**Teaching Writing in Elementary School and Middle School** 

**Teaching Beginning Writers and Struggling Writers** 

**TWAC : Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum** 

## How to Create Scaffolded, Student-Owned Writing Assignments with Your Students to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum

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## Outline: How to Create Scaffolded, Student-Owned Writing Assignments with Your Students to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum

#### **Student Ownership of Writing**

- 1. Teacher Owned vs. Student Owned
- 2. Two Kinds of Student Owned Writing Prompts and Assignments
- 3. Type 1: Creating Writing Assignments as a Class

#### Scaffolding Writing: Let's Give Them Something to Write About

- 1. Independent Writing
- 2. Scaffolded Writing
- 3. Guided Writing
- 4. Curriculum Lessons

#### How to Create Writing Assignments as a Class Across the Curriculum

- 1. On the Front Board: Whiteboards, Paper, and Technology
- 2. How to Start the Scaffolding Activity
- 3. Three Examples in Action

#### Three Methods to Keep it Organized on the Front Board

- 1. Method #1: Brainstorm and Organize as We Go
- 2. Method #2: Main Ideas and Details
- 3. Method #3: Graphic Organizers and Outlines

#### Time to Write: The Writing Prompt or Assignment

- 1. Open-Ended or Flexible Assignments
- 2. Rigid Assignments

#### **Connect the Front Board Work with the Writing Assignment**

- 1. Create a Formal Writing Prompt
- 2. Create a Strategy, Concept, or Genre Prompt
- 3. Use the Front Board as a Prompt

#### **Teacher Guided and Influenced**

- 1. The Beginning, Middle, and End of the Year: Considerations
- 2. The Writing Process
- 3. The Benefits and Problems of Creating Writing Prompts as a Class

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# How to Create Scaffolded, Student-Owned Writing Assignments with Your Students to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum

Do you want to get results teaching writing across the curriculum? If so, you must develop an effective toolkit of systems, routines, techniques, and strategies. In this eBook, you will find a strategy that works! Please note that I put this forth only as one tool in the teaching-writing tool belt. In other words, it's a helpful piece of the teaching-writing puzzle.

Although there is a great deal of information in this free eBook that will help teachers create writing assignments and teach writing across the curriculum in general, I direct the discussion towards *scaffolded* and *student-owned writing*. And there is a reason for that.

Working in a year-round school environment, I've had many opportunities to both sub in and take over unfilled positions on my vacation time. In disbelief and frustration, I have shown some of my teacher friends the writing from some of the more extreme so-called *situations*. They have gasped, "I wouldn't even know where to begin!"

I developed this scaffolded, student-owned strategy in those situations, and it was so effective that I had to let go of some of my prior beliefs about how to get results in teaching writing. When I brought the technique into my regular classroom, it helped me create a true "Classroom Full of Writers."

With this strategy, you will get more students to write more content in an organized way across the curriculum. It's a tool and a strategy that will help you will create a tipping point where your entire class takes ownership of their writing and becomes interested in writing. Furthermore, you will be able to teach more writing skills across the curriculum than you ever have before.

As relates to the scaffolding, every student benefits from the scaffolding because every student writes more and every student learns more. But here is what I have discovered. It powerfully brings the lower third of the classroom into the writing experience and writing mindset. If you are trying to teach writing and the bottom third of your class is not interested, it ruins everything. You don't realize just how much it ruins everything until you get that bottom third to become interested in writing and take ownership of their writing. Then you will have created "A Classroom Full of Writers."

Today, we are going to combine the following four teaching-writing concepts to create a highlyeffective strategy for teaching writing across the curriculum:

- 1. Student Ownership of Writing
- 2. Creating Writing Assignments Across the Curriculum
- 3. Scaffolding Writing Assignments: Let's Give Your Students Something to Write About
- 4. Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

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This methodology works in most grades and with most student populations. Some years back, I ended up in a first-grade class for a day, and I did what I describe here. After the students had finished writing, the teacher's aide said in astonishment, "Wow! You should feel proud of yourself!"

In this first-grade class, I had simply done what I had done so many times before in upper elementary and middle school classes—and it worked just the same. For me, it's just teaching writing.

So, if you teach a diverse student population that includes highly-skilled writers, average-level writers, beginning writers, struggling writers, and/or reluctant writers, this is a way to meet all of their needs and keep the class moving forward in learning how to write.

Although I direct this discussion towards teaching subject content across the curriculum, teachers can also use this approach to have students write about their own lives and experiences: e.g., what they did over the holiday weekend. My point of teaching writing across the curriculum is to avoid wasting time writing about things that don't relate to what's going on in your classroom—i.e., Why would I want my students to write about that?

Let's get started!

#### **Student Ownership of Writing**

Perhaps the number one rule in modern writing instruction is to foster students' ownership of their writing. Writer's Workshop, the writing process, rubrics, and checklists all encourage students to take ownership of their writing.

But who creates the writing assignments and prompts in the first place? Two approaches seem to be most common:

- 1. **Teacher Owned:** The teacher hands down writing assignments from on high. The teacher creates the writing prompt and assignment and communicates expectations and the grading process.
- 2. **Student Owned:** The teacher lets students write about whatever they want to write about. Early in my career, those little tan journals were frequently recommended as a sort of teachingwriting solution. Students enjoyed writing in them, and they were student owned. Students frequently wrote about whatever they wanted to write about. Although the little tan journals did get many of my non-writers writing, they didn't do much more than that. Many students simply practiced writing poorly.

We can do better!

#### **Two Kinds of Student Owned Writing Prompts and Assignments**

Elsewhere, I discuss in depth how teachers can create writing prompts across the curriculum, so I won't repeat all that here. What I cover here is how teachers can involve students in creating writing prompts and assignments across the curriculum. The goal here is for teachers to accomplish five goals at once: 1) to teach students writing skills and concepts, 2) to teach students how to generate ideas, 3) to foster student ownership of writing, 4) to get students writing, and 5) to teach content, to review content, and/or to check for understanding of content.

Now let's look at one of the "Two Types of Student-Owned Writing Prompts and Assignments." Please note: I don't discuss the second one here.

- 1. Creating Writing Prompts and Assignments as a Class
- 2. Student-Created Writing Prompts (discussed elsewhere).

### **Type 1: Creating Writing Assignments as a Class**

To be clear, I begin the year by doing this activity using the **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** methodology. It creates the necessary foundation, framework, and common language for everything I discuss here. You will see that I mention my free **Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills** eBook a couple of times. **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** is the first step that lets me teach what I need to teach in that eBook with skill and ease across the curriculum.

Thinking up something to write about (choosing a topic, generating ideas) is a part of the prewriting process, and so is organizing those ideas. Ideally, we want to generate ideas through an organized process and with organization in mind as we generate those ideas. We do all of this to figure out what is most important and most interesting inside of a topic—i.e., we do this to figure out what we want to say about a topic.

My goal is to create independent writers who can choose a topic, generate ideas, and organize ideas at the drop of a hat. Ideally, I want to teach students how to do this while I teach content across the curriculum. That's what follows!

#### Scaffolding Writing: Let's Give Them Something to Write About

First, I will place the concept of scaffolding writing in perspective by discussing these four concepts: 1) Independent Writing, 2) Scaffolded Writing, 3) Guided Writing, and 4) Curriculum Lessons.

To be clear, my goal is to create independent writers who write well independently across the curriculum and on state and district writing assessments. Everything else is a tool or a strategy to reach that goal.

- 1. **Independent Writing:** My goal is to create independent writers, and I do not consider what follows to be independent writing. It's scaffolded writing. In reality, I evaluate my success in teaching writing on students' independent writing progress. I look at my students' independent writing across the curriculum and their independent writing on state and district writing assessments. Put simply: I don't care what students can do; I care what students do do.
- Scaffolded Writing: To scaffold writing means to provide a foundation of some kind (ideas, requirements, structure, etc.) in advance. If teachers provide a graphic organizer or an outline in advance, that's scaffolding. If teachers have students generate ideas as a class, that's scaffolding. Most writing instruction is scaffolded to some degree.

To create independent writers and to teach writing, teachers must get their students writing. Some teachers lose the battle in teaching writing before they even get started. They fall into one of these two traps:

- a) They get their students writing, but they let them write poorly.
- b) They don't let their students write in any significant way. Instead, they focus on small stuff and errors. Their students don't like to write, and many students become afraid to write.

There is a better way. And if you want to teach students how to write across the curriculum, this is a highly effective strategy. Think about it: Why do the comprehension questions at the end of chapters require short answers? Because even if students have read carefully, they still don't have the knowledge in their minds to write more than a short answer. They can answer a question—but that's it.

What I outline below is this: Let's be flexible, and let's give our students something to write about across the curriculum. When I scaffold writing across the curriculum, I accomplish many goals: 1) I teach writing, 2) I teach content and review content, 3) I get struggling writers writing, 4) I teach all writers new writing techniques and concepts, and 5) I teach all students how to use the writing process.

As you will see, the class generates most of the ideas, so they have ownership of the assignment. Additionally, every student has something to write about, and every student learns. That's important. If the lowest third of your class consistently has little to write about across the curriculum (i.e., they don't have a wealth of content knowledge to draw from), it's going to slow

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down your class's writing progress. Furthermore, the class as a whole won't become interested in writing. You won't create "A Classroom Full of Writers."

3. **Guided Writing:** Guided writing can mean different things to different teachers at different grade levels. But as a rule, I'm not interested in most activities labeled as guided writing. I would choose instead to spend my time showing students a few exemplars or models, do a little scaffolding, and then let students write. After students write, we quickly share what they write and examine a successful student-writing attempt. I want my students to constantly make choices and then reflect on, compare, and/or evaluate their choices.

In short, I view guided writing as a slow, teacher-centered activity that does not teach concrete skills or create independent writers across the curriculum. To be fair, I'm sure that some teachers use guided writing as a productive tool for teaching writing. In fact, if teachers scaffold continuously in a rigid and controlled way, it will turn into guided writing.

4. Curriculum Lessons: Most teachers need at least some skill-based and skill-specific curriculum lessons to teach writing. Even in Writer's Workshop, curriculum lessons are a part of the teaching-writing puzzle. But Writer's Workshop calls these lessons *mini-lessons*, which communicates a great deal about how Writer's Workshop views lessons. Put simply: Students don't become skilled independent writers through lessons, especially when the lessons are isolated skill drills.

Although what follows focuses on scaffolding writing, it probably relates to all four of these concepts, so keep them all in mind as we move forward.

#### How to Create Writing Assignments as a Class Across the Curriculum

Creating writing prompts and assignments as a class across the curriculum is really quite easy. Here's how it works. If we have just finished reading a chapter, it's time to make the learning stick. And while I make the learning stick, I may as well teach writing.

Keep in mind that nearly all of the ideas come from students. They are doing the work and the thinking. Having said that, my goal is to teach content and teach writing, so I also guide and influence the direction of the class discussion and ideas. Furthermore, I offer my own ideas, especially at the beginning of the year as I teach students this process. As I teach students and guide student in this process, I encourage students to connect different ways of thinking and different ways of organizing information to the content we have just learned. What kinds of thinking? What ways of organizing information? To answer that question, be sure to check out **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills, Strategies, Concepts, Categories, and Models**.

**On the Front Board: Whiteboards, Paper, and Technology:** As we move forward, I will occasionally use "on the front board" as a generic term. We have three ways or places that we can create this work. Of course, we can also use these three ways in combination.

- 1. Whiteboards: If you have one or two large whiteboards in your classroom, this is the easiest and fastest way to make this activity a regular part of your teaching-writing and teaching-content routine. You can develop a habit of reviewing content, teaching writing, and giving your students something to write about FAST.
- 2. **Students Write on Paper:** This is an excellent method, but it takes substantially more time than the whiteboard. The main benefit of this method is that students are writing and organizing ideas on paper. They develop a mental memory and a muscle memory of generating ideas and organizing ideas on paper. Furthermore, students learn how to divide up their own sheets of paper to create effective prewriting. One final benefit is that teachers can save paper. If the exercise goes well, teachers can save an excellent example and later use it as a teaching tool.
- 3. **Technology:** Do you have technology (projectors, iPads, etc.) in your classroom? If you do, you can probably use it. But this is my least favorite way, as "the screen" limits the number of organized ideas that students can view and interact with at the same time. It's restrictive. Of course, if teachers are targeting a specific skill or concept, they may not need a lot of space. And just like paper, it's also savable. Teachers can quickly reteach a concept using their students' own words and ideas.

#### How to Start the Scaffolding Activity

Once again, our purpose is twofold: 1) teach writing, and 2) teach content. If we are doing this activity (creating writing prompts and assignments across the curriculum as a class), we have already learned content. As we do this activity, our goal is to make that content stick. And as we make the content stick, students learn how to generate ideas and organize ideas. And when we have finished, our students are truly prepared to write. And then they write. That's win, win, win, win!

Naturally, we must train our students. Furthermore, many teachers need to be trained. Many teachers probably don't know where to begin with this activity. Before you take action in the classroom, you may want to become familiar with these two resources:

- 1. The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills, Strategies, Concepts, Categories, and Models. Start with "Section B. Paragraphs and Whole Compositions."
- 2. Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

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By the way, I created Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay as I taught writing across the curriculum. If you want to teach writing across the curriculum, you should start with the program. It creates the foundation and framework that makes what follows easy. Once you have mastered the methodology, you will find it quite easy to apply the system to teach writing across the curriculum. At that point, you and your entire class will be ready to attack everything that's in The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills.

Let's look at three examples of how to use **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills** and **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** to teach writing across the curriculum.

Later, we will discuss these two groups of concepts, but for now, let's just focus on reading and understanding the example prompts and assignments that follow.

The Scaffolding: The Front Board Work
 The Writing Prompt or Assignment

Open-Ended or Flexible Assignments
 Rigid Assignments

9

#### 1. Social Studies

**Teacher:** "Class, we have just read a chapter on the American colonies declaring independence from Great Britain. We can easily relate this chapter to many of our common thought patterns. Let's quickly list a bunch of these common thought patterns on the front board."

**Students:** "Sequence, cause-effect, problem-solution, pro-con, reasons, point-proofcommentary, summary, enumeration, listing, description, justification, background..."

**Teacher:** "Okay, that's enough. You can see that I spread out these common thought patterns all over the front board. Now we are going to generate a bunch of ideas for these common thought patterns. You can throw out a phrase, a main idea, a claim, a thesis—anything. Let's generate a bunch of ideas. Later, you will choose two of these common thought patterns and write 1-2 paragraphs related to our topic. After that, you will read what you wrote to one other person."

#### 2. Science

**Teacher:** "Class, we have just read a chapter in our science book on the *forces that shape Earth's surface*. Let's generate some ideas that show, illustrate, and reflect how we understand what we have read. As you look over "Section B" in **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills,** think about how some of those concepts relate to what we have just learned. Now let's create a Main Idea List (MIL) and Main Question List (MQL) that we learned in **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay**. Now let's choose one of those main ideas and use our **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** methodology to break down that topic and create some prewriting."

After we have learned subject content in my class, my students can definitely generate ideas about it. As a whole class, it's relatively easy to generate tons of ideas right from the start. And after a while, every student can generate ideas to write about independently. Because the process of generating organized ideas come easy, the organized writing comes easy. And when we have organized writing across the curriculum, we can make that writing better.

I can give examples of how to do this all day long in any topic across the curriculum. If we have studied a topic across the curriculum, I can quickly guide a discussion in which students generate ideas that teach both subject content and writing concepts. With some practice, you will too!

#### 3. Social Studies and Science: Sentences

**Teacher:** Today, we will work on the same three sentence patterns in both social studies and science. In social studies, we will relate these sentence patterns to what we have just read about the Oregon Trail. In science, we will relate these same three sentence patterns to what we will read about chemical reactions.

Our three sentence patterns are compound sentences, complex sentences, and prepositional phrases. Please look at the word list in front of you, which contains a few coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and prepositions.

As you can see on the front board, we have three large boxes that are each divided into two sections. With coordinating conjunctions, we will focus on "and = addition" and "but = contrast." With subordinating conjunctions, we will focus on "before = sequence/time" and "after = sequence/time." For prepositional phrases we will focus on these prepositions: "across, behind, below, from, until, though, over, for, despite, up, and down."

As we generate ideas as a class, you can give a complete sentence or whatever comes to mind. Let's start with "before" and "after." I won't write the entire sentence on the board, but I will write a few keywords in each section of our box. I will start things off with my own sentence.

•	Before the settlers traveled West,	٠	they lived in the East.
_			

Keep in mind that I won't be writing the entire sentence on the board. I will write something like this.

settlers lived East	•	traveled West
	settlers lived East	settlers lived East  •

Later, you will write 10 of your own sentences using our ideas, or you can create your own.

### Do You Need a Foundation, a Framework, and a Methodology for Teaching Writing? Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay Is Your Teaching Writing Solution!

#### **Reflecting on the Three Examples**

Let's take a moment to think about those three examples. In the real world, teachers can't create those kinds of discussions with their class on the first day of school. Teachers must build a foundation. At the heart of that foundation is a collection of vocabulary words. At the heart of that foundation of vocabulary words is the common thought patterns.

Once again, there are so many ways to do this exercise. I did this in a first-grade class. Of course, I understand what the number one rule is: Don't confuse students. The number two rule is this: Build on what your students understand. Since most of the ideas are supposed to come from our students, we have to build on what they understand. And as they provide their ideas, every student improves their understanding.

The number three rule is this: Let your students write. Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) changed writing when he wrote his book titled *Essais* (1580). In French, *Essais* literally means *attempts*. His essays were attempts to say something true and important. Teaching writing is all about creating a foundation and an environment where our students can make reasonable attempts. Then we evaluate and reflect on their attempts.

If your goal is actually to teach writing and not just get your students writing, then we have a fourth rule: Keep it organized on the front board. Let's explore three ways to keep it organized on the front board.

#### Three Methods to Keep it Organized on the Front Board

We have three places to do this exercise (whiteboards, paper, technology), so I am using the term "on the front board" generically here. As we do this exercise on the front board, we must keep our ideas at least somewhat organized. Although a disorganized brainstorm will improve a piece writing, it won't teach anything concrete about writing. Having said that, students will come to see that every piece of writing is better if they do some brainstorming before they write.

If teachers want to teach concrete writing concepts, they must keep the ideas relatively organized as they do the exercise. We will now look at three methods to keep our front-board ideas organized as we do this activity with our students:

Method #1: Brainstorm and Organize as We Go Method #2: Main Ideas and Details Method #3: Graphic Organizers and Outlines

#### Keep it Organized: Method #1: Brainstorm and Organize as We Go

I often approach this activity just as every independent writer approaches a piece of writing—we start with a blank slate. "We just read a chapter. Now, what can we write about? What's important and interesting in this topic?" Writers begin prewriting by generating ideas.

When we start generating ideas from a blank slate, we must organize our ideas as we go. We have various ways to do this, and much depends on what our goal is.

Naturally, students can help guide this organization process, but it's much faster if the students generate the ideas and the teacher writes them down in an organized way. This form of prewriting models real-world prewriting. We generate ideas, and we try to keep our ideas organized as we generate them.

As the students generate ideas, the teacher writes the related ideas together and writes the unrelated ideas in separate areas of the front board. The unrelated ideas are frequently the important topics or main ideas—i.e., a new way of thinking about the topic. In this kind of brainstorm, students will create both main ideas and details. Every idea put forth is both a spark and fuel for new ideas to come forth. As the main ideas emerge, students naturally add details to them.

Throughout the process, groups of related ideas will emerge. These groups of related ideas are the foundation of paragraphs and of all writing. Naturally, we can make these groupings and their relationships to paragraphs clear to our students; however, if our students have a proper multi-

paragraph foundation, they just *get it*. When our students *get it*, we can have our students begin writing, and our students will approach the topic with an "Organized and Natural Paragraph Style." Students will use the board (the prewriting) and will build on it to say what they want to say—just like all writers do.

Here are the essential tools for this approach: groupings, boxes, grids, circles, lines, arrows, underlines, size, and color.

This method helps teachers see what their students understand about writing. It's less structured than our next method, but it teaches real-world prewriting. The writing that students produce is pretty close to independent writing.

#### Keep it Organized: Method #2: Main Ideas and Details

I created **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** on the front board teaching writing across the curriculum—and it certainly relates to this section. You can use the program on the front board across the curriculum, or you can use the program page by page. Either way, the curriculum remains the foundation and framework all year long.

In a sense, the program incorporates main ideas, details, outlining, a graphic organizer, mass idea generation, and a specific goal. Two sentences tie it all together—the A, B, C Sentence <sup>™</sup> and the Secret A, B, C Sentence <sup>™</sup>. It gets results fast. And it creates a foundation and framework that's easy to build on.

I use **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** early in the school year, and then I build on it using "Method #1: Brainstorm and Organize as You Go," and I target specific ways of thinking using "Method #3: Graphic Organizers." Teaching writing is not that difficult once you have the right foundation. Be sure to check out the program on the homepage!

Once students can write a decent isolated paragraph, teachers should teach the truth about paragraphs in the context of multi-paragraph writing. Reason being: The truth of paragraphs only exists in multi-paragraph writing. Young students don't necessarily need to connect together long strings of paragraphs, but they should experience how to divide a topic to create separate paragraphs. From what I've seen, when teachers do this, many young students intuitively figure out where to indent as they are writing. If teachers focus on "just one good paragraph," that doesn't happen.

I've used the **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** methodology on the front board in both elementary school and middle school, and it makes everything else I teach about writing easier.

Teachers may want to start with *Stage 1*. It makes *Stage 2* easy. However, with skilled writers or older writers, teachers may want to start with *Stage 2*.

- Stage 1: 1. The teacher lists a few main ideas on the board in a grid; 2. As a class, we brainstorm details for the main ideas; 3. Students write; 4. Students read it to one other person.
- ➤ Stage 2: 1. As a class, we create a Main Idea List (MIL); 2. We choose a few main ideas; 3. We brainstorm details for the main ideas; 4. Students write; 5. Students read it to one other person.
- Stage 3: 1. As a class, we create a Main Idea List (MIL); 2. Students choose a few main ideas; 3. Students brainstorm details for their main ideas; 4. Students write; 5. Students read it to one other person.
- → **Stage 4:** Students do it all independently across the curriculum.

*Please Note:* When students read their writing to one other person, they must bring their pencils and erasers with them. When stumbling across errors, most students will eventually choose to fix those problem areas. I rarely have to make students edit. Instead, I usually have to limit how much time they spend editing. Of course, I also teach them concrete editing and revision skills.

#### Keep it Organized: Method #3: Graphic Organizers and Outlines

Outlines, Venn diagrams, t-charts, and webs are the original popular graphic organizers. Today, we have all kinds of graphic organizers to choose from. While graphic organizers can be extremely valuable, they can also be a waste of time. Personally, I have always loved them because I love to look at them. However, as a tool for teaching writing, I ran into problems. As opposed to students creating an awesome piece of writing, students often created a time-intensive art project.

When is the last time you pulled out a graphic organizer to organize your thoughts before you wrote something? The reality of writing is that we write to say something that we feel is important and interesting and that makes a point of some kind. As a rule, writers are better off figuring out what they want to say on their own pieces of paper where they can generate ideas, connect ideas, and organize ideas in a way that helps them discover what is most important and interesting. And while they are at it, they will figure out what they want to say.

So what exactly are graphic organizers good for? What do they do? They make our common and important ways of thinking visual. We can translate a group of abstract ideas into a visual representation, and that can help us teach/learn writing and teach/learn subject content. Writing is a process of information in and information out. Writers learn information and process that information, and their output is their written text.

Aristotle (384 BC—322 BC) created his famous **Topics of Invention** well over two thousand years ago. Basically, these topics were intended to help ancient orators invent something to say. Today, they still help us teach students how to think. Of course, over the last two thousand plus years, we have added to Aristotle's patterns of thought to create an entire arsenal of **common thought patterns**.

Graphic organizers can help teachers teach students "how to think" by adding a visual component to our common patterns of thought. Graphic organizers make these ways of thinking concrete. Surprisingly, many of our common thought patterns relate to sentence structure just as they do to paragraph and whole composition structure. But that topic is for another day.

Every teacher should have a nice collection of graphic organizers. We have many ways to use graphic organizers across the curriculum, and we will look at nine of them:

- 1. Use Graphic Organizers as a Guide for Teaching Thinking
- 2. Teach Specific Skills and Concepts
- 3. Graphic-Organizer Cheat Sheet
- 4. One Topic / Multiple Graphic Organizers
- 5. Draw Them and Own Them
- 6. Writers Need to Make a Point
- 7. Use Your Time Wisely: Avoid the Art Project
- 8. Use the Graphic Organizers that Already Exist in Your Textbooks
- 9. Create a True Reading-Writing Connection
- 1. Use Graphic Organizers as a Guide for Teaching Thinking: We don't always need to use graphic organizers in a time-intensive way. We can use them as a quick guide for teaching thinking. Filling out graphic organizers and then using that information takes time, and this is even truer if each student fills one out. In contrast, it doesn't take much time for teachers to refer to and place the subject content in terms of graphic organizers. Put simply, teachers can use graphic organizers to help themselves develop a habit of placing abstract concepts and ways of thinking in visual terms.
- 2. Teach Specific Skills and Concepts: Graphic organizers are a highly effective tool for teaching specific skills, concepts, and patterns of thought. However, teachers need to create a bridge that leads to effective writing. Many graphic organizers don't translate directly into the written word. After all, writers don't discuss pro/con or sequence (etc.) just for the sake of it. The goal of a writer is to make points or make things clear to their readers. Pro/con and sequence (etc.) are tools that help them achieve their goals.

- 3. **Graphic-Organizer Cheat Sheet:** Once teachers have a nice collection of graphic organizers, teachers may want to create a graphic-organizer cheat sheet. With a graphic-organizer cheat sheet, teachers can address many different ways of thinking quickly, easily, and frequently.
- 4. **One Topic / Multiple Graphic Organizers:** Aristotle did not intend for ancient orators to think about a topic using just one Topic of Invention. Instead, the orator was supposed to consider a topic using many different Topics of Invention. We should think about graphic organizers in this same light.

One of our main goals with graphic organizers is to teach students how to think about information. We want our students to be able to think about the subject content that they learn in many different ways. There is not just one way to understand or think about our subject content. That's the most important point of Aristotle's Topics of Invention.

If our goal is to teach our students many different ways of thinking, we probably don't have time to list every single cause/effect or every single advantage/disadvantage and fill out an entire graphic organizer in the process. Instead, we may want to list just a couple of examples using several different small graphic organizers.

5. **Draw Them and Own Them:** Keep in mind that graphic organizers can be as simple as a grid or a piece of paper that is folded twice then unfolded. Take another look at "Example #3 Social Studies and Science: Sentences" to see just how easy graphic organizers can be to create and how flexible they can be.

My goal is to teach my students how to think, how to generate ideas, and how to organize their ideas before they write. But my goal is also to create independent writers. As much as possible, I want my students to create their own graphic organizers. Once again, here are the essential tools for creating graphic organizers: groupings, boxes, grids, circles, lines, arrows, underlines, size, and color.

- 6. Writers Need to Make a Point: Keep in mind that most graphic organizers don't teach students to make a point. When we write, our goal is to make a point of some kind. As an example, we compare and contrast something to make a point. Teachers often need to create a bridge from the graphic organizer to effective writing. Students need to understand that the graphic organizer helps them generate ideas and organize ideas, but that they still must communicate those organized ideas effectively.
- 7. Use Your Time Wisely: Avoid the Art Project: If someone had warned me that my students would try to turn their graphic-organizer prewriting into a time-intensive art project, I

would have used graphic organizers more effectively right from the beginning. So, I warn you here and now—they will.

- 8. Use the Graphic Organizers that Already Exist in Your Textbooks: Here is another time-saving tip. Many modern textbooks make good use of visual representations and graphic organizers. These can always be used to teach a common thought pattern, and they frequently provide an opportunity to write a sentence pattern or short paragraph. Furthermore, the class can build on the textbook graphic.
- 9. **Create a True Reading-Writing Connection:** Graphic organizers and outlines have long been used in both reading instruction and writing instruction. For this reason, they can be used as a visual tool to create a reading-writing connection.

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#### Conclusion: Three Methods to Keep it Organized on the Front Board

When you teach students how to generate ideas and how to organize ideas, you are teaching writing. And when you do it across the curriculum, you are teaching both writing and subject content in a time-efficient way. That's win, win, win!

Method #1: Brainstorm and Organize as We Go Method #2: Main Ideas and Details Method #3: Graphic Organizers and Outlines

Admittedly, it takes practice and effort to make this work, but it's worth it.

#### Time to Write: The Writing Prompt or Assignment

It's time to write. So, what exactly are your students going to write? Although we know what they are going to write *about*, we don't know what the *specific assignment* is. Students need a clear, concrete, explicitly stated assignment. In reality, this scaffolded writing activity has two parts:

- 1. The Front Board Work
- 2. The Writing Prompt or Assignment: The class or the teacher must create an assignment or writing prompt. In that assignment or prompt, the expectations must be clear to students. Even if the assignment is opened-ended or flexible, the expectations must be clear to students. The final assignment can be student-generated and student-owned or teacher-created and teacher-owned. One is faster than the other.

In reality, we can create these two parts in any order. The teacher can create the prompt and then do the front-board work with the class. Or the teacher can lead a discussion with the class and then generate a prompt with the class or hand down the assignment from on high.

As we move forward, the point is this: The writing assignment directions and expectations must be clear to students. Having said that, we have two types of assignments to make clear:

- 1. Open-Ended or Flexible Assignments
- 2. Rigid Assignments

**Rigid Assignment:** Here is a rigid writing assignment that is mostly teacher-owned and scaffolded. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with any of that. Every student will learn something, and every student will have something to write about.

**Rocks:** Your class has just read a chapter on rocks and minerals, and you have decided to cut right to the chase and create the writing assignment yourself. You say:

"Class, we just learned about three types of rocks. You can see that I have divided the front board into three columns and that each column is labeled as one of the three types of rocks. Using our textbook, we are going to brainstorm some ideas about how each type of rock is formed. Let's identify ideas related to sequence, stages, and characteristics of rock formation."

"Then you are going to write a short <u>expository paragraph</u> that focuses on the <u>process</u> of how each rock is formed. Be sure to make each of your paragraphs a **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** paragraph. Let's begin." While the above assignment is rigid, other assignments can be more open-ended or flexible. Either way, the requirements of the assignment must be clear. Now, let's examine a few benefits of both "Open-Ended or Flexible Assignments" and "Rigid Assignments."

**Open-Ended or Flexible Assignments:** There are various benefits to creating open-ended or flexible assignments. Here are four:

- 1. You will more clearly see what your students understand about writing. You will see what they actually produce when they make their own choices.
- 2. Open-ended and flexible assignments encourage students to move beyond formula and create naturally organized writing. As an example, if teachers require 1 paragraph, students will place everything they have to say in that one paragraph whether it belongs in that paragraph or not. In contrast, if the teacher requires 1 or 2 paragraphs, students may produce better paragraphs and really say something. You may want to read The Ten Stages of Paragraph and Multi-Paragraph Mastery.
- 3. Many assignments are based on the time that the class has. When this is the case, we want each student to produce the best piece of writing that he or she is capable of writing in the time allowed. The quantity of writing is just one of many considerations.
- 4. Open-ended and flexible assignments allow students to interact with the subject content naturally. As an example, some students will choose to make one point and go deep, and others will address many points quickly.

**Rigid Assignments:** Rigid assignments also have many benefits. Here are four:

- Rigid assignments help us teach concrete concepts and patterns. Although rigid assignments may not produce the most natural writing, they do help teachers teach important skills in a way that sticks. If teachers want to teach students how to create a strong point in an argument, rigid assignments are effective. If students are not using transitions, the teacher may want to create an assignment where students must use a specific number or specific kinds of transitions.
- 2. Students like a certain amount of structure and certainty. Too many choices and too much freedom may create analysis paralysis—i.e., "I don't know what to do." Furthermore, students like to know that they are doing things correctly. Rigid assignments make students objectively right or wrong. We all like that kind of objectivity from time to time.

- 3. It's not fair to penalize or reward students when they don't understand what they are being penalized or rewarded for. In short, students must understand how they will be assessed, and they must buy into the fact that the expectations were made clear to them before they began work on the assignment. Rigid assignments make this easy—i.e., just do this.
- 4. Rigid assignments leave a residue of understanding. Many teachers are focused on the "good writing" aspect of the rigid assignment. However, the real benefit is that the rigidness makes a new skill or technique concrete, which leaves a residue of understanding.

#### **Connect the Front Board Work with the Writing Assignment**

Once again, this scaffolded, student-owned writing activity has two parts, and we can generate these two parts in any order. However, one is more student-owned than the other, and one is faster than the other. By now, I hope you can figure out which is which!

First:	The Front Board Work		First:	The Writing Prompt or Assignment
Then:	The Writing Prompt or Assignment	<u>or</u>	Then:	The Front Board Work

Let's look at one more example: The Field Trip.

**The Field Trip: The Front Board Work:** Class, let's review our front board work. We returned from a field trip, and we have thought about what happened and what we learned.

We have discovered that we can approach our field-trip topic in at least two ways:

- 1. Narrative: We can tell what happened in chronological order.
- 2. Expository/Explanatory/Information: We can discuss the things that we saw, learned, or liked.

As you can see, we have created a timeline on the front board. On that timeline, we have listed many of the interesting and fun things that happened on our field trip. We have also brainstormed some words that relate to what we saw and did and placed them along the events on our timeline.

#### The Field Trip: The Writing Prompt or Writing Assignment

Let's create a writing prompt or writing assignment for what we have on the front board. We have three ways to do this, and we will look at each of them:

- 1. Create a Formal Writing Prompt
- 2. Create a Strategy, Concept, or Genre Prompt

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3. Use the Front Board as a Prompt

**1. Create a Formal Writing Prompt:** Writing prompts on writing assessments often have two parts: 1) The Writing Situation, and 2) The Writing Task/Directions.

- Writing Situation: You have just returned from a field trip where you learned a great deal and had tons of fun.
- Writing Task/Directions: Write a short story telling what happened and what you learned on your field trip. Include at least 3 sensory details and 3 new facts that you learned. You have 25 minutes. Be sure to save a little time to read your story over and check for errors and make it better.

**2. Create a Strategy, Concept, or Genre Prompt:** "Class, you are going to write three paragraphs from these four paragraph choices. Each paragraph will be an isolated paragraph, which means that it won't connect to the other paragraphs.

But keep this in mind: As we have talked about before, the word *paragraph* is both a noun and a verb. So, if as you write your paragraphs, you feel you have reached a logical break and need to start a new paragraph—please do. I'll let you know if it was an effective place to divide your one paragraph into two paragraphs."

- a. **Narrative Paragraph:** You will select one event and tell what happened. Use at least a few narrative techniques: action, sequence, sensory details, conflict, dialogue, etc.
- b. **Expository / Informational / Explanatory Paragraph:** Our field trip was a learning experience. Choose one thing that you learned about and teach others about it. Help them to understand it in the same way that you do.
- c. **Descriptive Paragraph:** On our field trip, you probably saw something that sticks in your mind. Think about it and describe it as you see in your mind. Start with a general outline or impression, and then move on to specific parts in an orderly manner—e.g., right to left, clockwise, top to bottom, etc. Be sure to fill your description with sensory details and adjectives. Include at least one participle adjective.
- d. **Persuasive / Argument Paragraph:** Would you like to go on another field trip? Persuade your teacher that this field trip was a wise use of class time with the hopes that your teacher will want to go on another field trip. You can either give one strong reason with deep support or give a few reasons with brief elaboration or commentary. Think of it from your teacher's perspective. What benefits could make your teacher want to take the class on another field trip?

**3. Use the Front Board as a Prompt:** "Class, when we began this prewriting on the front board, I told you to begin thinking about what you were going to write about. You have had plenty of time to think, and we have generated plenty of ideas. Now it's time for you to write. You have 25 minutes. When you are finished, you will read it to one other person, and it will be graded using a Six Traits holistic rubric. Please begin."

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#### **Conclusion: Connect the Front Board Work with the Writing Assignment**

Students need to know what to write. Since this is a scaffolded activity, students will develop an idea of what they should write, but eventually, that idea must be made concrete with a clear assignment.

<u>or</u>

Remember:

First: The Front Board Work

**Then:** The Writing Prompt or Assignment

First:The Writing Prompt or AssignmentThen:The Front Board Work

#### **Teacher Guided and Influenced**

In all of my free eBooks, my goal is to help teachers and guide teachers in creating systems and routines that get results in teaching writing. However, teachers need to iron out the specifics based on who they are as teachers and who their students are. A third-grade teacher with struggling students and a seventh-grade teacher with high-achieving students can use many of the same systems and routines to teach writing across the curriculum, but the teachers must figure out the appropriate specifics in order to achieve their appropriate grade-level goals.

I outline my vision for teaching writing across the curriculum in Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum, so I won't cover all that here. In short, my goal is to get results teaching writing across the curriculum and to create skilled independent writers.

As I mentioned earlier, in this scaffolding activity, nearly all of the ideas come from my students. However, I do maintain a flexible control of the process and direction. My goal is to quickly and effectively teach content and teach writing, so I need to guide and influence the direction of the classroom discussion. Having said that, I remain flexible and let the ideas that are put forth also guide the discussion.

#### The Beginning, Middle, and End of the Year: Considerations

How I guide this exercise at the beginning of the year is certainly different from how I guide this exercise at the end of the year. One of the common mantras in teaching writing is to begin the year in control of students' writing and to release control and create student-ownership throughout the year.

To be clear, with this exercise, teachers always need to be teaching. Furthermore, in the beginning of the year, teachers need to teach students the entire process, while also teaching students how to come up with ideas.

With that in mind, please look over these two sets of considerations. I could explain each of these considerations one by one, but it would take many pages, and it would take us off track from our purpose here. But if you take action and begin generating ideas with your class, you will quickly see how these considerations come into play.

Things to consider:

- 1. start with the end in mind <u>vs.</u> let's see where this leads
- 2. teacher owned vs. student and teacher owned vs. student owned

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- 3. guided writing vs. scaffolded writing vs. independent writing
- 4. substantial time vs. quick assignment
- 5. sentence exercises <u>vs.</u> paragraph exercises <u>vs.</u> whole composition exercises
- 6. targeted skills vs. a wide assortment of skills
- 7. clearly stated and detailed expectations vs. students try to "wow" the class
- 8. rigid assignments vs. flexible assignments vs. open-ended assignments
- 9. graded writing vs. low stakes writing
- 10. teacher decides vs. students choose from a few options vs. writer's choice

Teachers should also consider...

- 1. Whether it is the beginning, middle, or end of the year.
- 2. The grade level and skill level of their students.
- 3. How students are progressing with their writing skills.
- 4. What they have covered in the past.
- 5. What they want to cover.
- 6. How they can approach the topic from different angles.
- 7. The length of the assignment that is appropriate.
- 8. The type or types of writing that they want students to focus on.
- 9. The amount of class time that they have.
- 10. The subject content that they have studied and how it relates to writing.
- 11. What students understand about the subject content and about writing.
- 12. What will motivate and inspire their students.

As a rule, I move fast with this activity, and I always keep moving forward. I choose to do this activity consistently rather than to spend a great deal of time on it once in a while. Of course, sometimes we do spend more time on it than others.

#### **The Writing Process**

In reality, this scaffolding activity is an excellent activity and a wise use of time just to check for understanding and to review content. However, I always connect this activity to the writing process, even if it's just to teach students how to create prewriting. Usually, I do have students write, even if it's just a quick paragraph.

Here is a routine I frequently use:

- Step 1: We review and brainstorm what we have learned while we organize what we have learned while we generate ideas to write about.
- **Step 2:** We formulate one or more prompts to write about.

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- **Step 3:** We generate prewriting for one or more prompts.
- ⇒ Step 4: Students write.
- Step 5: Students read their writing to at least one other person. Students must bring their pencil, and soon, most students can't help but to make corrections and edit a little as they read their writing aloud. We may examine a successful piece of student writing or compare two.

#### The Benefits and Problems of Creating Writing Prompts as a Class

Most teaching techniques and strategies have their benefits and their problems. Furthermore, everything we do in teaching is a tradeoff of time. For this reason, it's worth discussing the benefits and problems in advance.

Although there is not just one correct way to teach writing, there are many ways that don't produce results. Getting results in teaching writing is a challenge.

The reality of teaching writing is this: Teachers use techniques, strategies, systems, and routines as tools to teach writing across the curriculum. As with all tools, we should use our teaching-writing tools when they are appropriate and useful, and we should use them in ways that they are useful and effective. Writing teachers need a full teaching-writing tool belt to be highly effective. A full tool belt helps teachers to keep things moving forward, to keep things interesting, and to keep students motivated. In teaching writing, teachers need to be aware of what's working, what's not working, and what has stopped working.

#### The Benefits of Creating Writing Prompts and Assignments as a Class

- 1. It fosters student ownership of writing.
- 2. If done across the curriculum, it's effective time management.
- 3. It gets struggling, reluctant, remedial writers writing. Scaffolding writing instruction takes away students' excuses, and it qualifies as an accommodation. Even the most stubborn and reluctant writers come to see that, "Boy, the teacher sure is making it difficult for me not to write. My excuses are starting to seem rather feeble. And everybody else sure is writing. At this point, I think it's easier to go with the flow and give it my best effort."
- 4. Students learn various ways to approach a topic quickly. Students learn how to generate tons of ideas fast.

- 5. Students will think of interesting things that adults never would. When students generate prompts to write about, it helps teachers to see the subject matter in a new light. It also helps teachers understand what their students understand about the topic.
- 6. Teachers learn more about what their students think about and what interests them. This creates a feedback loop that helps teachers teach writing more effectively.
- 7. It's a fun, active, and engaging way to create writing assignments. There is usually an air of excitement in the class, and the discussion is almost always lively. Students see that their ideas have value. Personally, I enjoy it! It's fun and effective!

#### The Problems with Creating Writing Prompts and Assignments as a Class

- This activity can take on a strong voting or popularity contest aspect, which can create divisions in the class. We are deciding what students will write about, and it can feel like there are winners and losers.
- 2. Whatever we decide to write about, some students will not like the choice, especially when the prompt is not coming from their in-group.
- 3. Students may begin to wonder, "Who exactly is in charge here?" Furthermore, students may start to perceive writing assignments as half hazard, spur of the moment busy work. "Boy, the teacher doesn't have to do anything. The teacher doesn't plan for this—and we just write and write and write."
- 4. Students may start to repeat the same ideas, possibly with a word or two changed. Students always seem to discover the shortcuts and loopholes that reduce the learning experience to familiar patterns and simple ways of thinking. Teachers need to find ways to shake things up and challenge their students' thinking.

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