AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE WRITE PATH:
A WRITING RESOURCE FOR SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHERS

By

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At the secondary level, essay writing skills are valued and related to academic success. This study investigates the implementation of a resource entitled *The Write Path* that targets persuasive essay writing skills. This resource was created by the Surrey School District and is currently used and available for purchase in the district, but no studies have been conducted to evaluate its impact on students' writing. Data were collected from grade eight students over a period of four months. Students completed an initial writing sample and then the lessons from the resource were implemented. Afterwards, students wrote a final composition which was compared to their initial writing sample. Data indicate that this resource has a positive impact on students who have adequate knowledge of the English language. Many students' writing showed impressive improvement, exceeding expectations in skills related to knowledge of essay structure and persuasive techniques. However, not all participants showed significant improvement. The data suggest that this resource is less effective for students who struggle with English skills. Presumably, students must have certain prerequisite skills to work within their zone of proximal development in order for the lessons in this resource to have a positive impact on students' writing.
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An Investigation into *The Write Path*: A Writing Resource for Secondary English Teachers

The ability to write is generally regarded as an important skill that will benefit students in not only their academic endeavours, but also their personal lives. In classrooms, students practice writing a variety of texts such as poems, journals, and stories, yet in both secondary and post-secondary institutions, the essay is the form of writing that is highly valued; students are asked to produce essays over and over again. Understanding the requirements of an essay is critical for academic success. Students should be familiar with the various forms of essays such as narrative, expository, and persuasive. In terms of persuasive writing, the ability to express an opinion and justify it with relevant support is a skill that will serve students beyond the classroom and into their personal lives. Although engaging in argumentative discourse has benefits that extend beyond the English classroom, there are few writing resources available to teachers that target this skill in conjunction with general essay writing skills.

In 2008, the Surrey School District published a resource entitled *The Write Path* which contains engaging lessons that include clear learning objectives, opportunities for student-generated criteria that coincide with the B.C. Performance Standards, and various exemplars that model good writing. This resource was initially distributed to leaders in schools who were associated with a grade 9 writing assessment, and it is available for purchase in the district. The authors of this resource have drawn upon research related to effective
composition instruction. Embedded within these lessons is the notion that if students are involved in their learning through reflection and self-assessment, their engagement will improve. Within the lessons there are multiple opportunities for students to compare their work to models, receive descriptive feedback, and implement suggestions so they can hone their writing skills.

**Purpose of the Study**

Lessons from *The Write Path* draw upon research related to process writing theory whereby the processes of drafting, revising, and working to improve one's writing are emphasized as opposed to the evaluation of the final product (Applebee, 1981). A process-orientated pedagogy is regarded as a very effective approach towards composition instruction (Cotton, 1988; Langer, 2002; MacArthur, Graham, Schwartz, & Schafer, 1995). The authors of *The Write Path* also considered the importance of incorporating explicit instruction and scaffolding into lessons so students understand the purpose of the activities while working within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Process writing theory has been present in education for decades, and this resource combines elements of this traditional theory with additional research on explicit instruction, the use of models, and the critical role assessment plays in relation to learning.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether or not implementing lessons from *The Write Path* improves students' persuasive essay writing skills. While this resource is currently used by individual teachers in some schools and
touted to be a useful tool, no studies have been conducted to support this claim. If there is discernible growth between the initial and final writing samples, there will be additional credibility for this resource thus supporting its distribution throughout the Surrey School District as well as other districts.

Literature Review

The Importance of Writing an Essay

The essay is one form of communication that is highly valued in both secondary and post-secondary institutions. Throughout their education, students will be asked to write numerous essays, using a variety of genres, for multiple academic subjects. At the secondary level, the mandatory Social Studies 11 Provincial Exam requires students to write two expository essays while the mandatory English 12 Provincial Exam requires students to write one synthesis essay and one personal essay using either a narrative, persuasive, expository, or descriptive approach. At the post-secondary level, essay-writing is related to admission, financial awards, and academic success. In an American study conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counselling, research indicated that "In 2004, the application essay was valued as equally important as a student’s rank in class by colleges and universities. This marks a convergence point in a ten-year trend in which class rank has declined and the essay has risen in importance as a factor in the admission process" (Hawkins & Lautz, 2005, p. 10).

Hounsell (2005) suggests that essay-writing is the dominant discourse in
the arts and social sciences because it serves two significant purposes: it is used as an assessment tool as well as a means from which learning occurs. Teachers have the responsibility to teach essay-writing skills as a student's ability to write an essay has a great impact on his academic achievement. However, this type of writing can be very challenging for students as they must address aspects of form and structure, content, and conventions. These demanding skills are integral elements of essays and they are focused on within the lessons contained in *The Write Path*.

**Persuasive Writing Requires a Specific Set of Skills That Challenge Students**

The genre of writing that is focused on in *The Write Path* is the persuasive essay. The ability to write persuasively is an important skill, but many students struggle with this discourse (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Ferris, 1994; Gleason, 1999; McCann, 1989; Nippold, Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005). Therefore, persuasive or argumentative writing is an area of composition that should be taught as it requires reasoning skills that extend beyond the classroom to our personal lives and work environments (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Gleason, 1999). Learning how to express an opinion and sustain an argument will serve students well beyond their adolescent years into adulthood, and in regards to post-secondary education, “competence in persuasive discourse is needed by university students” (Ferris, 1994, p. 45).

Despite these benefits, persuasive discourse can be difficult to teach
because it requires a complex set of skills, in addition to general essay writing skills, that must be present for the writing to be effective. For example, students must: understand the structure of an argument which includes writing a convincing thesis statement and presenting evidence in a cohesive and effective order; present sufficient evidence that is justified with supportive details; choose appropriate vocabulary to accomplish their purpose; consider alternative viewpoints (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Ferris, 1994; Gleason, 1999; Nippold, Ward-Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005). Students are capable of learning this discourse, but explicit classroom instruction is necessary.

Effective Composition Instruction

Research indicates that there are a number of instructional strategies that teachers can incorporate into their classrooms to make composition instruction effective. In a landmark meta-analysis of research related to composition instruction, Hillocks (1984) states that there are a number of activities that should serve as the focus of instruction in an effective writing program. These include: teaching grammar in context; the use of models as good examples of writing; the use of scales and criteria that students use to evaluate their writing and that of their peers; the use of inquiry to focus students' attention on strategies used in good writing; and a high level of student involvement and interaction with peers. Since learning is a social activity, effective composition instruction should take place in a collaborative environment in which there is a high level of student involvement and interaction (Applebee, 2002; Cotton, 1988; Langer, 2002;
Another characteristic of an effective writing program is the use of scaffolding and explicit instruction (Applebee, 2002; MacArthur et al., 1995). Scaffolding is an integral teaching strategy, especially when students are presented with new skills that are challenging, such as persuasive discourse. To assist students in learning the rudiments of this genre, teachers need to explicitly teach relevant writing skills; this is especially imperative for students with learning disabilities who tend to struggle with argumentative discourse (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Deatline-Buchman & Jitendra, 2006; Troia & Graham, 2002). Research indicates that teachers can support all students, and specifically those with learning disabilities, by explicitly teaching them how to set goals, plan and organize their ideas, focus on purpose and audience, and model their thinking through think-alouds (Cotton, 1988; Gleason, 1999; Deatline-Buchman & Jitendra, 2006). Once students are comfortable with the basic elements of the persuasive genre, teachers can incorporate lessons that draw on critical thinking skills. For example, students can consider “the relevance of the argumentation” which requires them to reflect on “the purposes for writing, the kinds of argumentative strategies that are appropriate for those purposes, and the critical questions that can be used to test the use of these argumentative strategies” (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009, p. 588). Such high-level questions have the potential to stimulate interesting discussion and writing that reflects critical thinking. This is a goal to work towards that is attainable when
students are provided with guidance and support. If teachers intentionally plan
lessons with these clear instructional goals and incorporate scaffolding to support
learning, they can help their students' writing skills improve. The lessons in The
Write Path incorporate explicit instruction and support learning through
scaffolding.

As teachers plan effective lessons that involve explicit instruction, they
need to consider the role of assessment and how it relates to learning.
Assessment is a powerful tool and an essential element of a classroom. When
used effectively, it can have a significant impact on student motivation and
achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cooper, 2006). Assessment should include
clear goals and descriptive feedback so students are aware of expectations and
cognizant of where to direct their attention to improve their work (Conley, 2008).
The principles of assessment for learning apply to a variety of activities in the
classroom, but are particularly relevant to writing instruction. Before authors
publish a piece of writing, they receive feedback from a variety of sources and
engage in numerous revisions before the general public reads the final copy.
They do not publish their first draft. They are not criticized on their first effort. If
teachers want students to view themselves as writers, we should not expect
perfection on the first attempt. This is especially important when students are
learning to compose a challenging text such as persuasive writing. Instead,
teachers should provide specific feedback that "should give each pupil guidance
on how to improve, and each must be given opportunity and help to work at the
improvement" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 145). As well, self and peer feedback is an important aspect of good assessment (Cotton, 1988). Such feedback helps students understand and internalize expectations, take ownership of their learning, and ultimately improve the quality of their work (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Cooper, 2006). A good writing program should reflect the principles of good assessment and *The Write Path* is grounded in this theory.

**Why *The Write Path*?**

The lessons in *The Write Path* are intended to develop students' skills in the very important, yet very challenging genre of persuasive essay writing. In terms of not only academic success, but also life skills, it is important that students learn how to engage in this discourse. When creating this resource, the authors drew upon educational research that supports the importance of effective composition instruction that is characterized by a collaborative learning environment, the use of models of good writing, scaffolding, and principles of assessment for learning. As a result, they have created educationally sound lessons that have the potential to improve students' writing skills.

Educators can feel confident that the units in this resource are grounded in educational theory. Teaching essay and persuasive writing skills requires specific knowledge about composition instruction that not all teachers enter the profession with. Although a Bachelor of Arts degree provides an individual with multiple opportunities to practice composition skills, the actual teaching of these skills is not explicitly addressed. Professional development programs are
designed to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom, but most beginning teachers will only have had one or two courses related to English methods. Thus, although undergraduate work provides knowledge of subject matter, it does not fully prepare teachers for the classroom (Ball & McDiarmid, 1990). For example, in a study designed to determine if experienced teachers have adequate knowledge of language structures, researchers found that the majority of teachers lack sufficient knowledge which impacts their ability to adequately instruct (Moats, 1994).

Research conducted with pre-service teachers indicates that although many have a personal love of the English language and are themselves competent writers, they feel unprepared to teach writing skills to the diverse population of students that they encounter when they actually enter the profession (Gomez, 1990; Street, 2003). Having the option of referring to a resource such as The Write Path can potentially help educators effectively teach the challenging skills imbedded in persuasive essay writing.

I intend to examine if implementing the lessons in this resource will improve students' persuasive essay writing, and to what extent. Because there are few persuasive essay writing resources available to teachers at the secondary level, The Write Path is a potentially valuable resource that could help teachers improve their writing instruction in the junior grades.
Methods

Design

For the purposes of this study, I implemented the lessons from *The Write Path* in my grade 8 classroom. I chose to focus on these units as they are directly related to important essay writing skills that students need to know: writing thesis statements, writing engaging introductory paragraphs, and using evidence that supports the thesis. Some of the lessons involve: having students read classic fairy tales and then generating evidence to defend the villain; rewriting the B.C. Performance Standards and creating visuals to represent the four levels; evaluating advertisements against persuasive criteria. Students completed an initial persuasive writing sample which was assessed prior to beginning the first unit and they wrote a second persuasive writing sample after I taught all of the lessons so I could assess if growth occurred in their writing.

This teacher-research was conducted in my classroom during a four month period. I engaged in this research because I wanted to know if implementing lessons in *The Write Path* would improve my students' writing skills and no studies have been conducted to support the use of this resource. Rust (2009) contends that teacher research is a valid form of inquiry that can serve as a "bridge connecting research, practice, and educational policy" (1884). Rust (2009) refers to Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) definition of teacher research in the broadest possible sense to encompass all forms of practitioner inquiry that involve systematic, intentional and self-critical inquiry about
Teachers who engage in this type of research can make a valid contribution to educational theory. Hubbard & Power (2003) believe that teachers, when approaching data, "bring a depth of awareness" as "we know our schools, our students, our colleagues, and our learning agendas. Our research is grounded in this rich resource base" (ix). Using this approach, I designed and implemented the study with one of my English classes.

Research Site

The study was conducted in a high school located in a large city in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. It has a population of approximately 1500 students in grades 8-12. The school has an inner-city designation because of the low socio-economic area in which it is situated. The neighbourhood is characterized by low-income housing and many rental units which contribute to a transient population. According to the 2008-2009 Fraser Institute Report Card, the average household income was $48,100. Because of the nature of the area, the school receives extra funding for at-risk students, one full-time and one part-time youth care worker, and an extra vice-principal. The school has an ESL population of 11% and there are a number of programs in place to help students who are new to Canada transition into the school. A large number of the population grew up speaking a language other than English, and many of these students received ESL support in elementary school.
Participants

Data were collected in a grade 8 English class. The school operates on the semester system; the first semester is from September to January and the second semester is from February to June. However, the participants in this study were enrolled in a class that was year-long from September to June, and classes met every other day. These students had English throughout the year as they opted to enroll in band which ran throughout the school year and alternated each day with their English block. They had different teachers for band and English. There were thirteen students in the class, and data were collected from twelve students whose parents consented to the study. Consent was voluntary and all participants were given the option of withdrawing from the study at any time. I was not aware of which students had consented until the end of the data collection period. Two of the participants were female and ten male. One student received learning assistance and qualified for learning adaptations. Another student did not receive learning assistance during the data collection period, but he will receive support next year. At the time of the study, another participant was undergoing testing to determine if he qualified for ESL support. At the end of June I was notified that he does qualify and will receive ESL support during the next school year.

Data Collection Procedures and Data Sources

The data were collected over the course of four months from the middle of November to the beginning of March. My data sources consist of students'
writing samples, student questionnaires, students’ writing reflections, and my anecdotal observations which were recorded in my daybook throughout the course of the study.

Writing Samples

Both the initial and final writing samples were collected using the same process, the format of which was used in previous years for a district wide grade 9 writing assessment. Students were asked to choose a magazine published by Scholastic entitled *The Ten*. They had three topics to choose from: The Ten Greatest Threats to Earth, The Ten Vilest Movie Villains, and The Ten Most Revolutionary Inventions. The students chose different topics from these magazines for their initial and final writing samples. After the magazines were selected, students spent one seventy-eight minute class reading the magazines, taking notes, and discussing their reading in small groups. During the next class, students wrote their essays using the question that corresponded to the magazine they chose: What is the greatest threat to earth? Who is the vilest movie villain of all time? What is the most revolutionary invention? They were allowed to refer to any notes they had taken the previous day and activities we had completed in class over the past four months, but they did not have the magazines while they were writing. All of the essays were written in class and collected at the end of the block. At the time of the initial writing assessment, I had addressed the structure of paragraphs earlier in the year, but I had not taught any lessons related to persuasive writing or essay structure.
Questionnaires and Writing Reflections

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their views on writing, which they completed after their initial and final writing samples (see Appendix A). They were given as much time as they wanted to complete this questionnaire. Also, after implementing units one and two, I asked students to complete a writing reflection in which they compared their initial writing samples to the model essays we evaluated and to the Performance Standards (see Appendix B).

Anecdotal Observations

Throughout the data collection period, I noted my observations about the students' work and their level of engagement during the lessons. These notes were made in my daybook after the classes ended and I noted students who had completed their homework and either showed or lacked interest during the lessons.

Instructional Implementation

Between the initial and final writing samples, I implemented lessons in units one, two, and five from The Write Path (see sample lesson in Appendix C). I chose these units because I believed they would have the most impact on students' work as they are directly related to persuasive essay writing. Although units three and four are applicable, I decided to omit them due to time constraints. Between the middle of November to January, I taught one lesson
from The Write Path for every five classes that I saw the students. During this time, there was a two-week Christmas break and a one-week break during Provincial Exams during which I did not teach. Throughout the month of February when classes commenced, I taught writing lessons during every English block. Preceding each lesson in the resource is a plan intended to guide the teacher and support instruction. I did not deviate from these lesson plans as I wanted to implement each lesson as intended by the authors. The only change I made was in unit two which focuses on teaching students to understand the B.C. Performance Standards. The authors used the grade 9 Performance Standards for Writing Personal Essays and Opinions and I taught the same lesson except I used the grade 8 Performance Standards for Writing Personal Essays and Opinions. Over the four months students completed work related to the lessons during class time, but they were allowed to take home anything that they felt needed finishing. Students would regularly hand in their work so I could give them descriptive feedback. Numerical marks were not given as this work was intended to be practice for the final writing sample.

**Data Analysis**

The initial and final writing samples were evaluated using the grade 8 B.C. Performance Standards for Writing Personal Essays and Opinions (see Appendix D). I decided to use this marking scale as students are familiar with the format given that the Performance Standards are also used in Elementary Schools. In addition, we worked with this scale in lessons from The Write Path which focus
on students' understanding of the criteria. This marking scale can be used to
assess a variety of essays as it is not exclusive to the persuasive genre.
However, it is appropriate to use within the context of persuasive writing as it
addresses a number of the elements necessary in this genre such as: an
effective and sustained focus, a clear sense of audience characterized by an
appropriate and consistent tone, varied language and specialized terms, and a
conclusion that has a strong impact. The scale is divided into four aspects:

- **Meaning**: the ideas and information, use of detail, generalizations and
  conclusions, and sense of audience

- **Style**: the clarity, variety, and impact of language

- **Form**: the introduction, organization, and conclusion

- **Conventions**: the use of complete sentences, spelling, punctuation, and
  grammar

Within these four aspects are ten points that function as the specific criteria from
which the writing is assessed. These ten points are listed in each column under
the four levels used to describe student achievement: not yet within expectations,
meets expectations (minimal level), fully meets expectations, and exceeds
expectations.

To reduce subjectivity, both the initial and final writing samples were
marked by me and one other teacher in my Masters Program. After evaluating
the essays separately, we discussed our results and came to a consensus on
aspects in which we differed. The data from the writing samples were entered
into a spreadsheet based on the ten points from the scale and results were
coded as not yet, minimal, fully, or exceeds (see Appendix E). The data from the students' initial and final questionnaires were entered into a spreadsheet so I could identify any changes regarding their views on writing. I also read through all of the students' writing reflections and noted their stated goals which I then compared to their final writing samples. After analyzing the data entered onto the spreadsheet, I re-read my anecdotal observations and noted students who did not always complete their homework or had trouble staying on task during lessons. Particular attention was given to those students whose writing is discussed in the case studies and I directly quoted some of the comments that they made on their questionnaires and writing reflections.

Case Studies

I purposefully selected three of the twelve students to provide case examples as their writing represents work at three different levels: a strong writer, an average writer, and a struggling writer. In most classrooms, this variety is evident, and at my school, it is very common to have classes with broad levels of ability. I selected these students after analyzing their initial and final writing samples. Their work is characteristic of the three levels of writing evident at the study site.

Findings

Since data were collected from twelve students, and each student is assessed according to ten criteria, there are 120 points upon which the classes' writing could improve. After comparison of the initial and final writing samples,
students scored higher on 69 of the possible 120 points for an overall improvement of 57.5%. There was no change on 39 of the possible 120 points which equals 32.5%. On 12 of 120 points or 10% of the criteria, students scored lower. Initially students' writing exceeded expectations on 13 points and their final writing samples show 63 points upon which students exceeded expectations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparing the classes' initial and final writing samples based on criteria from the grade 8 Performance Standard.

The participants in this study either maintained or improved their writing on 90% of the possible criteria. Impressive improvement is evident in participants who were on average fully meeting expectations on their initial writing samples. These students' final writing samples show that their writing exceeds expectations in at least 9 of the 10 possible criteria. The individual aspect that
shows the greatest improvement is form. This aspect relates to the quality of the introduction, the organization of the entire essay, and the impact of the conclusion. (see Figure 2). Every student showed improvement in this area which is positive as writing an essay with good structure is a fundamental skill that students need to learn.

Figure 2. Comparing the classes' initial and final writing samples based on criteria for form from the grade 8 Performance Standard.

Case Studies

Below is a case study of three students who represent writers at three different levels: a strong writer, an average writer, and a struggling writer. At the school in which this study was conducted, classrooms are usually composed of students with a wide range of abilities and the following writing samples are representative of each level.
Paul: a strong writer

The participants' improvement on 57.5% of the criteria is evident when the initial and final writing samples are compared, and this is also the case for Paul. At the commencement of the study, Paul was already a strong writer whose initial writing sample showed that overall, he was fully meeting expectations. His initial introduction fully meets expectations according to the Performance Standard as it clearly establishes his purpose, is logically organized, and attempts to engage his audience (see Figure 3). In terms of style, his writing minimally meets expectations as his language is clear and direct yet it lacks specialized terms and vivid vocabulary.

Figure 3: Paul's introduction from his initial writing sample.

This introduction shows that Paul has an understanding of essay structure and the purpose of the task, yet overall it lacks impact. On Paul's writing reflection that he completed half-way through the study, he stated that his two goals were: "writing better introductions" and "using different ways to start paragraphs."
Improvement is evident in the introduction he wrote for his final writing sample (see Figure 4).

The introduction of Paul's final writing sample exceeds expectations in aspects of style and form. His introduction effectively establishes the purpose of his essay and the use of the “you” pronoun effectively engages his audience. His vocabulary is rich and varied. Phrases such as “the Predator could do it with ease”, “personal glory” and “he has principles” demonstrate an excellent use of language to create the desired persuasive tone. Paul's results are characteristic of the five other students whose final writing samples also exceeded expectations in all aspects by writing engaging and persuasive essays.

Improvement in the quality of Paul's introduction may be connected to lessons from The Write Path which focus on writing engaging introductions. For example, during lesson 5 of unit 5, the class watched the first five minutes of two
films and then we discussed strategies that are used in films to engage an audience. In small groups, the students proceeded to generate criteria for engaging introductions and they used this criteria to evaluate sample introductions. As the culminating activity, students wrote a draft of their own introduction and received feedback from me. Paul and his classmates were engaged in this lesson as I noted in my anecdotal observations that they were initially hooked by the movie clips that we watched and all students were able to participate in the ensuing discussion by identifying strategies used in the films to hook an audience.

**Ryan: an average writer**

Another student who showed improvement was Ryan. The writing in his initial essay is indicative of a student who has a grasp of the general purpose of the activity and a general understanding of conventions. However, he has not learnt how to manipulate language to accomplish his purpose (in this case to persuade) and he lacks understanding of form and structure. Ryan's initial writing sample initially met expectations at the minimal level. His purpose was somewhat clear and he used some examples to support his claims, but his writing lacked detail and not all of his points were justified. Most noticeable was his lack of understanding regarding the structure of an essay. He only wrote one paragraph that included an introductory sentence but no conclusion; his essay ended with his last point so his initial writing sample was not meeting expectations with respect to a conclusion (see Figure 5).
I think the greatest threat to earth is an asteroid impact. The reason I think this is because it can happen anywhere in the world at any time. For example, Dairy Queen across the street could get hit by an asteroid on a Wednesday at 3:13 pm. Now there are asteroids big enough to destroy Dairy Queen, there is even asteroids big enough to destroy all of Vancouver. Even the smallest of asteroids can be deadly. In the past history has shown us the power of asteroids.

Two major events have happen to show us this. First, a huge asteroid is believed to have "killed all the dinosaurs" in 65 million years ago. If it had slammed into Earth, it would have destroyed much of our planet and we would become extinct with lots of other animals and plants. It is only big asteroids that we worry about because research shows small ones burn in our atmosphere. And NASA has a satellite that spots asteroids so they become smaller.

Figure 5. Ryan's initial writing sample.

On Ryan's writing reflection (that he responded to after I taught unit 2) he stated that his "first goal is to split my writing into at least three paragraphs and my second goal is to write more so I have three paragraphs." After writing the initial writing sample and participating in the lessons, he realized that essays consist of more than one paragraph.

After completing his final writing sample, Ryan's work improved on 7 of the 10 criteria and remained the same on the other 3 criteria. In his final essay he organized his writing into three separate paragraphs, including a solid conclusion.
which fully meets expectations (see Figure 6). In his conclusion, Ryan restates his thesis, lists the examples he referred to in his body paragraphs, and concludes with a final convincing sentence. Ryan's conclusion is somewhat repetitive, primarily because he has used "invention" three times, yet it is a logical conclusion to his composition.

Figure 6. Ryan's conclusion from his final writing sample.

After participating in the lessons, Ryan was able to write a good conclusion for his final writing sample. Moving forward, Ryan needs to learn how to move beyond formulaic essay writing so he can further engage his reader. However, for a grade 8 student, his final writing sample indicates that he now has a solid understanding of essay structure, which he did not have at the beginning of the study in November.

Throughout the course of the study, Ryan worked well in group situations and completed all of the assigned work. When completing his questionnaire after his final writing sample, Ryan wrote "I am getting better at writing paragraphs every time we do these assignments." He recognized the improvement evident in his writing. Creating strong conclusions was a topic addressed in the lessons. Students discussed criteria for strong conclusions, practiced writing conclusions
in a group, exchanged their drafts and received descriptive feedback from their peers, and then practiced writing their own conclusions. There are many students at my school whose writing is very similar to Ryan's. These students understand the general purpose of an activity, yet they have not yet learnt formal essay structure nor how to vary their diction to create a desired effect. The lessons in *The Write Path* can help these average writers, like Ryan, understand the basic elements of essay writing.

**Mike: a struggling writer**

Mike is a student who finds English very challenging. Although he was born in Canada, he was educated in another country from grades 3 to 7. His conversational English skills are adequate, but his written work is riddled with grammatical errors that often impede meaning. Mike's initial writing sample does not meet expectations (see Figure 7). His purpose is unfocused and it is unclear as to whether or not he understood the task. The length is deficient and his writing shows a lack of knowledge about form and conventions.

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*Space is immense. It is so huge that it's hard for our brains to grasp just how big it is. Our solar system alone spans a distance of over 100 billion km, and scientists would be surprised if they ever have figures that every year Earth is hit by at least one “small” asteroid about x kilometers in diameter or less.*

*Figure 7: Mike's initial writing sample.*
On Mike's writing reflection, he was asked to set two goals for the next essay. In response to this he wrote "more lines, neat and clean writing." On this same reflection, Mike was unable to state any strengths in his writing and in response to the question about the area needing improvement, he stated "the whole essay." It appears that he recognizes that his work is not yet meeting expectations, yet he is unable to articulate any specific aspects that could be focused on. Mike's final writing sample shows an improvement in length, but he is still not yet meeting expectations (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Mike's final writing sample
Mike attempted to write an introduction that is clearly a separate paragraph, but it does not clearly identify his purpose. Instead, he stated his purpose at the beginning of his body paragraph. The body of his essay provides some examples, but the points are at times illogical and inappropriate. The tone of the essay is very informal and the written expression is awkward. On Mike’s final questionnaire he was asked to explain the purpose of a persuasive paragraph and he responded by saying “the purpose of a persuasive paragraph is it makes your writing skills good it improves all your skills.” After participating for four months in lessons related to persuasive essay writing, Mike is not able to articulate the purpose of persuasive writing, which further explains why little improvement was seen in his writing.

Over the course of this study, Mike had to be reminded to stay focused when working in a group. He is an outgoing student who enjoys talking to his peers about social topics, yet his contributions to the group were minimal in regards to on-task comments. There were also many occasions upon which he did not complete his homework and therefore did not receive feedback with the rest of the class. Although his work shows his written output has improved and he attempted an introduction on his final essay, Mike still has a lot to learn before his work will meet expectations.

Discussion

As a group, the participants’ writing shows encouraging results as they either maintained or improved their writing on 90% of the possible criteria. The
lessons were particularly effective for those students who entered grade 8 as competent writers. Their final writing samples exceed expectations and show an excellent understanding of the persuasive writing genre. These students were able to compare their writing to model essays discussed in class, set goals for themselves, and apply strategies to their final writing samples that were taught during the study. However, there are four students whose writing only shows marginal improvement. Of these participants, one student receives learning assistance, one is scheduled to receive learning assistance next year, and the other, Mike, qualifies for ESL support next year.

The students who showed the most improvement regularly completed and handed in their work, thereby receiving important teacher and peer feedback. Since descriptive feedback is key to learning, it is not surprising that the students who showed the least improvement were also the most likely to not complete and hand in their assignments, which resulted in feedback being given at a later date or not at all (Black & William, 1998; Conley, 2008; Cotton, 1988).

Implications

Although many of the participants' writing showed impressive improvement, the data indicates that this writing program is less effective with struggling learners as it appears that a command of the English language is necessary before improvement is possible; lessons must allow students to work within their zone of proximal development. If a student cannot write complete sentences, how can he write a thesis statement? If a student only has
conversational English skills and limited vocabulary, can he even understand what a thesis statement is? Presumably these students require more explicit instruction in a small group setting or even one on one. Persuasive essay writing is a challenging discourse that requires knowledge of a specific set of skills (Ferretti, Lewis, & Andrews-Weckerly, 2009; Ferris, 1994; Gleason, 1999; McCann, 1989; Nippold, Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005). The students who struggle with writing the most may not be ready for this content at the grade 8 level.

In addition to proficiency with the English language, a student's work habits are also very important and related to success. Since this writing program is built upon the principles of assessment for learning, it is important that students have good work habits (attendance, behaviour, organization, completion of work) so they can practice their skills and receive feedback on their writing. This is an area that was not specifically focused on in this study, yet there was a correlation between students' work habits and their level of improvement.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Data were collected from a small sample of only 12 students and the gender balance is unequal as only two girls are represented in this study, which does not reflect the composition of the average classroom. As well, these students were placed in this block of English because they all chose to take band as an elective and therefore they do not represent a random sample of the grade 8 student population at my school. Reliability would be enhanced if this study was replicated with a larger sample of
Another limitation relates to the data gained from the student questionnaire. I did not find the students' answers particularly useful and they did not give me greater insight into the effectiveness of this writing program. To improve the questionnaire in the future, I would ask more specific questions related to students' writing skills and allow students to respond using their own words instead of circling a response given to them.

It is also important to note that only 3 of the 5 units in the resource were implemented. Because of time constraints, I was unable to teach units 3 and 4. Beginning this program earlier in the year would allow a teacher to cover the entire resource.

**Significance**

The lessons from *The Write Path* were created in accordance with relevant educational theory. The program provides a systematic approach towards teaching persuasive essay writing skills, which not all teachers are comfortable with when they enter the profession. These are valuable skills related to not only the academic world, but also personal and work environments. For the purposes of this study, I did not alter the lessons and deviate from the instructions located at the beginning of each lesson. However, teachers can easily adapt the lessons to meet the needs of their own classrooms. This resource serves as a guide from which educators can confidently draw upon to improve their writing programs. Given the data from this study, it is evident that
teaching the lessons from this resource can have a significant impact on students' writing, especially those who have a solid understanding of the English language. These lessons have the potential to develop rich, engaging compositions created by knowledgeable writers who purposefully use language to persuade their audiences.

At the same time, not all students in this study showed significant improvement. For some students, the skills addressed in this program are beyond their zone of proximal development. Adaptations must be made to ensure that these children are not left further behind while the rest of their peers excel.

**Further Research**

Future studies are needed to further support the use of this program. Since this is a small study with a select group of students, it would be pertinent to implement this resource in a classroom with a larger population in which both males and females are equally represented. As well, it would be interesting to evaluate *The Write Path* in a classroom located in a different socio-economic area and consider other teachers' perspectives regarding how this resource has impacted their classrooms and students.
References


Retrieved from http:ajbogucki.iweb.bsu.edu/GoodWriting/MaterialsLookingatWriting.pdf


Appendix A

Student Questionnaire: Writing

Please answer the following questions about your writing skills. If you do not want to answer a question you can leave it blank. This information will help me understand the needs of our class.

For each of the questions, circle the answer the best applies to you:

1. How do you feel about writing assignments?

I don't enjoy them  I don't mind them  I enjoy writing  I love writing

2. How would you rate your writing skills?

below average  average  slightly above average  excellent

3. Before you start a writing assignment in class, how much time do you usually spend planning and organizing your ideas?

I just start writing  1-5 min.  5-10 min.  more than 10 min.

4. After you finish a writing assignment, how much time do you usually spend editing your work?

I hand it in as soon  1-5 min.  5-10 min.  more than 10 min.
as I'm done

5. Can you explain the purpose of a persuasive paragraph?

6. Please add any additional comments relating to the questions above or any other information I should know about your writing skills.
Appendix B

Writing Reflection

1. Compare your initial writing sample to the essays we read in class.

2. Compare your initial writing sample to the Performance Standards we've been discussing.

3. Please answer the following questions:

   A. What is the strength that you notice in your writing? What part of the Performance Standards does this fit in (meaning, form, style, conventions)?

   B. What is an area of your writing that needs improvement? What part of the Performance Standards does this fit in (meaning, form, style, conventions)?

   C. What are two goals you can set for the next essay you write?
## Appendix C

### Lesson 1

#### Generating Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Materials</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Build Background Knowledge: Aspects of Writing</td>
<td>Handout 1</td>
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<td>- Go over Aspects of Writing – what teachers value when reading students' written work.</td>
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<td>2. Introduce Persuasive Writing Criteria</td>
<td>Handout 2</td>
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<td>- Explain acronym OSCAR. If O, S, C, and A are accomplished, then R is achieved.</td>
<td>Overhead 1 &amp; Teacher Reference</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Ask, &quot;How do these criteria relate to the Aspects of Writing?&quot; Using Overhead 1, fill in where O, S, C, and A belong.</td>
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<td>3. Teacher Models - Fairy Tale Assignment</td>
<td>Handout 3, Overhead 2</td>
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<td>- Put students in groups of 3. Assign each group a number (1, 2, 3, etc.).</td>
<td>&quot;Plot Synopsis&quot; - Teacher Reference</td>
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<td>- Distribute Handout 3 and explain the Fairy Tale assignment using Overhead 2.</td>
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<td>- Tell students you are going to model this assignment before they do it together in their groups. The fairy tale you model is Hansel and Gretel.</td>
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<td>- Retell/summarize the story of Hansel and Gretel (refer to &quot;Plot Synopsis&quot;, Teacher Reference Sheet).</td>
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<td>- Distribute Handout 4 to each student. Using Overhead 3, be explicit in your thinking as you record your responses. (See Teacher Reference, but do not place this on the overhead as it is important that students hear your thinking as you go through the process.)</td>
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<td>- Explain to students that these notes will form the basis of the paragraph. Arrange them in order from least important to most important. Be sure to model your thinking and justify your decisions.</td>
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<td>- Distribute Handout 5 and read sample paragraph aloud.</td>
<td>Handout 5, Overhead 6</td>
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<td>- Using Handout 6 and Overhead 4, identify the OSCAR criteria in the paragraph. Again, take time to model your thinking out loud so students are able to track your thinking processes. (Refer to Teacher Reference.)</td>
<td>Overhead 4 &amp; Teacher Reference</td>
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| 4. Group Writing Practice — Fairy Tale Assignment  
   • Distribute Handout 7.  
   • Refer students back to Handout 5. In their groups, they will repeat the process and begin the Fairy Tale assignments for a different fairy tale. Distribute Handout 8 (A–J).  
   Note: If students do not finish in class, ensure they have time to finish another day before working on Lesson 2. | Handout 7  
Handouts 6A–J  
(divided by group) |
**Appendix D**

**Quick Scale: Grade 8 Writing Personal Essays and Opinions**

This Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year. Essays and opinion pieces are usually expected to be carefully revised, edited, and proofread.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Not Yet Within Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)</th>
<th>Fully Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Exceeds Expectations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SNAPSHOT</strong></td>
<td>The writing consists of loosely connected ideas and details; fragmented and difficult to follow.</td>
<td>The writing presents some connected ideas; accomplishes the basic purpose or task. Often does not flow smoothly.</td>
<td>The writing is clear, detailed, and well-organized; accomplishes the purpose or task; flows smoothly.</td>
<td>The writing is clear, complete, and focused; effectively accomplishes the purpose or task, and may engage the reader.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td>* purpose is unclear; writing is unfocused</td>
<td>* purpose is clear; may lose focus * some relevant examples and details * may overgeneralize or omit generalizations or conclusions * some sense of audience; tone may be inconsistent</td>
<td>* purpose is clear; focus is generally sustained * specific relevant examples, details * some generalizations and conclusions * sense of audience; appropriate tone (may clip)</td>
<td>* purpose and focus are effective and sustained * uses specific relevant examples and details to elaborate and clarify * logical insights, generalizations, and conclusions * clear sense of audience; appropriate and consistent tone</td>
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<td><strong>STYLE</strong></td>
<td>* language is simple * little sentence variety; often awkward</td>
<td>* clear and direct language * some sentence variety</td>
<td>* clear and varied language * some specialized terms * variety of sentences</td>
<td>* language clear, varied, and specific; uses specialized terms * flows smoothly; effective sentences</td>
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<td><strong>FORM</strong></td>
<td>* introduction does not clearly identify purpose * lacks organization; often one paragraph of loosely related details and examples * conclusion is missing or inappropriate</td>
<td>* introduction states purpose; not engaging related material is grouped together, but transitions and paragraphing are weak (reads like a list, leaving reader to make connections) * conclusion is simple or predictable</td>
<td>* introduction clearly establishes purpose; attempts to engage individual paragraphs or sections are well-organized; overall sequence and transitions may be ineffective in places * logical conclusion; tries to create impact</td>
<td>* introduction effectively establishes purpose; engages effectively organized; paragraphs or sections are well-developed, logically sequenced, and joined by transitions * conclusion is strong and has an impact</td>
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<td><strong>CONVENTIONS</strong></td>
<td>* frequent errors in simple words and structures often interfere with meaning</td>
<td>* errors in basic words and structures are noticeable but do not obscure meaning</td>
<td>* errors in more complex language are sometimes noticeable, but meaning is clear</td>
<td>* may include occasional errors where the writer is taking risks with complex language; these do not interfere with meaning</td>
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The Write Path

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BC PERFORMANCE STANDARDS: WRITING
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