Introduction:

While most people will agree that high school graduates should be able to write to get their main points across, students are graduating with less than effective writing skills (NCDPI, “How”). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card, is a component of the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences and was established in 1969. The NAEP is the only nationally and continuing assessment of what America’s students can do in various subject areas. Over the years, NAEP has implemented additional tests. The results of each test are reported using three achievement levels: basic, proficient, and advanced: The basic level denotes partial mastery of the work; the proficient level represents a solid understanding of the material; and the advanced level demonstrates superior performance (NCERC, “Data”).

Problem:

Realizing the importance of education, in 1999 Governor Jim Hunt challenged North Carolinians to make our schools first in America by 2010; thus, North Carolina’s education leaders “established a set of goals, priorities, and performance targets to define what it would mean to be First in America” (NCERC, “First”). With First in America becoming the title of North Carolina’s initiative toward educational reform, Governor Hunt then directed the North Carolina Education Research Council (NCERC) to issue an annual report card on the state’s progress toward the First in America goals. Modifications have been made to the state plan to meet the federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind act that was signed by President George W. Bush in 2002 (NCDPI, “ABC’s”). Realizing the importance of writing, North Carolina began a statewide assessment program during the 1983-84 school year (NCDPI, “Understanding”). In 2001, NCDPI met and began the process for a new writing assessments and scoring procedures for grades 4, 7, and 10. The State Board of Education (SBE) then approved the writing assessment model in 2003. While the Board did decide that the results from grades 4 and 7 will be part of the performance composite scores for the ABCs, a system that rates a school based on levels of achievement, starting with the 2004-05 school year, the SBE is still discussing when to include the results of the grade 10 assessment (NCDPI, “SBE”)

According to the 2002 data from NAEP, “about 75 to 85 percent of students were able to reach the Basic achievement level,” and these students were able to only write with minimal effectiveness in getting the point across. Unfortunately, “only about 30 percent” of these same
students could reach the proficient level. Even though NAEP writing assessment showed that North Carolina had “34 percent of its students performing at the proficient level,” the SBE, NCDPI, and educators across the state have been discussing strategies to improve students’ writing skills (NAEP, 2004).

While assessing students with inadequate writing skills or students not writing at the proficient level, educational organizations and experts have also delved into how teachers should teach writing. The National Council of Teachers of English identified myths and produced an article titled the “10 Myths about Learning to Write” to encourage teachers to rethink the approaches used in delivering writing instruction to students. Elizabeth Close and Katherine Ramsey, co-editors of an article for the English Journal, also provided their data on using guidelines and rubrics to improve writing. Actually, various research studies are being conducted to assess why students are having problems writing effectively.

In Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips and Techniques, Jim Burke’s research concludes that students’ write better when they are writing for an actual audience, when they care about the topic, and when think their ideas are valued (39). In a later chapter, Burke goes on to suggest that “students become good at writing – and everything else – the same way we do: step-by-step”; thus, Burke’s findings would support teachers using rubrics, a checklist of expectations, as a tool for student self-assessment as well as for teacher assessment (83) He then provides research to show how breaking instruction into small tasks, or scaffolding instruction, is helpful for a student learning a new concept. Actually, scaffolding instruction is not a new concept. In Coaching Writing: The Power of Guided Practice, William Strong also provides historical data on the importance of scaffolding instruction and case studies to demonstrate that scaffolds “support language learners” (134). While Marlana Coe discusses how people learn differently, she does emphasize that “communication is key to knowledge transfer” and that “motivational needs: basic, psychological, and self-actualization” are essential for any learning to occur (67). Therefore, when developed properly, rubrics can be a tool that gives feedback to assist someone in developing writing skills.

Burke and Strong are not the only writing experts to encourage writing teachers to develop writing activities that are meaningful and that connect to the student’s world. Nancy Atwell, author of In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning, discusses her success in motivating students to write when she gave students topics “for all kinds
of real audiences” (13). Atwell also concludes that real-world writing activities will then motivate students “to do better work” (39).

To implement an effective statewide writing program geared toward improving students’ writing skills, NCDPI defined good writing as having five effective features: focus, organization, elaboration and support, style, and conventions. However, if a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is the cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that ensures educational opportunity for students with disabilities, dictates that a student may use technology during writing – a student will then be encouraged to develop computer skills as a means of compensating for learning difference. To create a consistent program and reduce the variable of the teacher giving instruction, NCDPI has now labeled the features as the “Five Features of Effective Writing” and has directed English teachers across the state to incorporate these features into their writing instruction (Learn NC, 2004). During the 2003-04 school year, North Carolina will be assessing students’ writing skills in grades 4, 7, and 10; however, NCDPI has not determined how or when teachers will receive feedback from the assessment tests. Actually, there is no data to confirm that North Carolina’s modified writing assessment tests will improve results on the NAEP or reflect improvement in students’ writing outside the classroom; however, North Carolina’s efforts in attempting to reform educational practices and assessments has received accolades from USA Today, Business Week, and the National Association of State Boards of Education (NCDPI, “Quick Facts”).

While some people are now beginning to question the amount of testing, NAEP has plans for additional assessments that will be “conducted in grades 4, 8, and 12 at regularly scheduled intervals” in subjects including reading, math, writing, science, history, geography, civics, economics, foreign language, and arts. NAEP wants to assess schools and students with these tests (NAEP, 2004). Therefore, educators are looking for strategies to improve skills as well as to motivate reluctant learners (NCDPI, “Education”).

While North Carolina’s SBE adopted the revised writing assessments in 2003, there is no research data to support that the teaching of the “Five Features of Effective Writing” will improve students’ writing skills or their performance on any writing test.

**Question:**

Will teaching the “Five Features of Effective Writing” improve students’ writing skills? Will incorporating these features into writing instruction diminish the lack of interest that students’ exhibit while acquiring written communication skills?
Hypothesis:

After teaching the “Five Features of Effective Writing” that North Carolina Department of Instruction has identified as essential to any writing program, high school students will demonstrate improved writing skills. (Originally, I had wanted to measure the effects in implementing a Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program and teaching the “Five Features”; however, I have revised my study to include just the measurement of the “Five Features of Effective Writing” on improving a student’s writing skills.)

Variables:

In conducting this research, there are a number of variables as defined by Lauer and Asher to consider through quantitative and qualitative research. The treatment variables are identified as the “Five Features of Effective Writing”: focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions. Students with varying writing skills and learning differences will be variables noted prior to the research. (A future study will determine the moderator variables: if teaching the five features affects particular categories or classifications of students, such as the student’s class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, and/or GPA. These issues can be clarified through assessing the data and then creating activities and assessments targeting manipulated variables – class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, and/or GPA.)

The criterion variables that test the outcomes of the study will be conducted in three phases: standardized testing, vertical teaming, and classroom assessment. Each phase will measure writing skills but differently.

Outcomes:

Students taught the “Five Features of Effective Writing” will achieve a higher percentage of being proficient on writing assessments. With monitoring students’ achievements on rubrics, students’ interests in developing writing skills will also improve.

Research Design:

Phase 1: Standardized Testing

The standardized testing phase will collect data on an individual student’s growth using various writing assessment tests. Phase 1 will be monitored by recording the scores of the different tests in the student’s folder that is housed in the school’s guidance department.

*North Carolina Writing Assessment Tests –
Since the state administers writing tests in the 4th, 7th, and 10th grades, the results from each test will eventually assess an individual student’s development of written communication. As of 2004, student will take writing tests that evaluate written responses using the same grading rubric that incorporates the language of the “Five Features of Effective Writing.” Schools will eventually be able to chart an individual’s growth through the final state writing assessment test administered in 10th grade. Test scores will then be sent to each county for dispersal to individual schools. Upon the return of the scores, each county will then assess an individual’s improvement in the five features of writing. However, current 10th grade students have not taken the modified writing assessment tests in fourth or seventh grades, so these students will not have a baseline score. These students’ scores will be used to compare growth among classes. Eventually, students reaching the 10th grade will have taken all three tests and an individual’s writing skills will be evaluated. If a student fails to achieve at the proficient level, then remediation and retesting at the local level will occur.

*Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT), or most frequently known as the PSAT*

This is a standardized test that provides firsthand practice for the SAT I: Reasoning Test and SAT II: Writing Test. It also gives students a chance to enter National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC). I propose that all tenth grade students at my high school take the PSAT and then again in eleventh grade. These PSAT scores will reflect a student’s writing skills and will assist teachers/schools in modifying writing instruction. The PSAT taken in the eleventh grade should show some improvement in a student’s writing.

*SAT I: Reasoning Test –

This standardized test is being revised for 2005 to include a writing assessment component. Overall, this test assesses student reasoning based on knowledge and skills developed by the student in school coursework. “The new SAT will reinforce the importance of writing throughout a student's education” (College Board, 2004). While the test is designed for students in 11th grade, individuals may take the test numerous times to improve their scores. Consequently, these new SAT scores will be helpful for a school and student in assessing current and future educational needs and programs.

Phase 2: Interdisciplinary Teaming
The second phase of assessment is through interdisciplinary teaming. I plan on completing a qualitative approach through teaming --a group of teachers that interacts with the same grade level of students that meet to plan interdisciplinary activities and to assess student work. Each team -- 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th -- will consist of academic and elective teachers that relate with specific grade levels. While academic courses are required by the NC Standard Course of Study, electives are courses that students elect to take. Therefore, teachers that teach elective courses may be involved in more than one team. Each team will discuss vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment strategies. Notes from these team meetings will be kept and given to the appropriate administrator.

1. Administrative component - The teaming approach to assessment will require the support from the school’s administrative team to work effectively. In establishing an effective writing program, there are several factors for the administrative team to consider.

   A. To implement the teaching of the “Five Effective Features of Writing,” the administration will also need to implement writing as a school goal and to offer training to teachers.

   B. To develop a successful writing program, the administration will need to provide writing workshops that will help teachers view writing-across-the-curriculum as a tool and not as an add-on, or as something else that they have to do.

   C. To develop a consistent writing program, the administration will need to support and adopt writing rubrics that incorporate the “Five Effective Features of Writing.”

   D. To measure this writing goal, administration could have each teacher produce two different writing samples with rubrics as part of his/her individual Professional Development Plan for Teachers

2. Development of teams - A team will then meet to discuss vertical curriculum alignment and assessment strategies. Cross-curricular planning will also facilitate teachers and students recognizing the importance of writing as a tool to master individual course goals and objectives. By providing instruction of the five writing features in a team meeting, the team will
serve to control the writing information and provide teachers with the same materials to present to his/her classes. Therefore, the variable of the teacher giving instruction is reduced.

3. Utilizing the “High School’s Product List from NCDPI - The “High School’s Products List” – a list of writing products that NCDPI and Manteo High School expects high school students to produce - will be distributed and discussed with teachers and, eventually, students. (I have developed a Checklist of High School Products for teachers to use in monitoring product development.) To ensure that all types of writing from the list are being taught, team members will discuss and decide on the categories of writing that a student will produce in a class. Some topics may be developed more than once. At the end of the year, a teacher will produce copies of these writing products as evidence for their Professional Growth Plan.

4. Team meetings - Periodically, all teams -- 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th --will meet to also discuss horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment. Again, notes from these meetings will be kept and given to the appropriate administrator.

Phase 3: Classroom Assessment with Rubrics

The third phase of measuring student improvement is through classroom assessment using rubrics that emphasize the five writing features. While each rubric is a list of expectations denoting the level of mastery of the five features, each teacher can assign different point values to the different features. Even though an individual teacher could alter the point value on a rubric, the language on the rubric will need to remain the same to consistently reinforce a writing vocabulary in each classroom to every student. These rubrics will serve as another variable in controlling the instruction given to students.

Various rubrics will be given to teachers to help them assess a student’s growth in the writing process. I have developed a diagnostic and end-of-the year assessment rubrics for the student to complete. These rubrics will allow the teacher to reflect and assess on appropriate lesson plan development. To create student ownership in his/her learning, one rubric allows for the student to select an area that needs improving. This rubric also uses the 1-5 likert scale in assessing growth. To developed scaffolding instruction, I have created rubrics for an introduction, body paragraph, and conclusion using a 1-5 likert scale. NCDPI has created general writing rubric that teachers will use to assess a complete writing product. This rubric will also be distributed to
teachers. These rubrics are designed to give students important feedback to assist the students in understanding and monitoring their own learning.

I have also decided to have all tenth grade English students complete a career interest inventory in the computer lab. After selecting a possible career to research, the teacher and student will then discuss this data and create an effective and individualized writing program for the student targeting this career. Using the “High School Products List,” teachers and students will then be able to discuss writing assignments that appeal to a student’s career or interest as well as fulfill state and local requirements. Thus, the student will have ownership and see relevancy in the writing activities.

**Additional study:**

After the data from the different assessments is collected, educators will be able to assess the effectiveness of the “Five Features of Effective Writing.” Future research may be needed to discern the impact of teaching the features on different categories or classifications of students, such as learning style, class size, English teacher, ethnicity, gender, GPA, and/or socio-economic background.

**Works Cited**


http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/newsat/about.html.


http://www.learnnc.org/topics/writing/features/.
Julie Workman Osmon  
Dr. Southard  
English 7701: Project 2  
April 2004  


Julie Workman Osmon
Dr. Southard
English 7701: Project 2
April 2004

