

Common Core Writing Gobsnacks Teachers and Students: Part I

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Students in public schools, younger and older, do not write well, which the use of Common Core Standards will not improve, and perhaps even worsen. Nearly 10 years ago, I wrote a column for the *Orange County Register* that explained why students do not learn to write effectively. The reasons have not changed.

Writing is taught by teachers who have never published anything. A very few number of teachers adapt and publish a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. Even fewer teachers ever write a piece for a newspaper. For the same reasons that surgery is not taught in medical schools by professors lacking surgical experience, writing should not be taught by teachers lacking writing fluency. But it is. For English teachers to teach writing is not any better: their academic focus was reading literature, not becoming writers or learning how to teach writing.



Writing =
rewriting.

Writing instruction students receive in school consists largely of rules and strategies that good writers never use. During the first session of a college writing class, I often distributed 3 x 5 cards and asked students to write three important rules they learned in school about writing. The most frequently identified rule was "Don't begin a sentence with *and* or *but*." I recall testing this rule by examining each sentence in [Kate Turabian's guide](#), a manual of style that many graduate schools require students to use in preparing formal papers. Approximately 8% of Turabian's sentences began with a coordinating conjunction. Many former teaching colleagues required students to write only 500-word essays, a task I never assigned. Why? Because in the real world of writing, good writers almost never write 500-word essays. (Another inaccurate writing rule students often identified learning was "Never begin a sentence with *because*.")

Students do not write enough in school to become fluent writers. When students write at all, they write an assigned paper, submit it—and rarely see it again. The lesson learned: a first draft is a final product, a disastrous lesson for students because good writers know that a first draft is the *beginning* of writing a paper or book, not the end. [Donald Murray](#) noted, "A piece of writing is never finished," a reminder that real writers and student writers face deadlines, that with more time, a writer can always improve the quality of a paper.

Students are almost never taught the most important concept about writing: that writing is rewriting—a lesson minimized and nearly ignored in Common Core Standards. Rewriting or revising is mentioned only *once* among the 10 [Common Core Writing Standards](#) for ninth and tenth graders: "Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach" (Standard 5). Moreover, the standards themselves are poorly written. Standard 1, for example, is an object lesson in clutter and redundancy: "Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence." *Argument* means a collection of reasons to support an idea or point of view. *To support claims in an analysis* is redundant, and *claims* is the wrong word, which better refers to a demand or request for something owed; e.g., a bank claims that a borrower owes \$1,000). *Valid reasoning* is part of the meaning of argument, another redundancy. The purpose of argument is to convince another person of a speaker's or writer's point of view. Another redundancy. Thus, clearly and directly, Standard 1 means "Write an argumentation essay."

And there's more. Standard 1 includes five subsections, beginning with these two gems: (a) *Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence;* and (b) *Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level and concerns.* No sane writing teacher, and certainly no student, wants to cope with this unnecessarily complex edubabble.

Third graders are also subject to [writing standards](#) that don't make sense to *third graders*: (a) *Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences;* (b) *Establish a situation and introduce a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally;* (c) *Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations;* (d) *Use temporal words and phrases to signal event order;* and (e) *Provide a sense of closure.* Sense of closure? Many adults do not understand "a sense of closure."

Without models of effective writing to read and without teacher feedback, comments students can use as a basis to complete several text revisions, it is unreasonable to expect a student's writing to improve. Teacher feedback, "one of the most powerful influences on learning, too rarely occurs" ([Hattie, 2011, p. 104](#)). To help student writers, the writing teacher can offer students (a) a few comments, which means the student is on the right track, (b) offer specific comments for the student to consider in rewriting and identify text to correct, or (c) suggest trying something different in the next revision. No feedback on students' papers is tantamount to the absence of instruction.

The most important factor in developing writing fluency is rewriting. How many revisions of a paper should a student write? My answer to student writers: "Until writing another revision will not measurably improve the quality of your paper." Unfortunately, Common Core regards rewriting as almost irrelevant to learning to write.