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Teaching Beginning Writers and Struggling Writers
Teaching-Writing Systems and Routines

How to Use Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets (RCAs) to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum (TWAC)

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The Purpose of This eBook

This eBook will help you use rubrics, checklists, and assessment sheets (RCAs) to teach writing across the curriculum (TWAC). The focus is NOT on assessing writing. The goal is to help you get results in teaching writing! This eBook is not a "the research says" type eBook. It's a practical explanation and analysis that should help teachers take action in creating systems and routines that get results with their students.

I began teaching during a teaching shortage, and I entered the classroom fulltime without any teacher training. In other words, I didn't know anything about teaching children or teaching writing. But even without any real knowledge about teaching writing, I discovered checklists surprisingly fast. Although I didn't know what I was doing exactly, I did know that I needed to communicate to my students that I expected them to use the writing and grammar skills that I was teaching them in their daily writing.

I created my own checklists. My checklists reflected what I expected from my students, and what I expected from my students reflected what I had taught my students. This is what made sense to me then, and it still does today. But today, here is what also makes sense to me: A checklist, rubric, and assessment sheet can guide instruction and can be a part of instruction.

My goal in teaching writing is to improve two types of independent student writing:

1. daily writing across the curriculum
2. writing on state and district writing assessments

This eBook will help you with both types of student writing.

Two Acronyms: RCAs and TWAC

I use two acronyms throughout this eBook. The acronyms take a bit of getting used to, but using them is better than the alternative.

1. RCAs: Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets
2. TWAC: Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

Although rubrics, checklists, and assessment sheets are all different types of tools, they are not unrelated—i.e., they form a group. So for our purposes here, I will mostly treat them as a group. By the way, you may want to read **Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum** first. This entire eBook is an explanation of TWAC Strategy #9.

My Ten TWAC Goals for RCAs

Teachers use rubrics, checklists, and assessment sheets to achieve goals. Here is what I hope to achieve with RCAs. You will notice that my first four goals are four TWAC Strategies from the **Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum** eBook.

Goal 1: To Create a Classroom Full of Writers. (TWAC Strategy #8)

Goal 2: To Hold Students Accountable. (TWAC Strategy #2)

Goal 3: To Foster Student Ownership of Writing (TWAC Strategy #7)

Goal 4: To Assess Writing and Content Across the Curriculum: 1) Content/ Correct Answers, and 2) Writing. (TWAC Strategy #3)

Goal 5: To review, teach, and assess important writing skills, techniques, and concepts.

Goal 6: To help students learn to identify what they must edit and revise.

Goal 7: To help students better understand their grades and the grading process, and in the process, create self-efficacy.

Goal 8: To help students better understand state and district writing assessments so that they have success on them.

Goal 9: To teach students how to begin and end writing assignments focused on quality, and in the process, produce a better product.

Goal 10: To teach students how to focus on and analyze the qualities and characteristics of effective writing.

Understanding Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets (RCAs)

First things first—let's define these three types of sheets. The definitions are largely an examination of the parts that make up the sheet.

➡ A **rubric** has three parts: 1) criteria, 2) performance rating scale, and 3) performance rating descriptions.

➡ An **assessment sheet** uses two of these parts: 1) criteria, and 2) performance rating scale.

➡ A **checklist** uses one of these parts: 1) criteria. Students respond to the criteria with either a *yes* (checkmark) or *no* (no checkmark). A checklist is binary—yes or no. Although some aspects of excellent writing are binary, other aspects are not.

Now, let's take a closer look at our sheets:

1. **Checklist:** Google/Oxford defines a checklist this way: "A list of items required, things to be done, or points to be considered, used as a reminder." This list of *required items* is similar to criteria on a rubric. A checklist is the foundation of an assessment sheet and a rubric.

2. **Assessment Sheet / Evaluation Sheet:** An Assessment Sheet is a checklist that we assess using a scale (e.g., on a scale of 1 to 5). We can take any checklist and assess a piece of writing by giving each item on the checklist a score of 1-5, etc. We can teach students a great deal about rubrics by using checklists this way.

   When we use a checklist as an Assessment Sheet, we are just one step away from having a rubric. To create a rubric, we need to create a grid and then ask and answer these questions: What does a *1* look like? What does a *2* look like? What does a *3* look like? What does a *4* look like? What does a *5* look like?

3. **Rubric:** A rubric uses all three of our components: 1) criteria, 2) performance rating scale, and 3) performance rating descriptions. It's the performance rating descriptions that separates Rubrics from an Assessment Sheet.

Let's Look at a Few Short Examples of RCAs

I provide four short examples on the next page. These short examples illustrate the structure of each type of sheet. Please study and analyze these examples. Pay special attention to our three parts: 1) criteria, 2) performance rating scale, and 3) performance rating descriptions. You will notice that I labeled them clearly so that they can't be missed. I did that for a reason. When you can identify each of the three parts with ease on any RCA, you are ready to move on.

Be sure to compare and examine the differences between the types of sheets. I don't provide analysis or commentary, so please examine them closely. Take notice that they all begin with a grid. Imagine an entire sheet built on the structure. What would you include on your RCA? What would your students say is important about writing? What would they put on the sheet?

Checklist Criteria: List of Required Items	Check!
1. The writer has used correct punctuation and capitalization.	
2. Paragraphs: The writer has divided the topic into effective paragraphs.	

With Assessment Sheets, teachers and students can write the score in the box or circle the score:

Assessment Sheet: Criteria	Performance Scale: 1 to 5
1. Correct Use of Punctuation and Capitalization	
2. Paragraphs: The writer has divided the topic into effective paragraphs.	

Assessment Sheet: Criteria	Performance Scale: 1 to 5				
1. Correct Use of Punctuation and Capitalization	1	2	3	4	5
2. Paragraphs: The writer has divided the topic into effective paragraphs.	1	2	3	4	5

And here is a rubric:

Rubric: Criteria	Performance Rating Scale: 1 to 5				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Correct Use of Punctuation and Capitalization	> 6 errors	< 6 errors	< 4 errors	< 2 errors	Perfect
2. Paragraphs: The writer has divided the topic into effective paragraphs.	Random ¶s or not paragraphed.	Has ¶s but no ¶s with UCE.	Uneven ¶s. At least 1 nice ¶ with UCE.	Most ¶s have UCE & logical breaks.	Has logical breaks, well-developed ¶s, all with UCE.

Performance Rating Descriptions

Note: UCE = Unity, Coherence, Emphasis

Notice that:

1. All four RCAs use the same Criteria.
2. Three of the four use the same Performance Rating Scale.
3. Each builds on what came before.

The Need to Train: The Reality of Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets

This *need to train* has two categories: 1) The need to train teachers, and 2) The need to train students.

Training Teachers: We are going to learn how to use RCAs as a teaching-writing tool, so this eBook serves as teacher training. Having said that, I don't tell teachers exactly what to do. I provide a foundation and a framework for using RCAs to teach writing across the curriculum. Once teachers understand that foundation and framework, they need to experiment with and figure out the specifics of what works in their classrooms.

Once again, we are not going to discuss RCAs as a formal assessment tool. Assessment is an interesting, important, and complex topic, which is why so many books on the topic exist. Most anything that teachers read about formal assessment will help them with using RCAs to teach writing across the curriculum. Likewise, even though our focus here is not on formal assessment, everything you read here will help you with your formal assessments.

Training Students: Teachers need to train their students on RCAs. There are not many things that I say writing teachers *need* to do, but this one of them. If teachers don't train their students on RCAs, they end up with many conversations like these:

Checklist Scenario:

> *Teacher:* Did you carefully check off each item on the checklist?
>
> *Student:* Yes! Definitely! Every single one of them!
>
> *Teacher:* Well, I can see that the first sentence in your text does not have ending punctuation. Are you sure you used the checklist and checked carefully?
>
> *Student:* Yes! Definitely!

Rubric or Assessment Sheet Scenario:

> *Teacher:* On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being exceptional, I see that you gave yourself a 5. Well, I'm looking at our checklist and your text, and I see a few items that you could improve. Please look at our checklist and our rubric and see if you want to give yourself another score.
>
> *Student:* Okay. I've looked it over. I give myself a 1.
>
> *Teacher:* A one? Why?
>
> *Student:* I don't know. I make too many errors?

Perfect is the enemy of *good* with RCAs. Even with training, some students will not use RCAs perfectly or even well. This is especially true with young students and struggling students, along with students who don't understand the concepts and information that is on the RCA. While using RCAs is not without problems, it is still better than the alternative—i.e., not using RCAs. With practice and training, RCAs will become an extremely valuable tool in your teaching-writing tool belt.

Plan Out Your Training

Over the years, I've developed many systems and routines to teach my students about RCAs. Some of my early experiences with RCAs did not go well, and I learned from them. Be sure to check back for eBooks and blog posts on training students on RCAs. Once again, my purpose here is to help teachers understand how to use RCAs to teach writing across the curriculum.

Point being: Plan out your training. Collect a variety of materials (RCAs, student writing samples, etc.), and begin with student-friendly materials. Don't try to cover everything all at once. Introduce your students to RCAs and then return to them occasionally. Always teach your students something about writing and your expectations while you teach them about RCAs.

Worth the Effort

As a teaching-writing tool, RCAs are an extremely helpful tool that pays off all year long. They become a shortcut for communicating expectations and a foundation for discussing writing. Here are seven more ways that RCAs benefit the writing classroom:

1. RCAs teach. RCAs communicate valuable information about the qualities and characteristics of effective writing

2. RCAs help teachers set the standard.

3. RCAs guide students in their writing; RCAs also hold students accountable.

4. RCAs train students to think critically about their writing and others' writing.

5. RCAs train student to view writing as the application of strategies, techniques, skills, and rules.

6. RCAs train students to evaluate writing by analyzing the characteristics, qualities, and traits.

7. RCAs help students to view writing objectively and logically, which lets them know others will view their writing objectively and logically.

The Three Ways that Teachers Use Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets (RCAs ™)

How will you use RCAs in your classroom? I like to make things concrete, so I've come up with *Three Ways that Teachers use RCAs*. Are you getting results with your RCAs? Whether you are or whether you are not, but especially if you are not, you should reflect on how you are using your RCAs.

This "Three Ways" model is not perfect or conclusive. My goal with this model is to get teachers thinking about how they are using RCAs now and how they want to use RCAs in their classroom in the future—and I think it achieves that.

1. Teacher-Centered: The Handed-Down-From-On-High Approach
2. Student-Centered: The Teaching Approach
3. Busy Work: An Ineffective Use of Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets

1. Teacher-Centered: The Handed-Down-From-On-High Approach to RCAs

We can connect the Handed-Down Approach to teacher-centered classrooms and red-pen writing teachers. While they are not the same thing, they often go hand in hand and require the same mindset.

Please note that I'm all for running a tight ship, but I've found that it's easier to teach writing with student-centered strategies and by creating student-ownership of writing. In short, I don't want to own my students' writing, and I don't want to be their personal editor. Additionally, in teaching writing, I don't want to create an environment where students will only work for a grade. When that happens, I have to grade many more student papers and I get less student effort.

➡ "Here's the syllabus. Here's the rubric. I will be grading you fairly using objective criteria, so don't complain to me about your grade. You must work hard and earn your grade."

That's the Handed-Down-From-On-High Approach in a nutshell. Although I may have worded it a bit harshly, I have come across syllabuses that communicate that message. Of course, all teachers should start the year with at least some of that kind of thinking. Teachers need to get clear on their expectations and communicate those expectations to their students. Naturally, teachers tend to communicate their expectations differently in elementary school compared to middle school compared to high school.

The Handed-Down Approach is not without value, and when it comes to formally assessing writing, the Handed-Down Approach is certainly valid. But assessing writing is not actually teaching writing. It's teaching writing adjacent.

Let's now look at some positives and negatives for the Handed-Down Approach:

1. **CON: The Handed-Down Approach and Red-Pen Teachers** often go hand in hand. These teachers do a large amount of "teaching by grading," and they spend a great deal of time grading papers. You will often find these teachers sitting at their desk grading papers while their students work.

   We have three big negatives with this approach:

   a) In some grades (often younger grades) and with some students (often struggling students), it's a better use of time to "**Teach Writing and Provide Feedback by Walking Around**." Of course, most teachers do both of these activities to some degree, but teachers who grade more tend to walk around less.

   b) Some teachers spend their lives grading papers because they don't know how to stop grading papers. They have trained their students to work for grades, and when they stop grading papers, their students stop working.

   c) Some teachers don't give many writing assignments because they feel the need to grade every writing assignment. They don't give assignments that they don't plan to grade, so students end up writing very little because teachers can only grade so much and only want to grade so much.

2. **PRO: Efficiency and Repeating Assignments:** The Handed-Down Approach is efficient with consistent and similar types of writing assignments. From a practical time-management perspective, it takes time to create RCAs that match the assignment. In short, teachers should create a small arsenal of Handed-Down RCAs for these repeating assignments: e.g., weekly essays, comprehension questions at the end of chapters, the same big report every single year, etc.

3. **PRO: Students Need Concrete Feedback:** Students need concrete feedback, and grades based on RCAs are concrete feedback. Sometimes students just need to know that they will be graded objectively according to criteria to work harder and do their best work. A quick Handed-Down RCA along with a grade accomplishes this.

2. Student-Centered: The Teaching Approach to RCAs

The *Teaching Approach* communicates the same message as the Handed-Down Approach: "Students will be graded fairly using objective criteria." But with this approach, we are not handing down; we are teaching.

I cover this topic extensively in "Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs," so I will only discuss it briefly here to contrast it with (1) The Handed-Down Approach and (3) Busywork.

Please take a close look at this list of words. All of these words relate to *The Teaching Approach to RCAs*, and they don't relate much to the two other approaches.

• on the front board	• in the moment	• quickly and consistently
• student-generated	• student and teacher-generated	• interactivity
• create student ownership of writing	• an agreement between students and teacher	• connect instruction with assessment

The Teaching Approach is not unrelated to the Handed-Down Approach, and we can use the Six Traits to explore the connection. The **Six Traits** began as an assessment rubric (largely created by teachers) that was handed down to other teachers and to students, but it has become much more.

The **Six Traits** has now become synonymous with teaching a wide range of writing concepts, strategies, and techniques. What began as a tool that educators handed down not only became a valuable teaching resource, but it became a resource that guides instruction and provides a framework for understanding writing. This certainly describes the Teaching Approach.

Furthermore, one of the guiding principles of the Six Traits is that anything we can assess, we can revise. This principle connects assessment and RCAs with the writing process. If writers can't see what is good and bad in their writing, they can't make it better. Clearly, this principle has no purpose if not to teach writers (our students) how to look at their own writing so that they can effectively use the writing process. That is certainly related to our Teaching Approach to RCAs.

3. Busy Work: An Ineffective Use of RCAs

RCAs are rarely if ever a complete waste of time. But as I point out elsewhere, they are not without problems, and the results can be less than optimal. If students perceive the process as busywork, and if students use them without care or deep thought, they amount to little more than a way to fill time.

As you will see later, "a checklist cannot fly a plane," and likewise, a checklist (or any RCA) cannot teach writing.

RCAs are a tool for writers and a tool for teaching writing—but they don't write and they don't teach writing. Writers (our students) need to use RCAs as a tool to guide, analyze, reflect on, and improve their writing, and teachers need to use RCAs as a tool to teach writing, which includes teaching students how to use RCAs, along with guiding students in using RCAs.

Unfortunately, when it comes to RCAs, success for both students and teachers is achieved through learning and practice. As I figured out how to use RCAs, I was certainly in this "Ineffective Busywork" category at times. However, being in this category frustrated me. I was frustrated when my students used RCAs carelessly or without effort because then it amounted to busywork.

One doesn't need to expect perfection to strive to avoid busywork. When RCAs are busywork, it's something that teachers can see physically. One can see when students' *minds* are not *attached* to the RCA. It takes practice and tenacity to turn RCAs into a highly effective, meaningful tool.

Of course, a certain percentage of students will connect to RCAs and take them seriously without powerful teacher guidance. Some students are inherently self-motivated, self-monitoring, and reflective to the degree that they naturally see criteria as targets and goals. They are always striving for excellence.

Making RCAs Work: Finding Solutions to Problems

Criteria: Correct Use of Commas: Let's say that one piece of your criteria is that your students will use commas correctly. Well, there are more than ten common comma rules. Do your students know all of them? Do they know the less common comma rules? They probably don't, but they do probably come across some of these less common comma examples as they read, and these uncommon examples serve as confusing models.

Problem: If students don't know how to use commas correctly, students won't use the RCA correctly. What are they supposed to do? Lie? Guess? In fact, that single item that they are forced to lie or guess on may inspire them to feel that it's okay to lie and guess on all of the items.

Solution: Finding a solution is the teacher's job. Here is one possible solution: "Students, if you don't understand the RCA item or if you don't know what the correct rules are for the RCA item, simply place a "?" in the box. That question mark will let me know that I need to review that concept with you."

Finding Solutions to Problems: Teachers will need to find many more practical solutions to the problems they come across with RCAs. Truthfully, adding a "?" into the mix will likely solve some problems but cause other problems. Once again, using RCAs is better than the alternative—not using RCAs. Teachers must always focus in on what is not working and find solutions.

By reading this eBook and with practice and reflection, you will become more effective with RCAs. Furthermore, you will learn to accept and deal with what is not perfect about RCAs. When working with writing, with children, and with human beings in general—perfection tends to be elusive. In short, always be thinking about what can make your RCA systems more effective.

TWAC: A Final Note: Most of this eBook is devoted to using RCAs to teach writing across the curriculum, and therefore, I present a more active, interactive, consistent, and persistent approach compared to how teachers have traditionally used RCAs. With this approach, I am usually leading students forward, not staying stuck on what is not perfect.

The Three Types of RCAs: 1) Generic RCAs, 2) Specific RCAs, and 3) TWAC / On-the-Front-Board RCAs

Once you understand these three types of RCAs, I suspect you will think differently about RCAs. You will see them as tools that you collect and create and use to get results teaching writing across the curriculum.

Type 1: Generic RCAs

Type 2: Specific RCAs: Assignment-Specific, Genre-Specific, and Skill-Specific RCAs

Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs

Type 1: Generic RCAs

As you begin typing in "generic rubric," Google will suggest these keywords: generic writing rubric, generic rubric for writing, and generic writing rubric elementary. Point being: The term *generic writing rubric* is very common.

Generic is not used as a negative word here. In fact, a *specific rubric* is less likely to be of help to someone who is looking for a *generic rubric*. Generic writing rubrics tend to outline the most common and general qualities of effective writing. In case you are wondering, most Six-Trait rubrics are generic rubrics. Although teachers can use a Six-Trait rubric with any type of writing and with any writing assignment, the rubric won't address the specific qualities, characteristics, skills, and techniques that would make the piece of writing excellent, or ensure that students meet the requirements of the assignment.

The original Six Traits rubric was created for writing assessments, so it should be no surprise that many writing assessment rubrics are generic rubrics. Teachers probably want to keep these two generic rubrics handy:

1. A rubric that matches the requirements of their state or district writing assessments.
2. A similar student-friendly version.

Some teachers have a single generic rubric that they just love, and it's pretty much the only one that they use. While that may be an effective strategy for assessing student writing, I don't see it as a great strategy for teaching writing across the curriculum. Once again, my focus here is on using RCAs to get results teaching writing across the curriculum.

Type 2: Specific RCAs: Assignment-Specific, Genre-Specific, and Skill-Specific RCAs

Unless it's a snuggie, one size does not fit all. Although we can use a Generic RCA for every type of writing and for every type of writing assignment, we probably shouldn't. While Generic RCAs serve as a guiding foundation that sets the standard for all writing across the curriculum, they don't target specific types of writing, specific writing assignments, or specific skill sets.

The reality of teaching writing across the curriculum is that we must focus in on and target the specifics that will make our students' current piece of writing effective, while also guiding them to meet the requirements of the assignment. The specific skills that create an effective argument are different from the specific skills that create an effective narrative story. And when students record a science experiment, the skills differ from that of an argument and a story.

Additionally, teachers may want to consider the 80/20 principle. Put simply, some skills are more important and more impactful than other skills. In teaching writing, 80% of your students' writing progress may come from 20% of your efforts. As mentioned before, I have a free 38-page **Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills, Strategies, Concepts, Categories, and Models**. Point being: Teachers can teach a boatload of writing skills and still not improve their students' writing. In fact, **decades of research has shown that grammar instruction and isolated skill drills don't improve student writing**.

As teachers figure out what creates writing success with their students, they should include those skills, techniques, and concepts on their Type-2 Specific RCAs. By the way, if you teach beginning writers or struggling writers, I guarantee that **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** will create 80% of your students' writing progress in just 20% of your time. It's the fastest, most effective way to teach students organized multi-paragraph writing… Guaranteed!

Furthermore, I've recently added a new 40-page master checklist to **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay**. This master checklist includes all of the important genres and types of assignments that students write. With this master checklist, teachers will be able to assemble an arsenal of effective Type-2 RCAs to approach every genre, every skill set, and every assignment effectively.

In summary, Type-2 Specific RCAs help teachers target what is most important right now.

Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs

➡ The entire next section is devoted to this topic.

Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs

Early in my career, lost in theory, I started creating Type-3 RCAs—and they worked! They didn't work perfectly, but they worked better than anything else I had tried. They were in the moment, and they reflected what I was teaching my students and what my students were learning. Put simply, I was holding my students accountable across the curriculum for using the writing skills that had I taught them. That's a large part of teaching writing.

My First Type-3 Assessment Sheet

Before we discuss Type-3 RCAs in-depth, let's look at the first Type-3 RCA that I ever created. I still remember when it came together. To be clear, it was not a solution that changed everything. But it was a very important step forward in learning how to teach writing and an important new tool in my growing arsenal of teaching-writing tools. This was me taking action in a way that I hadn't seen anyone else do. This is what made sense to me, this is what I had taught my students, and this is what I could hold them accountable for on a daily basis across the curriculum.

My First Type-3 Assessment Sheet: 4th Grade ELL Students	
	1. Neatness
	2. Paragraph Form with Main Ideas
	3. Introduction, Body, and Conclusion
	4. Spelling: The 1000 Most Used Words
	5. Spelling: All the Rest, Including the Rules We Have Studied
	6. Every Sentence Makes Sense
	7. Capitalization and Punctuation
	8. You Wrote an Appropriate Amount for the Time You Were Given
	9. You Made it Fun and Interesting to Read
	Final Grade: Your final grade is based on how easy it is for me to read, understand, and enjoy your writing, along with how close it is to 4th-grade level writing.

Please Note: I can fit **five** of these on a single page, reducing the amount of paper I use and the number of copies I must make. I always have a class set of various RCAs ready to use.

The important thing is not what you think of this assessment sheet or what I think of it so many years later. The important thing is that at the time it reflected an understanding and a personal agreement

that I had with my class. This assessment sheet covered the basics of what was acceptable writing. These 4th-grade students had caught the tail end of a bilingual debacle, and their skills were low. I remember what their writing was like at the beginning of the year, and I remember what I went through to get them to write acceptably.

This Type-3 Assessment Sheet reflected what I had repeatedly communicated to my students about writing; therefore, it was certainly fair that they might be graded on these concepts and topics at any time on any assignment. That's why I say that this assessment sheet represents a personal agreement.

If students were scoring well in most areas on the RCA, they were showing that they were applying what they had been taught and they were showing that they were taking pride in their writing. If students were scoring well, they were showing that they were developing the habits of focusing on their writing, of paying attention to detail, and of doing their best work.

Figuring it Out: Experimenting with My First Type-3 Assessment Sheet

Sometimes the theories and research make things unnecessarily complicated or rigid. The reality is that the results of teaching writing show up "on the page" of our students' independent writing. You can see it on the page, you can see it in the process, and you can see it on your students' faces.

When I began using RCAs, I was probably thinking that formal assessment was the solution, and sometimes it is. But when you look at how your students react to assessing their writing, you can see that it often leaves an unproductive residue.

What I learned was this. My goal was not to use RCAs to become a constant grader. Instead, I had different goals:

1. My goal was to use RCAs to teach writing across the curriculum.
2. My goal was to use RCAs to train my students to focus on and critically examine their own writing and others' writing.
3. My goal was to place the responsibility for producing acceptable writing on my students.

Initially, I thought it made sense to assess students on every single piece of criteria, but I soon realized that I wasn't using my assessment sheet as often as I wanted to. Additionally, I found it difficult and unpleasant to assign all of those grades. I realized that my real goal was to provide feedback that explained the final grade I was giving.

I realized that sometimes it was more helpful to provide feedback only on what stood out to me, both the good and the bad. I also realized that not every piece of criteria was relevant to every piece of writing. Put simply, I realized that I should do whatever worked for my students and me.

I began to use my assessment sheet in many different ways. Sometimes I used it as a whole and sometimes I used the individual parts to help me assign a final holistic grade. Sometimes I graded students individually on whatever stuck out and strongly influenced the final grade. This let me provide feedback quickly and easily and let me point out the areas of strength and weakness.

Finally, I experimented with all three of these approaches:

1. Students self-evaluate using some or all of the criteria.
2. Students peer-evaluate using some or all of the criteria.
3. Teacher formally or informally evaluates using some or all of the criteria.

There were times when I was extremely happy with my first RCA; there were times when I was trying to figure out how to make it work better; and there were also times when I thought that *these things don't work*. Whenever I thought that *these things don't work*, I took a break and changed things up.

As you will see, I learned to keep things interesting, novel, and relevant. What happens when you break out a new assessment sheet that uses little or none of the criteria from the last assessment sheet? Put simply, it's a *whoa moment* for students. It wakes students up from the certainty that the prior assessment sheet created. Writing isn't what they thought it was. Writing is more than what they thought it was.

A Note on Giving Grades

Needless to say, all teachers need to give grades because all teachers need to give report cards. But grades are more than just an accounting. Grades are concrete feedback that students need to do their best work. Since I don't cover giving grades in this eBook, you may want to read this eBook:

➤ **How to Grade Writing and Classroom Work Fast and Fairly Across the Curriculum Using the Pile Method**

Worth considering as we move forward, when grading writing across the curriculum to teach writing, it's a best practice to grade two categories:

1. writing
2. content/correct answers

Type-3 RCAs and Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

Interactivity and Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

To paraphrase Google.com, *interactivity is the process of people working together and influencing each other*. When I think of teaching writing across the curriculum, I think of every time my students pick up a pencil. However, I don't think we teach writing by nagging students. We teach writing by bringing students into the material, into the process, and into the conversation.

As you will see, teachers can create their RCAs by themselves, or they can create them interactively with their students. To teach writing consistently across the curriculum, teachers need to bring in interactivity. Without interactivity, many of the opportunities to teach writing slip right by.

In both of these eBooks on teaching writing across the curriculum, I bring in lots of interactive ideas. The second one is largely devoted to interactivity:

1. **Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum**

2. **How to Create Scaffolded, Student-Owned Writing Assignments to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum**

To be clear, I created the heart of **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** on the front board teaching writing across the curriculum. And when I say "on the front board," I mean that literally. Additionally, it was an interactive experience.

Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay is the framework, foundation, and methodology that I use to teach writing across the curriculum. I use the curriculum to teach my students the methodology at the beginning of the year, and then I have nice organized writing to work with and build on all year long.

Type-3 RCAs and Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

Teaching writing across the curriculum is not about big assignments or an endless list of small skills. It's about many things, but it's certainly about consistency and persistence. Try not to stop everything to teach writing. Instead, try always to be teaching writing. Type-3 RCAs can help with this.

Type-3 RCAs Have Two Names:

1. **TWAC RCAs:** I call Type-3 RCAs "TWAC RCAs" because I frequently used them to teach writing across the curriculum and to hold students accountable for using proper writing skills across the curriculum.

2. **On-the-Front-Board RCAs:** I also call Type-3 RCAs "On-the-Front-Board RCAs" because teachers can create them *in the moment* on the front board with their students right before, during, or after their students pick up their pencils to write.

   Of course, teachers can also create these RCAs on their computer beforehand, or if teachers create an RCA on the front board with their students and they like it, they can transfer all of it or some of it to their computer. When teachers do this, they create a nice master list of student-generated criteria, which is extremely valuable.

How Should Teachers Use Type-3 RCAs?

1. Use them consistently; use them quickly.

2. Use them to reflect and target current learning; use them to reflect and target essential skills (80/20 Principle); use them to reflect and target problem areas (80/20 Principle); use them to reflect and target current goals and objectives.

3. Use them *in the moment*.

4. Use them to review; use them to teach; use them to assess.

5. Use them to Hold Students Accountable (TWAC Strategy #2); use them to create a Classroom Full of Writers (TWAC Strategy #8); use them to Foster Student Ownership of Writing (TWAC Strategy #7).

Who Makes These Type-3 RCAs?

1. Teacher-Created RCAs and The Handed-Down Approach

2. Teacher and Student-Generated RCAs

3. Student-Generated RCAs

How Do Teachers Begin Making These Type-3 RCAs?

I can walk into any random classroom just as students are picking up their pencils to write and create a Type-3 RCA with the students on the front board. What's the assignment? Is it end-of-chapter comprehension questions? Are students researching for a report? Are students going to write an essay? Are they filling out a field trip form? It's no problem!

We have two ways to get started in creating a Type-3 RCAs. In this random classroom scenario, I would probably use both:

1. **Start with Reflection:** What have you taught your students about writing? What do you want to review with them? What do you want to reinforce? What do you want to encourage? What aspect of writing do you want to grade your students on? You may want to start with **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills, Strategies, Concepts, Categories, and Models**.

2. **Start with Your Students and Questions:** Ask your students what important writing skills they should use on this piece of paper. Students often focus on small, specific skills (grammar and conventions). Teachers will probably need to guide students to get the skills they want. As an example, teachers can suggest new categories: "Okay, we have enough grammar skills. What kind of ideas do we want to include in our answer? How should our paragraphs be organized?"

Type-3 RCA Example: Here is an example that I created off the top of my head, and it took me just a few minutes. I thought about the comprehension questions at the end of a science or social studies lesson, and I thought about what I would like to see in my students' answers. It's just that simple.

Is this perfect? Who knows? But this RCA written on the front board will encourage students to produce better writing and better answers. Or I can print this out and have students use it as an RCA.

Short Answer / Comprehension Check RCA #14	
	1. The writer answers each question.
	2. The writer incorporates the question into his or her answer. The writer "Uses THEIR Words ™."
	3. Every sentence is a complete sentence that has a subject, a predicate, a capital letter, and ending punctuation.
	4. The writer can point back to the page in the textbook where the answer can be found.
	5. The writer used at least two types of sentences: simple, compound, complex, compound-complex.

Numbering Your RCAs

Did you notice the numbers on the RCA? Numbers are something that you may not think about if I didn't mention it here. Although you can get quite far without numbers, numbers have their benefits. Right now, it may not seem obvious how valuable these numbers are, but by the end of this eBook, it will.

1. **Numbered Criteria:** Notice that I numbered each criteria item. If we number the criteria, it makes it much easier to discuss the criteria with students quickly and easily and without confusion. Furthermore, students' eyes glaze over when they see a long list without numbers.

   Numbers are helpful in another way. As you will see later, I use various grids so that I can reuse RCAs so that I don't constantly have to make copies and pass out papers. It speeds things up. In short, teachers and students can write their scores on a separate sheet of paper or in a **journal of some kind**. Later on, I will show you ways to create grids that are extremely useful and flexible. Additionally, if you list the criteria on the front board, you will *need* to number your criteria, as you can't score students on the front board.

2. **Numbered RCAs (e.g., RCA #14):** It doesn't take long to create a collection of RCAs that you like and that your students understand. If you number your RCAs, you can write your scores on a separate sheet of paper, and you can still go back and see the criteria on the RCA. Numbering your RCAs also lets your students know that this is a concrete and strategic system. Furthermore, it also lets students know that there is no one way or one RCA in writing.

It's the Missing Piece of the Puzzle That Makes Teaching Writing Easy!

Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay

Type-3 RCAs: Making Them on Your Computer

Early in my teaching-writing career, it occurred to me that I needed to hold my students accountable for applying their newfound writing and grammar knowledge across the curriculum. I realized that the lessons that I had taught my students didn't hold my students accountable for using the knowledge and skills—so, I must.

Probably the number one mistake that teachers make when they begin using RCAs is to use a "nice looking" RCA that someone else created. They place it in front of their students and expect their students to understand it and use it with some skill. The reality is that this kind of RCA is not student-owned or even teacher-owned. The reality is that it's someone-else owned. Of course, these *someone-else owned* RCAs are fine and effective for teaching writing, but they aren't that useful for holding students accountable for using the skills that they have learned.

In reality, only two groups of people know what students have learned and should understand about writing and grammar: 1) the students, and 2) the teacher. If teachers want to hold their students accountable for applying that knowledge across the curriculum, they should get in the habit of creating RCAs that reflect that knowledge.

When teachers create RCAs that reflect what they have taught their students, it has two beneficial effects:

1. Students put more effort into learning the material in the lessons (as opposed to just filling in the blanks or going through the motions) because they know that they will be required to use the skills in their daily writing across the curriculum. Students know that they must learn the material because they know that they will be required to hold themselves accountable.

2. Students see these RCAs as being *authentic* and fair, as they reflect what they have learned. When students think, "Yes, we learned all this," they take ownership of the RCA, which makes them take ownership of their writing.

Type-3 RCAs: How to Get Started Making RCAs on Your Computer and Using Them

Every great journey begins with one small step. With RCAs, teachers often begin with a step that is too large, and as a result, everyone becomes overwhelmed and frustrated. Here is a simple plan to help you get started. Remember that our goal with these RCAs is to create a classroom culture where

students know that their writing is important. These RCAs are a consistent reminder for students to apply what they have learned about writing in their writing. Here's how to begin:

1. Start by creating one small RCA that targets between 4-7 important, well-known, well-taught skills. Use it a few times until most of your students get the hang of checking for those skills.

2. Create a new RCA that includes a couple of skills from the previous RCA, along with some new important, well-known, well-taught skills. Use it a few times until most of your students get the hang of checking for those skills.

3. Create a new RCA that includes a couple of skills from both of the previous RCAs, along with some new important, well-known, well-taught skills.

4. Create a master list of all the skills from all of your RCAs.

5. Create a new RCA that includes a couple of skills from your master RCA, along with some new important, well-known, well-taught skills.

That's how you get started with RCAs.

Type-3 RCAs: The Art of Making RCAs on Your Computer and Using Them

What will work in your classroom with your students? That's something that you must figure out. While working in a year-round school district, I use to take over classrooms on my vacation time. I've taken over a third-grade class that was out of control, a fifth-grade GATE class that thrived on grades, and a sixth-grade class that was out of control. All of these very interesting classes had very different needs.

While my basic systems and routines stay the same, the specifics change. My goal is to motivate my students to become the best writers that they can be in the time that we have. Think about being a coach of a college basketball team playing in the national championship game at half time—what you say depends on how the game is going, what your team is doing, and what the other team is doing. In teaching writing, it's always like that. Of course, simply teaching a single writing lesson is not like that—but getting students to use that information in their independent writing across the curriculum is like that.

Additionally, everything involved with teaching writing takes time, and there are tradeoffs and opportunity costs involved with all activities that take time. RCAs are an effective technique that works, but they do take time away from teaching more lessons, teaching more techniques, and having students write more. Although this entire eBook is devoted to RCAs, I'm not suggesting that you should devote all of your time to them. Instead…

Type-3 RCAs: Eight Artful Ways to Get Results with Type-3 RCAs

I encourage all teachers to find consistent routines that work for them and their students. Here are a few ideas that will help you figure out how to use Type-3 RCAs:

1. Use them in a way that motivates your students. Don't overuse them in a way that slows down the writing classroom to a crawl. Always keep moving forward. Use them to make strong points. Use them to make dramatic points of excellence.

2. Use them with consistency. Use them often enough that your students don't forget how to use them. Use them enough to keep the possibility of an RCA being required fresh in your students' minds. Use them enough that your students think about the qualities of excellent writing even when an RCA is not in front of them.

3. Use them with surprise. Make sure that students know that an RCA can come out at any time and on any type of writing.

4. Use them on different types of writing. Use them with a math word problem. Use them on a field trip slip. Use them on a journal entry. Use them on end-of-chapter comprehension questions.

5. Use RCAs different ways. Use them as a guide. Use them as a reminder to help students focus on their writing. Use them to self-check or teacher-assess various skills.

6. Use them quickly and frequently. Use them in-depth occasionally or frequently.

7. Use RCAs with specific skills. Use RCAs with general traits.

8. Use them formally. Use them informally. Use them to teach. Use them to assess. Use them to fix errors and improve writing.

Type-3 RCAs: Involving Your Students in Creating RCAs on the Front Board

Teachers can certainly create RCAs that reflect what they have taught their students on a computer and "Hand Them Down" to their students.

But why should teachers do all of the hard work themselves creating RCAs when their students can tell them exactly what they have learned about writing? If your students can't come up with excellent criteria and ideas for an RCA, then you need to teach them more about writing and grammar—and you may need to.

I like to do fast and consistent reviews of what's important in writing and grammar. Creating RCAs with students on the front board is a nice review of what is important in writing and grammar, and the activity helps teachers understand what their students know and understand about writing and grammar.

Furthermore, when teachers and students create RCAs together, students buy into the criteria, and they also buy into the process. When students give the teacher criteria to place on the front board, they are agreeing to the terms of the criteria and taking ownership of those criteria. A great deal of modern research supports involving students in the assessment process.

Once again, I have two names for Type-3 RCAs: 1) TWAC RCAs, and 2) On-the-Front-Board RCAs. Put simply, I often create these RCAs on the front board with my students to teach writing across the curriculum. Students pick up their pencils all day long. Probably 20% of teaching writing effectively is to make students aware of the qualities of effective writing when they do pick up their pencils. Once again, these Type-3 RCAs are fast and consistent reminders of the qualities of good writing. They are an extremely valuable tool in teaching writing across the curriculum.

Remember, the writing and grammar skills on these RCAs are important, well-known, well-taught skills that you can review fast. You can use these RCAs formally or informally to (1) assess, (2) teach, (3) check for understanding, (4) review, (5) reteach, (6) remind, or (7) hold accountable.

Type-3 RCAs: Always Be Teaching Writing with Type-3 RCAs

In many classrooms, students don't even know that their teacher thinks that writing well is important. Although most teachers believe that writing well is important, many teachers don't know how to communicate that belief to their students beyond words alone. And we all know that words alone communicate very little to students because students test everything that teachers say:

> _**Teacher**_**:** I expect you to present your best writing on these end-of-chapter comprehension questions.

> _**The student thinks**_ **(unconsciously or passive-aggressively):** Hmm… I wonder what that means. I'm going to do what I always do… at best. I'll see what happens. Nothing I bet.

Instead of the teacher's words, an RCA on the front board communicates much more. In fact, for the teacher to outline 3 specific skills on the front board in RCA form would take just one minute more. And once teachers have an RCA on the front board, they can use it formally or informally to (1) assess, (2) teach, (3) check for understanding, (4) review, (5) reteach, (6) remind, or (7) hold accountable.

Type-3 RCAs: Four Concepts Across the Curriculum

Please remember that the focus of this eBook is on teaching writing across the curriculum. We are not discussing how to teach a single writing lesson or a single skill. Teaching writing across the curriculum is active, consistent, and persistent. Type-3 RCAs sure help with this.

Let's tie Type-3 RCAs together with four groups of ideas:

1. On-the-Front-Board / On the Computer
2. Teacher-Generated, Student-Generated, or Student and Teacher-Generated
3. In-the-Moment / Across the Curriculum
4. Formal Assessment / Using RCAs Informally

1. On the Front Board / On the Computer

Over time, teachers want to create a large master list of skills that they want to teach their students and that they have taught their students. The items on this list are writing and grammar skills that make sense to both the teacher and the students.

As you and your students generate ideas on the front board and create RCAs, be sure to save some ideas to your master list on your computer.

Think of these Type-3 RCAs as a personal agreement between you and your students that reflect what students have learned. You want your students to think of them this way as well. You may want to create them in a way that your students see that you are not presenting a long list of boring, unfamiliar rules.

➡ e.g., The paragraph contains at least one complex sentence, one compound sentence, two attributive adjectives, and two adverbs.

2. Teacher-Generated, Student-Generated, or Student and Teacher-Generated

Use Type-3 RCAs to keep students interested, involved, and on their toes. When students participate in generating RCAs, it creates ownership. Students buy in. Student-generated rubrics are associated with authentic assessment and student-centered classrooms, both of which are important research-supported concepts.

Keep in mind that there is an art to running a writing classroom and motivating student writers. With practice, teachers perfect their systems and routines, and they will need to do so when using RCAs.

Furthermore, teachers should also use creative thinking. As an example, let's say that you have been using a Six-Trait rubric, and your students are very familiar with it. Teachers can use that knowledge and foundation to guide students in creating Type-3 RCAs. As a result, the class may end up with an excellent student-generated and student-owned Six-Trait rubric.

Like everything in teaching writing, teachers must use their time wisely. Sometimes it's not a wise use of time to take lots of ideas from students or let students guide the process too much. Teachers need to get things done in the time that they have, and they have to do what actually works and get results.

3. In the Moment / Across the Curriculum

When is a good time to review the writing requirements for an assignment across the curriculum? Answer: Right before your students pick up their pencils to write. How many times a day do teachers have the opportunity to review the qualities and characteristics of effective writing? Answer: We have the opportunity every time students pick up a pencil.

Always be teaching writing: long answer, short answer, journal entry, learning log, filling in a field trip form, recording a science experiment, taking notes on a movie, reflecting on a field trip or assembly, etc. This is when we reinforce the qualities of good writing.

How long will it take you to ask your students for five qualities of effective writing right before they pick up their pencils? Ten qualities? Twenty qualities? Not that long. And I always enjoy it—I look forward to hearing what they say.

4. Formal Assessment / Using RCAs Informally

Everyone who writes terribly and everyone who writes terrifically wants to write well. Put simply, everyone wants to write well. In the right environment, your students will strive to write well. In the wrong environment, they won't strive to write well even though they may want to write well. In the wrong environment, students feel they are playing a game that they can't win. Teaching writing is more than just teaching information.

How teachers teach writing is more important than what they teach about writing. This is the reason that so many models and tools for teaching writing have been created over the years: e.g., rubrics, checklists, peer editing, the writing process, Writer's Workshop, holistic scoring, the reading-writing connection, the Six Traits, etc.

Formal assessment is an important part of teaching writing and holding students accountable. Be sure to read all of these free eBooks for more on this topic:

1. **Teaching Writing with Six Traits and Common Core**

2. **Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum**

3. **How to Grade Writing and Classroom Work Fast and Fairly Across the Curriculum Using the Pile Method**

Although we can use Type-3 RCAs for formal assessment, we can also use them less formally. It's much faster to hold students accountable informally than it is to hold them accountable formally. And while it is extremely important to assess students formally, we also want to teach them how to examine, analyze, and reflect on their own writing. We want our students to think about the quality of their writing consistently. That's the right environment.

So, once you have the criteria on your RCA, how will you use that RCA? Do you even have to use it? What if your students have given you lots of excellent criteria on the front board? Does that mean you must assess your students? Does that mean you even have the time to assess your students on the criteria? No, it doesn't. In fact, thinking that way is missing the point and purpose of Type-3 RCAs. Teachers must use all RCAs in a way that works for them in the time that they have.

As I discuss all over my website, I use many different systems and routines to teach writing across the curriculum. I use them as strategic tools to get results in teaching writing. So yes, I also use RCAs strategically to teach writing. Type-3 RCAs have five valuable aspects that teach writing, and many of these aspects don't involve filling in an RCA:

1. When teachers create the criteria and RCA with their students, they are teaching writing.

2. When teachers discuss the criteria and RCA with their students, they are teaching writing.

3. When teachers have students use the criteria and RCA to edit, examine, analyze, reflect on, or self-score their writing, they are teaching writing.

4. Even the possibility that the criteria and RCA will be used to assign a formal grade keeps students focused on their writing. When teachers keep students focused on their writing, they are teaching writing.

5. When teachers use the criteria and RCA to provide feedback or assign a formal grade, they are teaching writing. Be sure to read **How to Grade Writing and Classroom Work Fast and Fairly Across the Curriculum Using the Pile Method.**

I frequently use the term *hold students accountable*; I use many different ways to hold my students accountable for writing well. Sometimes I assign a formal grade to hold students accountable, and

sometimes I require a completed checklist as an exit ticket to hold my students accountable. Here are seven of many possible ways you may choose to hold your students accountable using RCAs.

1. The teacher will assess students holistically using all of the criteria on the RCA.
2. The students will self-assess themselves holistically using all of the criteria on the RCA.
3. The students will self-assess themselves by assigning a score for each criterion.
4. The students will self-assess themselves by assigning a score for some of the criteria: e.g., 5 of the 10 criteria.
5. The teacher will assess students on some of the criteria: e.g., 3 of the 7 criteria.
6. The students will use the RCA as a checklist. The checklist is each student's ticket to a fun activity.
7. The teacher will use the RCA as a checklist. A perfect checklist means that students receive a reward or avoid a consequence.

Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay

The fastest, most effective way to teach students organized multi-paragraph writing... Guaranteed!

✓ **Beginning Writers**	✓ **Struggling Writers**
✓ **Remediation**	✓ **Review**

Types of Scoring Sheets: Where Do I Write the Scores?

Let's look at the two locations that we can place the score (or checkmark):

1. The Scores and Criteria <u>ARE</u> on the Same Sheet of Paper
2. The Scores and Criteria <u>ARE NOT</u> on the Same Sheet of Paper

1. The Scores and Criteria <u>ARE</u> on the Same Sheet of Paper

Formal rubrics (with detailed Performance Rating Descriptions) are always on a separate sheet of paper from the scores, which is why they are reusable. For this reason, formal rubrics don't really relate to this section. In contrast, with checklists and assessment sheets, the scores are almost always placed on the same sheet of paper as the criteria, so they are our focus here. Example:

	1. The writer begins each sentence with a capital letter and ends each sentence with a punctuation mark.

Placing scores and criteria on the same sheet of paper is the traditional way that teachers use checklists and assessment sheets. It's simple, concrete, and easy. I always have a small arsenal of trusted and targeted RCAs printed and ready to use at any moment across the curriculum. Furthermore, I like to wave these RCAs about in front of the class occasionally to reinforce that writing is an activity that is composed of specific skills—skills that students can learn and skills that students will be held accountable for. Also, when students see multiple RCAs in front of them or being waved about, they understand that we can analyze writing from different perspectives using different criteria. No one set of criteria encompasses the art of language.

As "My First Type-3 Assessment Sheet" illustrates, I also use these RCAs to assign formal grades quickly and easily. When I use a Type-3 Assessment Sheet to assign a grade, I want the score and the criteria to be on the same sheet of paper, and I usually staple the RCA to my students' writing. Once again, these Type-3 RCAs are a personal agreement that reflects what students have learned and what I have taught them. Students believe that it is a fair and just world when their teachers grade them on what they have been taught.

2. The Scores and Criteria <u>ARE NOT</u> on the Same Sheet of Paper

Making copies in the copy room is not a great use of time or resources. Furthermore, it's not always possible to create an RCA and run to copy room to make copies. The point of an in-the-moment, on-the front-board RCA is that it is in the moment and on the front board.

If you brainstorm and review a list of 5 or 10 writing skills on the front board right before students begin writing, what are you going to do with that list once they have finished writing? If you don't have a system in place, you're not going to do anything with them.

In short, we need ways to use our criteria to evaluate writing *in the moment*. And here are three:

1. Scorers write the scores or checkmarks on the actual piece of writing. Is there a blank space somewhere on the top, bottom, or back of the paper?

2. Scorers write the scores or checkmarks in a **Multi-Purpose Journal and Learning Log**.

3. Scorers write the scores or checkmarks on a blank grid.

The only one that needs any further explanation is Blank Grids.

Get Your Scissors or Paper Cutter Ready: I rarely use a full sheet of paper as a one-time checklist or assessment sheet. As I mentioned before, I always have a few trusted and targeted RCAs printed and ready to use at any moment across the curriculum. I also have a few different types of blank grids cut up and ready to use. My little pile of RCAs would be a large stack of paper if I used one piece of paper for each RCA.

Blank Grids

As long as teachers number their criteria, BLANK GRIDS will help teachers hold their students accountable for applying proper writing skills across the curriculum.

Whether you brainstorm or review 5, 10, or 20 skills and techniques, you can assess any number of items that you wish on a blank grid. As discussed, you don't have to assess or address every skill or techniques that you list. In fact, if you list 10 skills and assess only 3 of them, you can make a point that these 3 skills are important or are a problem area that students must focus on.

I will assume that most teachers know how to make tables in their favorite word processor. If you don't, you need to learn how. As I have explained, teachers should create at least some of their own RCAs to meet the needs of their students.

With just this little grid (below), teachers can have five students self-evaluate themselves on four criteria, or the teacher can evaluate five students on four criteria. Or teachers can create an entire sheet like this and have students keep it at their desk and take it out as needed. Or teachers can keep a sheet like this for each student. Or teachers can… You get the point.

RCA #		RCA #		RCA #		RCA #		RCA #	
Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score	Item	Score
#		#		#		#		#	
#		#		#		#		#	
#		#		#		#		#	
#		#		#		#		#	

Or teachers can create a sheet for the students' scores (S-Score) and the teacher's score (T-Score).

RCA #			RCA #			RCA #		
Item	S-Score	T-Score	Item	S-Score	T-Score	Item	S-Score	T-Score
#			#			#		
#			#			#		

Or teachers can create a sheet that lets students peer-compare their scores.

Item	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3	Score 4	Score 5	Score 6	Score 7	Score 8	Score 9
#									
#									

Or teachers can create a sheet that leaves room for students to write in the criteria or traits.

Item	Score	Description or Criteria	Item	Score	Description or Criteria
#3		Neat and Legible	#3		Neat and Legible
#7		Capitalization and Punctuation	#7		Capitalization and Punctuation

The possibilities are almost endless.

Using the Three Types of RCAs with Skill

What grade do you teach? Do your students have any unique or special needs? Do your students score high or low on standardized tests? How much do you know about writing and grammar? How do you run your classroom? Point being, I can't tell you exactly what to do. The only thing I know about you and your students is that if you are reading this, you want to teach writing more effectively.

My purpose in writing this eBook is fourfold:

1. To present teaching-writing strategies and techniques.

2. To help teachers think about and develop a teaching-writing mindset.

3. To point out many teaching-writing pros and cons, alternatives, and pitfalls.

4. To help teachers think about and figure out how to manage their time wisely.

Do all teachers use RCAs with skill and get results? No. The reality is that quite often RCAs are little more than busywork. The students figure this out. Soon after, the teacher figures out that the students have figured it out, so they stop using them.

RCAs are almost an essential tool in teaching writing, but it takes practice to make them work. Furthermore, it also takes judgment to make them work because we are always working against the clock, and when we spend time using an RCA, we are not using our time using a different teaching-writing tool or activity.

I think that the primary reason that RCAs fail in the classroom is that teachers think about them in a very narrow, rigid way. When that narrow, rigid way doesn't work, teachers believe that RCAs don't work, and they move on. Since you have read this far, you most certainly are not thinking about RCAs in a narrow, rigid way. Once again, we are thinking about three types of RCAs:

Type 1: Generic RCAs

Type 2: Specific RCAs: Assignment-Specific, Genre-Specific, and Skill-Specific RCAs

Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs

And let's not forget that the term RCA, in reality, covers three tools: 1) rubrics, 2) checklists, and 3) assessment sheets. We have covered a great deal!

Mindset Review for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum with RCAs

We teach writing across the curriculum by being consistent and persistent. However, I'm not suggesting that we should overuse RCAs. In fact, we want to use them only to the extent that they help us teach writing. We don't want students to perceive them as busywork.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this eBook, RCAs can help teachers achieve ten goals across the curriculum. Now that you have a solid understanding of RCAs, it's worth revisiting those goals:

Goal 1: To Create a Classroom Full of Writers. (TWAC Strategy #8)

Goal 2: To Hold Students Accountable. (TWAC Strategy #2)

Goal 3: To Foster Student Ownership of Writing (TWAC Strategy #7)

Goal 4: To Assess Writing and Content Across the Curriculum: 1) Content/ Correct Answers, and 2) Writing. (TWAC Strategy #3)

Goal 5: To review, teach, and assess important writing skills, techniques, and concepts.

Goal 6: To help students learn to identify what they must edit and revise.

Goal 7: To help students better understand their grades and the grading process, and in the process, create self-efficacy.

Goal 8: To help students better understand state and district writing assessments so that they have success on them.

Goal 9: To teach students how to begin and end writing assignments focused on quality, and in the process, produce a better product.

Goal 10: To teach students how to focus on and analyze the qualities and characteristics of effective writing.

RCAs are a teaching-writing tool, and we need to use all tools skillfully and with judgment to achieve goals. Here is one thing I've learned about teaching writing: Most students want to write well, and if you teach writing effectively, most of them will become interested in writing. Think about it: a person who hates basketball becomes at least somewhat interested in basketball once they start making shots.

The Checklist Manifesto: A Checklist Cannot Fly a Plane

Checklists are used for things that are binary. Did you do it or not? The checkbox is a request for one of two answers: 1) yes, or 2) no. For this reason, a checklist can't capture what excellent writing is. Writing is far too complex for that.

Checklists can hold both students and teachers accountable:

1. Checklists can hold students accountable for using specific skills that will likely improve their writing.

2. Checklists can hold students accountable for meeting the requirements of an assignment.

3. Checklists can hold students accountable for using skills that will expand their repertoire of writing skills. If students don't use their new skills, they lose those new skills.

4. Checklists can hold teachers accountable for teaching various skills.

Teachers who are frustrated with checklists often believe that checklists are something that they are not. It's probably this misunderstanding about checklists that inspired Atul Gawande to write an entire book on checklists. The advice in the book is not as concrete as I would have liked, as it's mostly in narrative form. However, the book does help one create a big-picture mindset on how effective checklists work.

Here are a few concrete takeaways from *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* (2009) by Atul Gawande. Hopefully, these takeaways will get you thinking about what is working and what is not working in your own RCAs. The most important take away is this: "A checklist cannot fly a plane." In terms of teaching writing, it means that a checklist cannot teach writing, and a checklist cannot create effective writing.

1. **Length:** "The checklist cannot be lengthy. A rule of thumb some use is to keep it to between five and nine items, which is the limit of working memory."

2. **"Bad checklists** are vague and imprecise. They are too long; they are hard to use; they are impractical… They treat the people using the tools as dumb and try to spell out every single step. They turn people's brains off rather than turn them on."

3. **"Good checklists**, on the other hand, are precise. They are efficient, to the point, and easy to use even in the most difficult situations. They do not try to spell out everything—*a checklist cannot fly a plane*. Instead, they provide reminders of only the most critical and important steps—the ones that even the highly skilled professionals using them could miss. Good checklists are, above all, practical."

4. **Tested:** "A checklist has to be tested in the real world, which is inevitably more complicated than expected. First drafts always fall apart, he said, and one needs to study how, make changes, and keep testing until the checklist works consistently."

I only came across the *Checklist Manifesto* somewhat recently, so it didn't help me in creating my RCA systems and routines. However, it does seem to explain why I struggled with a few "nice looking" checklists early in my career. It also seems to explain why I have had such great success with my *Type 3: TWAC RCAs / On-the-Front-Board RCAs*.

Your students will say, "I finally get it! I can't even read what I was writing before!"
Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay

Thinking Outside the Checkbox

Ways of Thinking Outside the Box

Teaching writing is fun and interesting. Teaching writing is not just holding students accountable; it's also about inspiring students and encouraging students to take pride in their writing by leading them forward. While writing is an activity of following rules, it's also an activity of making choices and decisions. We learn to write by writing because writing is a process of making choices and decisions and evaluating them. When we approach a topic one way, we can't approach it a different way. When we use one strategy, we may not be able to use a different strategy.

If teachers want to teach writing across the curriculum, they have to provide both structure and freedom. They have to provide opportunities to let students make choices and decisions and reflect on their choices and decisions, while also requiring that students follow the rules.

RCAs can help with this. I strongly encourage teachers to have some fun with RCAs and to experiment with them and to make them fun and interesting. Change things up from time to time. Surprise your students. Here are some ideas to get you thinking both inside the checkbox and outside the checkbox.

1. Which Skills Did You Use? Which Skills Did You Choose Not to Use? Which Skills Don't You Understand?

Just because students don't use every single skill or technique on an RCA does not mean that it is not exceptional writing. Furthermore, just because students can check off every single box on an RCA does not mean that it is effective writing.

In reality, if students understand and have skill with a large list of writing skills and techniques, they won't be able to use every single one of them. Writing becomes an activity of making choices and decisions. At the other extreme, students don't understand many of the criteria on the RCAs.

By using a few different marks, we can use our RCAs to communicate with our students about what they understand and about the writing choices they have made. Here are a few marks that can help teachers expand the checkmark box:

- **(✓)** Used/Did
- **(X)** Didn't Use/Didn't Do
- **(?)** Don't Understand
- **(# x)** 4x, etc. = Used four times.

2. Fill-in-the-Blank on RCAs

In the right environment, every student writer wants to write well, and every student writer wants to expand their repertoire of writing skills. I require and encourage my students to use the skills that I teach them. Sometimes I require and sometimes I encourage. Whether I am requiring or encouraging, my goal is to get my students to analyze and reflect on their writing.

Instead of requiring a score or a checkmark on an RCA, we can leave blanks spaces in some RCA items where students can write in numerical or other information as to how many times or how they used various skills. Here are four examples:

	1. The writer used _____ simple sentences, _____ compound sentences, _____ complex sentences, and _____ compound-complex sentences.
	2. The writer used _____ adjectives right before nouns, and the writer used _____ adverbs.
	3. The writer used Introduction Strategy # _____ .
	4. The writer uses various Sentence-Opener Strategies, including _____, and _____.

3. Students Generate a List of Skills that They Used in Their Writing

With this activity, we are building on all of our RCA work. If you consistently use RCAs and teach writing across the curriculum, you and your students will develop a common language related to writing. You all will be familiar with many important skills, techniques, and concepts. Additionally, you all will be able to list many important skills, techniques, and concepts.

Instead of focusing on what students have not done, sometimes it's nice to let students focus on what skill they have done. With a large list of skills in front of them, even struggling writers can easily find skills and techniques that they have used. Here's how it works:

Teacher Says: "Think about all of the RCAs and all of the skills, rules, techniques, and concepts that we have discussed. Open your **Multi-Purpose Journal and Learning Log** and list five writing skills that you used on this science experiment report. Try to list skills from a few different traits."

Student Writes:
1. I used capital letters to start every sentence.
2. I explained a sequence of actions.

3. I explained a cause and effect.
4. I used a prepositional-phrase sentence opener.
5. I described what happened.

When students analyze and reflect on their writing and think about the skills that went into creating their writing, they will find that their best writing is filled with fabulous writing skills. This activity can provide many in-the-moment teaching opportunities, as students will find examples of giving evidence, using cause-effect, providing explanations, using definition (etc.) that they hadn't thought much about while writing.

Keep in mind that teachers can also use some of their RCAs or the **Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills** as inspiration, food for thought, or guidance.

4. The RCA Has Students Add Marks to Their Papers

We can also include items on our RCAs that instruct students to mark their papers.

1.	Mark each simple sentence with a dot, each compound sentence with two dots, and each complex sentence with a triangle.
2.	Underline each adjective that is right before a noun.
3.	Circle each adverb.

5. Use Categories on the RCA

If I'm creating an on-the-front-board RCA with my students, I may begin the process by writing each of the Six Traits (1. Ideas, 2. Organization, 3. Sentence Fluency, 4. Word Choice, 5. Conventions, 6. Voice) on a distinct section of the board. Then we generate criteria in each of the six categories.

Of course, I don't always use Six Traits. I may use **Common Core-based traits**, or I may use categories from **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills**. On the other hand, I may have students suggest a few categories that we should work on.

Even if I don't start by writing categories on the board, we may still use categories. When I create RCAs on the front board with my students, I try to keep things organized as we go along by grouping related items together. We may then add category labels to these groups of ideas.

Categories are extremely important and helpful when it comes to RCAs. However, it is the specific skills that make writing excellent or poor. Let's not forget about the specific skills.

6. Combining Scores and Checkmarks and All of the Above

Do what works. Challenge your students, but don't confuse your students. From time to time, experiment with new approaches and techniques. Try combining approaches and techniques. Use RCAs to connect your grammar and writing lessons with your language arts lessons and with your students' writing. Instead of rote boredom, mix things up and drive home points. The goal here is to get students to analyze, reflect on, and interact with their writing, along with all of the skills and techniques that they have learned.

Here are a couple of examples:

	1. The writer used _____ proper nouns (specific places: e.g., Atlanta) (specific people: e.g., Governor Walsh) (specific things: e.g., Declaration of Independence). The writer capitalized how many of these proper nouns? _____. Score the writer on the capitalization of proper nouns on a scale of 1-5.
	2. Underline the common nouns in your first five sentences. How many did you use in those five sentences? _____.

Will your students pay better attention to the language arts lessons that you teach them if they know that the skills and concepts may show up later on an RCA? They probably will. Use these techniques strategically to challenge and engage your students and to hold them accountable for what they have learned.

A Couple of Thinking Outside the Box RCAs

Teachers should begin with basic RCAs appropriate for their grade level. However, as the next page illustrates, as the year progresses, teachers can take RCAs wherever they want to take them by thinking outside the box. Once again, challenge your students but don't confuse your students, and use your time wisely. Make sure that what you are doing is worth the time.

	Grammar, Mechanics, Conventions, Sentence Structure
	1. I checked the spelling on the 1000 most common words.
	2. Every sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with ending punctuation.
	3. I checked every homonym to make sure I used it correctly. I placed a dot next to each one.
	4. I used both antecedents and pronouns. I underlined each pronoun and circled each antecedent.
	5. Every sentence has a simple subject (a noun or something that functions as a noun) and a simple predicate (a verb). I circled the simple subject (noun) and underlined the simple predicate (verb) in each sentence.
	6. I used _____ complex sentences. I started _____ of my complex sentences with the subordinate clause and _____ with the main clause. If I began the sentence with a subordinate clause, I used a comma.

	Sentence Structure and Grammar
	1. The writer used at least _____ different types of sentences.
	2. The writer used active voice in every sentence except _____.
	3. The writer used _____ sentence-starting transition(s).
	4. The writer used _____ interrupter(s) or buried transition(s).
	LFR ™ : Literary Techniques, Figures of Speech, Rhetorical Devices
	5. The writer used at least one sensory detail. Place a star next to each example that speaks to one of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch.
	6. The writer made at least one comparison using a simile, an analogy, or a metaphor.
	7. The writers used at least one scheme of sound repetition or word repetition.
	Ideas, Content, and Organizational Strategies
	8. Argument: The writer clearly states and supports at least two claims or reasons.
	9. The writers used at least two common thought patterns (patterns of organization): cause-effect, compare-contrast, sequence, PPE, problem-solution, process, etc. These can be at the sentence level, the paragraph level, or the whole composition level.
	Additional Strategies and Techniques
	10. List Other:
	11. List Other:

Using RCAs as Cheat Sheets to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum

Teachers are presented with many opportunities every single day to teach writing. However, to take advantage of these opportunities, teachers must be nimble.

Once you have collected and created RCAs that make sense to you, the RCAs can serve as a foundation for teaching quick lessons across the curriculum. In a sense, these RCAs are RCA Cheat Sheets. Keep in mind that if you find someone else's cheat sheet, it may not make sense to you. An RCA Cheat Sheet must express your understanding of something.

When you understand your RCA Cheat Sheet, you can use it quickly to teach your students, while also using your RCA Cheat Sheet to make your directions and expectations clear to your student. After your students have completed the assignment, you can use the RCA Cheat Sheet to hold them accountable.

If you explore **The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills**, you will discover many possible writing assignments that you may want to give your students across the curriculum. I'll list a few here:

write a summary	write a description	compare the pros and cons
describe a process	write a character sketch	write an expository paragraph
write a PPE (point, proof, explanation) paragraph	write about a problem and a possible solution	tell what happened in chronological order

Students primarily learn to write by writing and analyzing their writing. The job of the teacher is primarily to provide information and structure the activity. Many teachers place way to much value on their information and their control of the process. When it comes to creating and developing writing skills that students own, the reality is that students figure out how to write and discover how to write. Teachers must provide an environment where that can happen.

With RCA Cheat Sheets, teachers can do their job quickly while devoting the majority of the writing time to letting students do their job, which is writing and analyzing their writing. Please note that the fastest and most effective way to get students to analyze their own writing is by creating an environment where students can compare what they did with what other students did. But that topic is for another day.

In Conclusion: What Should You Do?

To teach writing across the curriculum, teachers need to use systems and routines. Hopefully, this eBook will help you create a variety of RCA systems and routines for all kinds of assignments across the curriculum.

How you use RCAs will depend on many things. I'll put a few considerations into question form:

1. What grade do you teach? Are your students below grade level, at grade level, or above grade level?

2. What are your goals? Do you want to improve your students' daily writing across the curriculum? Are you targeting your next writing assessment?

3. What type of assignments do you give? How often?

4. How do you run your classroom? What systems and routines do you already use to teach writing? How many systems and routines do you already use to teach writing?

5. How much time do you want to devote to teaching writing? How much time do you want to devote to RCAs?

6. How much experience do you have teaching writing? How much do you know about writing and teaching writing?

7. Do you have the same students all day long or do your students rotate? If your students rotate, can you get the other teachers to work with you in teaching writing?

The Goal: Take Charge and Take Action

With all of my free eBooks, I try to help teachers understand how to take action and teach writing beyond lessons. Teachers need to take charge and take action and develop a collection of systems, routines, and skills that help them teach writing.

And yes, I always make it clear that if teachers teach beginning writers or struggling writing, **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** is the framework, foundation, and methodology that makes teaching writing easy. In short, **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** will be the most valuable tool in your teaching writing tool belt.