

## **Student Writing: Making Claims and Using Evidence Effectively**

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### **Abstract**

Writing skill can be a predictor of academic success and is a high stakes assessment for acceptance into college and career. With entry being so competitive, students must be able to write effectively to argue their points. In my time as an instructor at Alternatives in Action High School, I noticed that students struggled with and responded negatively to writing. The school did not have a set writing curriculum or strategy on how to teach writing. This action research project sought to improve student's attitudes towards writing, improve their skills in writing a clear thesis statement, and use strong evidence to support their claims through a four week long unit focused on pre-writing time, thesis statements, evidence based writing, and organization. Data collection included pre and post student surveys, student learning logs, teacher observation journal and writing samples. Students expressed a higher level of interest in writing about topics they were invested in, and felt supported when given time to brainstorm, share their ideas and time to write. Student writings were organized with a thesis statement, and included evidence to support their claims.

## **Introduction and Context**

Alternatives in Action High School (AIA HS) is a public charter high school located in Alameda, CA and strives to prepare youth for college, career and community. It is a small school of approximately 155 youth: 96% are youth of color, of which 73% are Latino students, and 97% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

One of AIA HS's goals is to foster a college-going culture. In 2012, 97% of graduates enrolled in a form of higher education including four-year universities, community colleges, trade schools, and military service, with 65% of the students accepted to a four-year college. Students need to be prepared for college level work and career; the school believes that a school wide focus on literacy has the most potential to affect student achievement. To create an environment where youth can grow into effective citizens, the school practices Habits of the Heart, Mind, and Hand to develop students' capacities across all curriculums in alignment with the Common Core Standards. One of the Habits of the Hand expects students to learn the following:

*Persuasive Writing (ELA Writing Application Standard 2.4): Write persuasive compositions which:*

- a) Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained and logical fashion,*
- b) Use specific rhetorical devices to support assertions (e.g., appeal to logic through reasoning; appeal to emotion or ethical belief; relate a personal anecdote, case study, or analogy),*
- c) Clarify and defend positions with precise and relevant evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and expressions of commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning, and*
- d) Address readers' concerns, counterclaims, biases, and expectations*

Students' reading skills are assessed from the school wide testing of the MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) test and their writing skills from the school wide Writing Assessment administered to all students at the beginning and end of each school year. The data is used to leverage strategies to improve students' writing and reading. In Fall 2011, the school adopted the Barton Reading and Spelling Program as part of the school's Literacy Intervention Program.

However, a school wide writing program was not adopted to address the need of improving students' writing.

In my second year of teaching at AIA HS, I felt the urgency to focus on writing to prepare students for college and career. I focused on the SAT Writing prompts and rubric because they were used for our school wide Writing Assessment. As explained on the SAT Writing Practice Questions Directions, the SAT essay measures students' ability to:

- *develop a point of view on an issue presented in an excerpt;*
- *support your point of view using reasoning and examples from your reading, studies, experience, or observations;*
- *follow the conventions of standard written English*

The essay gives students an opportunity to show how effectively they can develop and express their ideas. Therefore, students should take care to develop their point of view and present their ideas logically and clearly. There was also a shift in the Common Core State Standards from persuasive to argumentative writing, which invested my focus on argumentative writing.

### **Problem of Practice**

Writing is an essential part of our lives, both professionally and personally. Writing well can help us become good readers and foster our abilities to communicate clearly. Writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy (Graham and Perin, 2007).

As embedded as writing is in our lives, my students have an overwhelming negative response when it comes time to write. Students said they don't like to write because they don't know what to write. Although students may struggle on their vocabulary, spelling, or grammar, I notice is that they have a hard time defending their opinions and explaining their ideas. Students

will say, “I don’t know.” or “Just because I think so.” Although highly opinionated during class discussions, students struggle to express logically in writing what they feel, think, and why. Student journal writes, brief responses to readings, book summaries, and essays, show opinions without strong evidence, unfocused writing, or short explanations. Students also often face writing blocks, and say they do not have anything else to write. How can students process their thoughts, gather strong evidence, and organize their writings to clearly argue their position on an issue? Students need to be able to articulate their opinion in a clear and focused way. In this literature review I will explore what motivates students to write and how students can become more effective writers.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Importance of Writing***

Writing is a means of extending and deepening students’ knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter (Keys, 2000; Shanahan 2004; Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Helping young people to write clearly, logically, and coherently about ideas, knowledge, and views will expand their access to higher education, give them an edge for advancement in the workforce, and increase the likelihood they will actively participate as citizens of a literate society (Graham and Perin, 2007). Writing is a skill we see at every stage of life, from writing a cover letter to writing a letter of recommendation (Wolpert-Gawron, 2011).

Improving the writing abilities of adolescent students has social implications far beyond the classroom. When students start to discover their own voice, they realize their own potential (Mann, 2011). Students feel empowered when they are able to articulate their feelings. In order to articulate anything thoroughly, one must be able to write it down on paper and examine what one thinks in writing (Sheils, 1975).

Writing can be used as a tool to heal and empower youth. Studies have also shown that when people have opportunities to express themselves through writing, it can offer positive results in strengthening people's immune systems and health (Murray, 2002). Writing about traumatic, stressful or emotional events have found improvements in both physical and psychological health (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005).

### ***Student Writing Performance***

In 2011, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) administered the first computer-based assessment in writing: 24,100 eighth-graders and 28,100 twelfth-graders were assigned writing tasks and composed their responses on computer. To be performing at a *Proficient* grade level means a clear demonstration of the ability to communicate the purpose of their writing. Roughly 25% of students at both grades 8 and 12 performed at the *Proficient* level in writing in 2011, while the rest scored below proficient (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

In 2010, the ACT Policy Alert reported only 22% of 1.2 million ACT-tested 2004 high school graduates met all three of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in English, Math, and Science. College readiness in English and Math has remained largely unchanged for the past five years. Most students are not on target to meet college and career readiness. (ACT 2012).

### ***Creating Effective Writers***

Students need to spend more time writing. Students often struggle to write clearly and concisely with sufficient supporting evidence because in high school, they have generally written very little (Mayfield 2012). In the Nation's Report Card Writing, 2011, the NAEP survey results shows that 40% of ELA students spend 15-30 minutes a day on writing in class, 21% of students

spend 30-60 minutes a day, and only 4% spend over 60 minutes a day on writing. Students who scored higher on average spent at least 30-60 min of writing in ELA.

Offering students choice is one way to foster motivation. By allowing students to choose their own topics and giving them time to write, teachers can support students' learning and motivation (Buhrke, et al, 2002). Children want to write. Instruction should be student centered, and allow for student choice (Graves, 1983). Teachers who incorporate best practices with realistic writing examples increase their students' writing ability (Boersma & Dye, 1997). In addition, there are four motivational conditions that can create a conducive learning environment by:

- Establishing inclusion: Creating a learning atmosphere in which learners and instructors feel respected by and connected to one another
- Developing attitude: Creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice
- Enhancing meaning: Creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include learners' perspectives and values
- Engendering competence: Creating an understanding that learners are effective in learning something they value

These conditions are essential for developing intrinsic motivation among all participants (Wlodkowski, R.J. and Ginsberg, 1995).

Understanding the task is an important phase in self-regulated learning (Winne & Hadwin, 1998). It is especially important for students to understand what is expected of them (Buhrke, et al, 2002). Self-regulated learners strategically monitor, evaluate and adapt learning strategies and processes. In recent years, the Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. Key points in the Common Core English Language Arts Standards state:

### **Writing**

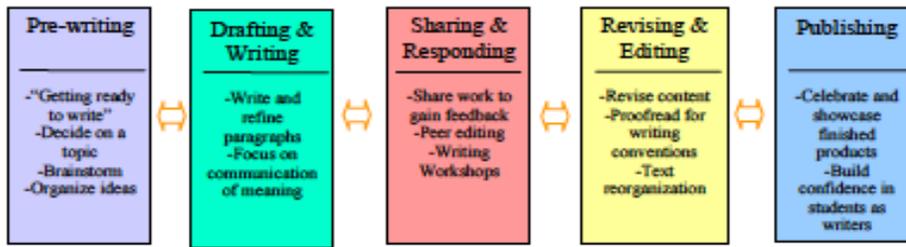
- The ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards, with opinion writing—a basic form of argument—extending down into the earliest grades.
- Research—both short, focused projects (such as those commonly required in the workplace) and longer term in depth research—is emphasized throughout the standards but most prominently in the writing strand since a written analysis and presentation of findings is so often critical.

Teachers who are knowledgeable and effective in teaching the writing process are able to focus more of their instruction on teaching writing (Bridge, Compton-Hall & Cantrell, 1997). If students receive effective writing instruction, then this will close the learning gap. According to the National Council for Teacher Quality, California received an overall grade of D+ for preparing, retaining and rewarding effective teachers. Middle school teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach appropriate grade-level content and secondary teachers are not required to pass a subject matter test (NCTQ, 2014). Students who have a series of strong teachers soar academically, while those who have weak teachers fall further and further behind (Sanders, et al, 1996). The single most important school-based factor in improving student academic performance is the quality of the teacher in the classroom (Rivkin, et al, 2005). Investing in highly qualified teachers will increase student achievement and close the learning gap.

### ***The Writing Process***

Although there are many stages in the writing process, prewriting is essential to producing quality writing. Researchers and educators have identified several steps that take place in the writing process (Kamehameha Schools, 2007):

Figure 1. The Writing Process<sup>1</sup>



Skilled writers spend significantly more time organizing and planning what they are going to write (Hillocks, 1986). However, most students spend on average only about 3 minutes to prepare for their writing (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). Pre-writing, or planning out what is going to be written, is an essential step in the writing process and should account for 70 percent of the writing time (Murray, 1982). Students spend little time thinking and planning how to express their thoughts before writing them down, and therefore are not accessing information and ideas that could possibly enhance their writing.

When children stop writing it is not because they run out of things to say, but because they do not yet have adequate methods of articulating what they know. Children have much more extensive knowledge about a topic than that reflected in their typical writings. Allowing students to tap into their knowledge can help them to write (Kamehameha Schools, 2007).

### ***Modeling***

Literature supports the need for teachers to model the writing process for their students (Buhrke, et al, 2002). Lack of, or inconsistencies around modeling creates another probable cause for weak writing skills. Teachers often do not take the time to model writing before they teach the skills needed to write well. Large (1997) suggests that a probable cause for lack of student motivation and progress in writing is lack of modeled writing by adults. Teachers need to model the writing process in small increments so that students can integrate the complexities of

the writing process into their own cognitive arenas (Buhrke, et al, 2002). Students will respond positively when teachers write with their students and provide hands-on approaches (Holt, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

Students can be motivated to write when they are given a choice to select their topics. They can be better prepared to write when given time to brainstorm, write, and organize their essay. Students who are able to make a claim and use evidence to back up their claims will be more effective writers. Based on my research, students will be motivated to write, learn how to write a thesis statement (state a claim), and back up their claim using evidence through teacher modeling and examples.

### **Theory of Action**

Problem of Practice	Literature Review	Intervention	Expected Change
- Students are not motivated to write	- Students who are given choice are more motivated to write	- Students select their own topics	- Students will be motivated to write
- Students are not spending enough time in the pre-writing and drafting phases	- Pre-writing should account for 70 percent of the writing process; students are spending an average of 3 minutes	- Students are given more writing time, especially in class and specifically for pre-writing phase	- Every paper has a clear thesis statement (claim)
- Students are stating they “do not know what to write”	- Students are not spending enough time writing in class	- Students are taught how to write a thesis statement (claim)	- Every claim is backed up by evidence (not feeling, but facts)
- Students are stating claims and not backing up with good or detailed evidence	- Teachers spend time focusing on grammar and not developing ideas	- There is explicit teaching of claims backed up by evidence	- Writing is organized

### **Intervention and Data Collection Plan**

Students will participate in a four-week writing unit around argumentative writing. Students will be asked to pick a topic of their choice, make a claim, and write an argument backing up their point of view with good evidence. Good evidence will consist of facts and logic, not just feelings. Students will spend the first week learning the purpose of argumentative

writing through definition and examples. Students will be able to evaluate good versus bad evidence. Students will also understand the writing objectives and expectations. During the second week, students will brainstorm a list of topics and pick one that they would like to write about. They will be able to make a claim and spend time on the pre-writing phase. During the third week, students will continue to brainstorm, draft, and organize their evidence. Models will be introduced throughout the writing process. During the final week, students will write and submit their first drafts.

### **Overview of Intervention**

	Component	Activities	Purpose	Data to be Collected
1	Pre-survey	- Students will take a Pre-Survey	Collect baseline data on students experience around writing	- Pre-Survey
2	Learning Logs	- Students will keep journals and document their writing experience through the pre-writing and drafting phases	Students will share their feelings and experience of the writing process	- Student learning logs
3	Teacher observations	- Teacher will keep a log documenting observations of student behavior and conversations	Teacher will document students' attitudes about writing and their behavior in response to writing	- Teacher journal
4	Writing samples	- Students will participate in the writing process and samples will be collected throughout the process	Writing samples will be compared and analyzed to report on the changes of student writing	- Student writing samples
5	Post-survey	- Students will take a post-survey when they are done with the writing unit	Data from the end of the writing unit will be compared to base-line data to see how students attitudes and experiences around writing has changed	- Post-Survey

### *Expected Change / Data*

Expected Change	Data Sources	What will this data tell me?
- Students who have a choice in selecting their topic will express motivation to write	- Survey - Learning Logs - Teacher Observations	- Students are more motivated to write when they are able to select their own topic -

- Students who are given more time to prewrite will produce more writing	- Student essays	- Writing time allows students to engage in the writing process for longer periods of time and help them feel more comfortable with writing
- Every claim is backed up by evidence (not feeling, but facts)	- Brainstorm - Student essays	- Students are able to use evidence effectively
- Every paper has a clear thesis statement (claim)	- Student essays	- Students are able to write a clear thesis statement
- Writing is organized	- Student essays	- Students are able to organize their writing

### **Research Methods**

The literature review led me to focus on specific parts of the writing process: focusing on student's understanding of the assignment, allowing adequate pre-writing time in class, and providing models (Murray, Buhrke, et al, date?). The unit totaled four weeks, with students submitting a first draft by the end of the fourth week. To begin the writing unit, students took a survey to capture their writing attitude, knowledge and experience. Questions ranged from multiple choice questions on their strengths and challenges around writing to open ended questions about how they felt about writing and what tools they use to get started writing. Over the course of four weeks, students also kept a learning log to document their writing experiences, and I kept a teacher observation log. To close out the writing unit, students re-took the same survey that was given to them at the beginning of the unit, so that results could be compared. Twelve students completed the survey; nine completed both the pre and post surveys. Three students did not have the pre and post surveys completed because of attendance, and I overlooked not having given them the pre-surveys prior to starting the writing assignment. They took the survey after the writing unit was complete.

To understand how students utilize writing time, students kept learning logs throughout the unit. At the end of each day, students answered questions reflecting on that day's lesson, including what was helpful to them and what they would need to move forward in their writing. As the teacher, I also kept my own notes based on observations of students. This included what I saw them doing in class and how they responded to the assignment.

After the pre-survey was administered, Week One focused on explaining the objectives and expectations of the assignment. It is important for students to understand what is expected of them (Buhrke, et al, 2002). I introduced the lesson by asking students why writing is important and where writing occurs in their lives. After connecting writing to each student, we discussed the different types of writing and the assignment was explained to them. We reviewed the rubric and focused on the main objective of this writing unit, which was argumentative writing. Students would be able to understand and identify "good" evidence from "bad" evidence, including what makes writing argumentative. After understanding writing expectations, students needed to select a topic. They were given time to brainstorm topics that interested them and I also brought in examples in which students could pick from. Allowing students to choose their own topics to write about will encourage and motivate them to want to write (Graves, 1983).

After selecting a topic, students focused on the pre-writing process during Week Two. Pre-writing, or planning out what is going to be written, is an essential step in the writing process and should account for 70 percent of the writing time (Murray, 1982). Students were given time over the weekend to think about their topic, ask others their opinions, and do any research. In class, students received a graphic organizer to brainstorm ideas, lay out arguments for and against, and discuss the topic with their peers to get further supporting opinions and/or rebuttals.

Because I planned on students focusing on their personal experiences as evidence, I did not think that they would want or need to do research. However, students wanted to gather more evidence; therefore, time in the computer lab was scheduled so they could gather evidence.

During Week Three, students were given examples of argumentative essays. Students need teachers to model the writing process so they can integrate their learning into their writing (Buhrke, et al, 2002). Using sample essays, students were asked to identify the essay's thesis statement, arguments, and counterarguments. Students reviewed how to write an effective thesis statement and also identified the arguments used to back up the claim. Students discussed whether or not the argument was effective based on "good" and "bad" evidence and why. Students were given class time to continue their writing process and plan out their essay. A graphic organizer was distributed and students used that to outline their essays.

Week Four was focused on writing the first draft. Students spent time in the computer lab writing and continued their research on line. At the end of the week, 12 out of 14 students submitted a first draft. One student submitted a partial draft and another student transferred out of the school. Students then completed the post-survey to close out the unit.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

Along with the students' first drafts, I collected their learning logs, and compiled their pre and post surveys. The expected outcomes guided my data collection and coding. For my data collection, I wanted to capture students':

- Writing process, including time, and how this affected their writing;
- Attitudes about writing;
- Understandings of effective argumentative writing;
- Thesis statement and their ability to state a claim;
- Use of evidence to back up their claims.

I transcribed all the students' surveys and compared pre-surveys with post-surveys. I looked at the way students rated themselves before and after, and also read their written responses to questions around their attitudes towards writing. For the multiple-choice answers on the survey, I entered them onto an excel spreadsheet, looked at the results individually, and noted any significant findings from pre to post survey responses. For the student's learning logs and teacher observations, I transcribed them and coded them using the following guide:

Kind of data	code	Kind of data	code
Brainstorming	B	Selecting a topic	ST
Evidence Number	E-N	Thesis Statement Student Definition	TS-SD
Evidence Student Definition	E-SD	Thesis Statement Student Identified	TS-SI
Evidence Student Identified	E-SI	Thesis Statement Teacher Identified	TS-TI
Evidence Teacher Identified	E-TI	Writing Challenges	WC
Feelings	F	Writing Process Reflection	WP
Introduction Hook	I-H	Writing Time	WT
Models	M	Writing Time in Comp Lab	WT-CL

The codes were paired with what I transcribed from the student's answers on the open ended questions of their surveys, learning logs, my own observation notes, and their first drafts.

### **Impact Data**

Impact data was collected through pre- and post- surveys and student essays. Surveys were given at the beginning of the writing unit and at the end, and used to measure how students' writing attitudes may have changed. One student stated that she thought choosing a topic would make writing more enjoyable; and at the end of the writing unit, she stated that having the skills to write made writing enjoyable for her. Students were also able to better articulate what they found easy or difficult around writing.

At the end of the four-week writing unit, students submitted their pre-writing brainstorm, organizers and notes attached to their first draft. In addition to evaluating their writing, students were asked to self evaluate their essays by identifying their thesis, claims and evidence. The action research intervention hoped to address four objectives: students were motivated and

excited to write about a topic of their interest, their writing was organized, every paper had a clear thesis statement, and that claims were backed by evidence.

***Impact Data: Motivation and Organization***

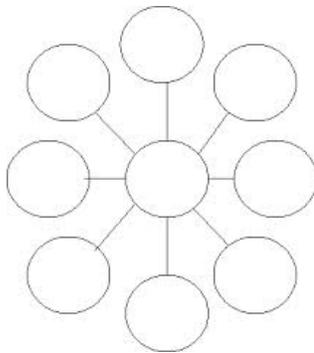
For students to write, they need to be motivated and excited about writing. One of my goals of the action research project was to get students to enjoy writing, feel proud of their work, and take ownership of their writing. When asked how students felt about writing when asked to write, they stated on their pre-surveys that they didn't like to write and felt, "annoyed, angry, anxious, irritated, hatred and upset." One student stated that she didn't like writing because it "takes too long." In my literature review, I found that students need to get used to writing essays, and when we allow them time to practice, get more comfortable, or increase expectations, it can possibly shift their attitudes towards writing. From my pre-survey, students said they would be motivated to write if they could pick their own topics. Five out of nine students explicitly stated that being able to choose their own topic motivates them to write. One student stated, "Writing isn't enjoyable but writing about interesting topics makes me motivated and interested to write." And another stated, "What makes writing enjoyable is writing about what I like." Although students were allowed to pick their writing topics, and expressed that this would change their attitudes around writing, the post survey showed little to no change from the pre-survey where students expressed various negative feelings around writing. Students still said they felt irritated, angry or annoyed when asked to write. From my teacher observations, students showed immediate interest in selecting their own topics. Students were excited about selecting their own topics and collectively asked if they could have time to research their topics. They were motivated to learn. I secured time in the computer lab and after the first day of being productive, finding information, and sharing what they learned, student motivation decreased when it was

time to write. I observed less focus and less excitement. Interest was sparked when students were allowed to select their own topics and make personal connections to their work; however, it seemed like writing skill can contribute to their feelings toward writing and be a stronger cause of their writing attitudes. Students may be able to select a topic, but when it comes time to write, students who have difficulty and low writing skills, revert to their negative feelings about writing. One student stated, “I thought it was going to be easy because I got to choose my topic.” She is a lower level writer and although I was encouraged by her excitement to write, observed this student say, “I don’t know what to write” and continue to struggle with getting started. If students are not taught the skills to write, they will struggle and continue to not enjoy it.

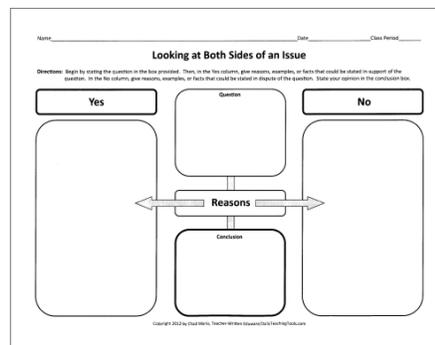
Writing should be organized with an introduction, strong body paragraphs and a conclusion. To help students organize their writing, I assigned graphic organizers to have students brainstorm their ideas and outline their essays. On the pre-survey, six students stated they use bubble maps to brainstorm their ideas. I observed some students who had a difficult time using graphic organizers and just wanted to write. One student stated, “I don’t use organizers unless it [my writing] needs to be perfect.” This lead me to believe that students do not understand the purpose of organizers in helping plan or that the student is not trying to make his writing “perfect.” Organizers can be an effective tool in the planning process of writing; however, students who don’t know how to use it, won’t. Students need to understand the purpose and function of organizers. Some students expressed that organizers help them “put all their ideas down and keep them organized” or that it “helped them get their work done.” During the brainstorming process, I started with a bubble map graphic organizer and students were asked to brainstorm their topics. Student brainstorms included a spectrum of information, including some that were not helpful to the writing assignment. For students who started the assignment later because they were absent, I

decided to use a brainstorm organizer that included “pros and cons” on the topic. Student information was more focused and their research was driven by the organizer. The first organizer was just a plain bubble map (see Pic 1). This bubble map did not have any guidance in organizing student ideas and they were all over the place. The second organizer I decided to use was specifically designed for students to organize an argumentative essay and brainstorm both sides of the issue.

Pic 1



Pic 2



When students know how to use these tools effectively or are given useful graphic organizers aligned with the writing assignment, they are able to use it to support their writing process. Originally, I was hesitant about using a graphic organizer that reflected the 5-paragraph essay structure because I wanted students to be able to decide how many body paragraphs, or evidence they were going to use to support their claims. I did not want to limit ideas and wanted students to choose the opinions that they felt strongly about and would be able to defend with relevant evidence. I also wanted to focus on the quality as opposed to the quantity of evidence or the number of paragraphs students were to write. However, many students would continue to ask, “How long does this have to be?” One student stated, “I’m feeling stressed about this whole writing thing because I don’t know how long you might want it.” Prior to giving students a concrete number, students kept asking and wondering when they needed to stop researching. It

seemed like they felt uneasy about not having a specific number response. This suggested that students associate writing with a specific length and can lead them to writing to fulfill the page expectation, instead of focusing on the quality of their writing. In hindsight, I would have chosen to spend more time explaining to students the value of quality writing over quantity. However, to ease students' anxiety, I decided to use the 5-paragraph structure and all students said they were familiar with this structure and that they were taught an essay had to be 5 paragraphs. By telling students they needed 3 body paragraphs or 3 reasons as evidence, this helped focus their research and students began to write and fill out their graphic organizers. This tool was also very helpful with low level English Language Learners. Although some of their first drafts needed a lot of revisions, their graphic organizers were completed and you can see how students attempted to organize their ideas and thoughts. The students who used the brainstorm organizer aligned with the argumentative essay had the strongest evidence to support their claims. Students who also followed the 5-paragraph essay organizer were more organized in their writing.

***Impact Data: Thesis Statements***

A thesis statement is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. It is the point or claim that your paper is trying to prove and drives the rest of your arguments. It also prepares the reader for what to expect in the rest of the paper. I wanted students to be able to write a clear thesis statement that stated their claim reflective of the writing assignment. Students were able to define what a thesis statement was based on their notes and work submitted. All students said a thesis statement is what your paper will be about; however, only one student stated that a thesis statement is “debatable.” Although a thesis statement is what your paper will be about, this writing assignment asked students to select a topic in which they were interested and to make an argument to persuade the readers of their

point. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, or to take a stand on an issue, you are being asked to develop a thesis statement that is arguable; it should not just be a statement of fact. During class discussions, students were able to make claims and take a position on a topic. Example writings were shared and students were able to identify from the writing, the thesis and what the position the writer was taking. I framed topics as questions that asked students to pick one side or to agree or disagree such as, “Do you think...is good or bad.” or “Should...” This worked well because I immediately asked students to state their position and provide with me their arguments to persuade me to feel the same way. Responses ranged from, “This is good because,,,” or “This is bad because..”, or “Yes, because...” At the time, I assessed students as being able to define a thesis statement and show understanding of a thesis, and moved onto brainstorming and pre-writing process. However, I should have ensured student mastery of writing thesis statements, instead of moving on because in their essays, some students did not fully know how to write effective thesis statements. Being able to say you can and doing it are different skills. On their first drafts, I asked students to identify their thesis statements. Although all students had a thesis statement, not all thesis statements were arguable, and therefore, did not meet the writing assignment objective. Having a thesis statement in all their essays demonstrated that students understood the point of a thesis. When only one student defined a thesis statement as being “debatable,” it did not occur to me to stop and re-teach the lesson or check for understanding. Also, during discussions, students were not expected to write down their actual thesis statements. I did not provide clear instruction to be more specific about how to write thesis statements or provide time to practice. This shows that understanding the purpose and expectations of a particular writing prompt is very important and key to success, and understanding should not just

be measure via verbal regurgitation, but through practice. I did not spend time ensuring students understood that their thesis statement should be arguable. I did not give students time to practice writing thesis statements.

***Impact Data: Claims Backed by Evidence***

For writing to be effective, students need to provide good evidence to back up their thesis. I wanted students to use personal experience as their evidence, because this experience would be closest to a standardized writing assessment. I wanted to focus on student writing skills without including any researching for information outside of their own personal experiences. However, when students were selecting their topics, they all asked if they could do more research on it. Because I had not secured time in the computer lab, I explained to students that I wanted them to use their personal experiences and to at least try until I could see if there was an opening in the computer lab during class time later that week. Prior to going to the computer lab to allow students to research their topics, students struggled with providing personal experiences. I gave students time in class to brainstorm or talk to their partners. A couple student responses ranged from, “I feel that the writing process is very slow.” to “All you are doing is making me hate writing more.” Because students felt they did not have enough information, giving them time to write did not help. Knowing that students may not be able to do research prior to a writing prompt, students need to learn how to write when they only have their own knowledge to tap into. When students expressed excitement in writing and took initiative to want to research, I ran in that direction instead. Prior to being able to research their topics, students “did not know what to write.” Students said that writing became easier when they were able to research and find more information. This shows that being knowledgeable about a topic can help ease in the writing process. Although I wanted students to write an essay without having to do research, I

realized that students can struggle with writing because they either need to have more information on the topic or learn strategies on how to write using personal experience as evidence.

***Process Data: Focused writing time***

I wanted to learn what was helpful for students during the writing process. Students said the most useful time was when they were able to share their ideas and discuss with a partner, get help from their teacher, or research for more information. Although students were given choice to select their own topics, time to brainstorm, and time to write, students need more opportunities to gather information so they can then have things to write about. Writing is supported when students are able to critically think and discuss their topics or ask questions with others. One student stated that “time with my partner to discuss my topic” was most helpful for him. Two students picked the same topic and wanted to share their ideas. I allowed them to sit together and talk during the brainstorm and pre-writing time. These brainstorm strategies could have helped other students gather more information with a thought partner. Although students were given a lot of time in class to brainstorm and write, I did not create meaningful, focused writing time for students. Student writing levels vary and providing writing time may not be helpful for all students. The higher level skilled writers expressed they thought the writing time was useful while the students who need help in their writing expressed that it wasn't. I also observed more focused writing from students who were able to write and no writing or less focused writing from students who needed support. Students are at different levels of writing and teachers need to understand how to differentiate writing groups to focus on individual or small group needs, and to best utilize writing time. Creating writing circles, or groups could have been an effective way to differentiate instruction and/or provide more intentional support to various students. Students

who need more support writing may benefit from writing prompts to stay focused or writing expectations for that day's writing time.

Students also look for teacher guidance during the writing process and “approval” that they are headed in the right direction. I did not provide on going written feedback for students during their writing process. This could have been helpful in re-directing students whose writings were off topic.

***Process Data: Writing samples and modeling***

Students need to understand what makes a “good argument,” what is “good” evidence, and be able to cite strong, relevant evidence. I did not spend enough time providing examples of clear thesis statements or sample essays. I did not model writing to students or have students digest good and bad examples. I did not spend time planning, or find quality examples to share with students, and I was not confident in my ability to model the writing process with students.

***Process Data: Determining quality of evidence***

During class discussions, students displayed understanding of where evidence came from and what makes evidence believable. When writing examples were shared with the class, students were quick to provide their opinion and often very critical of others work. “That doesn't make sense.” And, “that's not a good reason because...” were counterarguments I heard from students. In their own writing, students were able to identify their thesis statements, evidence, and even define terms; being able to do it well was another issue however. The quality of the evidence and argument was lacking. Students must be given time to practice how to write good arguments. Being able to identify good evidence and writing them are two separate tasks.

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