



LITERACY ACCELERATOR #4 | WRITING & PERSONALIZATION



OVERVIEW

Deriving evidence from the text in a disciplined, focused way has the potential to be a great equalizer, allowing students to learn about the text from each other. Asking students to write about the texts they are reading means that all readers have equal access to the same body of information (the given text).

All students can learn how to marshal textual evidence in the service of a skilled interpretation of what a text says directly or inferentially. Learning to do so is essential to students' futures. Researchers note that the task "most associated with college-level work" across the disciplines is "reading-to-write" (Flower et al., 1990, p. 4). College instructors are unanimous in citing the ability to identify, evaluate, and use evidence to support or challenge a thesis as one of the essential skills expected of incoming college students (Graham & Hebert, 2010; ICAS, 2002). The College Board (2019) conducted an extensive survey of college teachers before changing the SAT to emphasize evidence-based reading and writing. They found strong evidence that postsecondary faculty as a whole across the disciplines rated skills such as "command of evidence" as high on the importance threshold (p. VIII). Employers agree (Hart Research Associates, 2018).

The use of evidence is not unique to a certain kind of writing or even to particular disciplines. Students can defend claims about the meaning of a piece of literature with evidence from the text in English classes. In history/social studies, students can analyze evidence from multiple primary and secondary sources to advance a claim about an event or a historical figure. And in science, students can include data from lab reports and investigations as evidence in support of their findings, answering a question or addressing a problem. As Reither (2000) explained, using evidence is not merely at the core of each academic discipline but also the glue that inseparably connects the foundational academic activities of writing, reading, and inquiry. He observed that "all three are learned not by doing any one alone, but by doing them all at the same time . . ." or in other words, "ground[ing] writing in reading and inquiry" (p. 291).

Using evidence in student writing has only recently come into focus. It stems from a long-standing historical divide that placed reading and writing in separate disciplines, departments, and courses—a "divorce... that has been central to pedagogical tensions" since the 18th century (Harl, 2013, p. 30). The importance of including evidence in text-based writing has clear implications for how we teach and assess reading. Evidence runs throughout a text in patterns that reflect its organization and purpose—what Walter Kintsch (1998) has called its macrostructure ([Accelerator #5](#)). Finding, employing, and understanding the full range of evidence from texts is impossible without a pedagogy that brings reading and writing together.

HOW DOES TEXT-BASED WRITING BOLSTER READING COMPREHENSION?

Writing about texts adds power and efficacy to students' reading, rereading, and discussing each text they examine closely (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Anchoring assignments in the texts students are reading (and the topics these texts cover) gives ELs (and all students) meaningful information and ideas to write about as they extend and solidify their content learning as well as their writing skills. Writing about what one is reading through the collection of evidence forces attention and careful reading. Collecting evidence for writing gives students a payoff in the form of deepening their comprehension. Researchers who studied mainstreamed Latino English language learners in secondary school report, "It is precisely because reading and writing access similar cognitive strategies . . . that reading and writing make such a powerful combination when taught in connection with one another" (Kim et al., 2011, 7). Such assignments are superior to ones explicitly geared toward producing grammatically standard writing because decontextualized writing is much harder to negotiate than is writing on a subject one knows about. Allowing students to write about what they've learned grounds that content deeply in students' understanding.

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Whether pursuing their own learning goals or responding to questions or tasks presented to them by a teacher, paying careful attention to the text activates the brain while reading. Neuroscientists have shown that successful readers' brains are "switched on" in ways different from those of less proficient readers (Wolf, 2018). The more skilled students become at finding textual evidence to use in their writing and organizing it in service of presenting it in print, the better they will understand what they have read. Collecting evidence is one means of forcing attention and careful reading that can achieve deep understanding. There are several studies by Brockman et al. (2010) that found support for basing writing assignments on reading precisely because such assignments are "designed to help students learn class material" (p. 44). As most academic writing asks students to respond to what they have read, it is no surprise to discover research supporting the idea that "good writers are most likely careful readers" (ICAS, 2002, p. 15).

While citing evidence makes student writing richer and more engaging (and provides the central element in proving what they say), there are numerous other benefits. First and foremost, asking students to write about what they read simultaneously improves their expressive skills, comprehension, and ability to learn more completely from the text (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Second, reading to comprehend by setting that understanding down in writing grows students' domain knowledge (Accelerator #2). Research shows that reading "thoughtfully and critically and produc[ing] evidence" is one of the most effective ways to lead students to "make connections to related topics" and "synthesize information" (ICAS, 2002, p. 16). Capturing learning in writing is an effective way for students to solidify what they have learned. Presenting that collected evidence effectively, whether by summarizing its essence, responding to questions posed on an assignment, or developing a well-reasoned formal argument, cements understanding that too often remains nebulous unless written down.

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HOW CAN WE GROW STUDENTS' WRITING EFFICIENTLY?

The more skilled and habitual students become at finding textual evidence through close reading, the better they will understand what they have read. The more students write about texts, the more explicitly they will consider the text's contents, and the better they will consolidate its information and integrate its ideas. All of this contributes to students' confidence and efficacy regarding their abilities to express themselves in print. The regular repetition of this cycle of learning—if not daily, weekly—is what is needed.

Over time and with lots of practice, students can become better able to develop a controlling idea and a coherent focus on a topic. They also become more skilled at selecting and incorporating relevant examples, facts, and details into their writing. A sharp instructional focus on source-based writing would help integrate reading and writing. The research supports having students “articulate a clear thesis and identify, evaluate, and use evidence to support or challenge that thesis” (ICAS, 2002, p. 15).

And we should not underestimate the will of students to read. In the words of researchers Doug Fisher and Nancy Frey, “Reading has to be a thrill...students need to do something with the information they have gained from the text. . . . Comprehending means that students become active producers. One way to accomplish this is to ask students, ‘What are you inspired to do?’ after they read a text,” (2020, p. 821). Again, as they note, choice matters—a lot.



Recommendations

Top opportunities for personalization spring out from this core mindset and are myriad.¹ That's why the first two leadoff strategies to fortify the writing accelerator are to:

1. PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH AMPLE CHOICES TO CONDUCT AND REPORT RESEARCH ON TOPICS CONNECTED TO WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING IN CLASS.

Rather than ask students to brainstorm, free-write, or otherwise reflect about a familiar topic or experience, tasks that ask students to reflect on what they are reading will boost their comprehension and literacy outcomes.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONALIZATION?

Yes! Human-enabled opportunities that can accelerate literacy outcomes are available right now to capitalize on students' interest, motivation, and identities—both in terms of what to study and how to report their findings.

Students can follow their interests to research all kinds of topics throughout the year, and should

¹ The products or approaches named here are called out because they are known to the authors and align to the research supporting this accelerator. They are examples that could work, not an exhaustive list. Careful evaluation against the Consideration Question and vetting should be undertaken before making any decisions about the utility of any of these products or approaches for your needs.

frequently be free to design both the process and the product of their research in ways that seem most viable and valuable to them. Topics can be connected or not to what they are reading in class, which should provide outlets to validate and learn more about their own identities and cultural traditions as well as exposing students to other perspectives. Teachers can use research assignments to introduce ideas and information that expands representation to be culturally relevant and expansive beyond the core curricular materials. Close reading itself can be treated as a “research lab,” where students can develop their understanding of any manner of things connected to the “anchor texts,” such as insect ecosystems, ancient civilizations, civil rights, the human body, and so on. Over time, teachers can expand the choices students have about how to share what they have learned. Fisher and Frey (2020) cite their communication with reading researcher Richard Anderson (June 30, 2018, pp, 821) about how to provide students with choices about just how to deliver their research results. They describe students assuming the role of “storyteller,” “explainer,” or “arguer.” As they explain it, the “storyteller” uses accurate information from the texts they’ve read and then make the story come alive with imaginative dialogue and other material (pp. 821). The “explainer” sticks to the facts and provides the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the information. The “arguer” must select a claim for which she provides compelling reasons and evidence to convince readers to agree to her point of view. The goal is for students to personalize what to do with the knowledge they gain in meaningful and interesting ways.

2. MAKE IT EASY FOR TEACHERS TO ASSIGN FREQUENT EVIDENCE-BASED WRITING—ACROSS GRADES AND SUBJECT (Graham & Hebert, 2010; ICAS, 2002).

Practice makes perfect—the quantity of writing matters. Regular repetition of the reading-writing cycle of learning is what is needed but hard to do.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONALIZATION?

Yes! Schools need options here to accelerate students’ writing abilities that are easy to use and easy to implement. New scoring technologies are on the horizon and they could be real game-changers.

Too few students around the nation are given weekly writing assignments tied to their reading. That’s because the load on teachers to score and provide cogent and timely feedback often serves as a barrier to assigning frequent evidence-based writing. Enter automated essay-scoring (AES) technologies to offer teachers a feasible way to implement evidence-based writing at scale. New technologies are providing information about students’ skills at marshaling text evidence. Researchers have found a close correspondence between human and AES scores (Correnti et al., 2020). Using these technologies could significantly boost student practice and relieve scoring burdens on teachers. These scoring platforms could work in tandem with teachers regularly assigning writing assignments.

Following are some additional methods to boost the writing accelerator, though not all have ready-to-go personalization opportunities:

3. PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN ACTIVE READING TO CONSTRUCT AND EXPRESS THEIR ARGUMENTS.

Horning and Kraemer (2013) summed up the situation by declaring, “[T]oo little time is devoted to [teaching students] *how* to transfer and assimilate the readings into effective compositions” (p. 72). Teaching students explicitly how to write about the texts they read (not just assigning writing) matters: writing instruction paves the way for improved reading fluency, comprehension, and learning (Graham & Hebert, 2010; ICAS, 2002).

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONALIZATION?

Perhaps, but innovation is needed. Students need and deserve lots of explicit writing instruction. Then, tech-enabled instruction can be a slice of students' instruction, thereby providing students with needed targeted practice on what the class is doing.

The teacher needs to conduct explicit, whole-class instruction, although tech-enabled programs could provide students with practice transferring and assimilating evidence into compositions. Again, AES platforms could work in tandem with teacher writing assignments, so compositions' scoring does not fall completely on the teacher.

4. PROVIDE PRACTICE ON HOW TO MINE SOURCES—TO EQUIP STUDENTS WITH THE SKILLS AND KNOW-HOW TO VALUE EVIDENCE.

Several recent studies show that student writing suffers from a shallow grasp of what constitutes evidence in sources and how to use it (Horning & Kraemer, 2013; Howard, Serviss & Rodrigue, 2010). A particularly illuminating investigation by Jamieson and Howard (2013) revealed that even with the recent emphasis on writing with evidence, an overwhelming number of students (94 percent) merely “mine sources” for sentences, which they then only superficially integrate into their writing (p. 117). The result is a kind of “patchwriting”—a sea of floating quotations not smoothly fitted together into coherent and flowing prose (Howard, Serviss & Rodrigue, 2010, p. 178). Jamieson and Howard (2013) were even blunter, describing it as a form of copying rather than composing. They observed that many students do not know how to use the evidence they discover to craft their arguments effectively.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PERSONALIZATION?

Perhaps. Like #3 above, students need and deserve lots of explicit instruction in learning how to mine sources to accelerate their literacy outcomes. Tech-enabled instruction can be a slice of students' writing instruction and assist students with targeted practice on what the class is doing.

There are tech-enabled programs out there that allow students to “highlight the section of the text that offers evidence for the claim.” Additional future innovations could advance students' targeted practice on mining sources.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once you have identified that you want to pursue a personalized approach and you have determined that it is tangibly tied to one or more of the literacy accelerators, ask yourself whether it:

1. **Advances the right content for your students?**
2. **Promotes equity and counteracts bias in both the assignment and delivery of the chosen instruction?**
3. **Offers opportunities to elevate student interest or agency in their own learning?**
4. **Is easy to use and implement?**

(See the Consideration Questions (Appendix A) for more detailed reflections.)

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