

REVIEW

*Review of Write for Insight: Empowering
Content Area Learning, Grades 6–12*

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William Strong. *Write for Insight: Empowering Content Area Learning, Grades 6–12*
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SECONDARY SCHOOLS OFTEN FOCUS on developing the writing facility of college-bound students while limiting “writing instruction” for less-academic students to isolated grammar tutelage. Writing-across-the-curriculum practices that are well-established on university campuses rarely filter down to secondary instruction in spite of efforts by National Writing Project sites and others. At this level, writing instruction is typically felt to be the sole responsibility of English teachers. Although universities expect arriving freshmen to be able to produce effective, discipline-specific academic writing, it rarely occurs to high school content teachers to take time from their subject curricula to teach students how to approach the demands of content-specific writing. However, The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges reminds us that “writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (11). That is, knowing how to write well is a foundational ability for successful participation in society—college educated or not.

ACT’s recent *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work* similarly argues that the literacy skills required for professional post-secondary training are identical to those required for college success (iii). Developing the ability to write well is important for all high school students, not just the college

bound. And, particularly in light of the diverse populations arriving in high school, many with under-developed literacy skills, teaching students to write well is a task far beyond the capacity of a single department. Although composition specialists have long recognized that preparing students for the multiple writing tasks that will be woven throughout their personal and professional lives as adults should be the responsibility of all teachers, few outside English departments have shared that understanding.

Additionally, content area teachers are often ill-equipped to embed writing instruction into their curricula. Lacking explicit knowledge of composition theory or practice themselves, many are well-meaning but timid about offering even limited guidance to students working to master conventions of disciplinary-specific discourse. At best, they help students improve in the only way they know—by correcting mechanical and spelling errors. Indeed, until now, much of the instructional guidance in composition offered to content teachers (even if they knew how to access it) has seemed more accessible to English department colleagues or university professors than to themselves.

That has now changed. William Strong's new book, *Write for Insight: Empowering Content Area Learning, Grades 6–12* is easily the freshest, smartest, and most readable addition to the secondary Writing Across the Curriculum literature in recent years. Beautifully written and intellectually engaging, *Write for Insight's* 10 chapters lay out processes and procedures to guide content teachers interested in integrating writing into their curricula but unsure how to proceed. Strong speaks to readers in a comfortable, personal tone, coaching and encouraging teachers to integrate explicit writing instruction into their curricula. Without bludgeoning them with jargon, he provides accessible strategies, tools, and specific heuristics accessible to content areas as diverse as health and physical education, consumer and family studies, the fine arts, mathematics, science, social studies, English, and drama. Providing examples of specific writing tasks, Strong suggests students keep journals of their exercise regime, create a handbook for younger students on good nutrition, write song lyrics or a critique of a local art show, prepare story problems modeled after those in their text book (and then trade them with classmates), write imaginative accounts of a white blood cell moving through the circulatory system, or explain a historical event to someone from another planet.

Strong presents just enough theoretical background on writing's power to enhance learning and thinking to convince skeptical teachers of the pedagogical value of embedding writing into their already crammed curricula. And, he argues, teachers will

find integrating writing as a core pedagogy serves both their agendas and their students' needs. Effective teaching leads to enhanced learning.

Strong's voice is authoritative and experienced, and his presentation comfortable without being reductive. He is respectful of students and their teachers, yet critical of the fakery of the "paint by numbers" teaching operating in many classrooms and driving students to the disengaged game of "doing" school instead of mastering material. This book is for teachers interested in providing authentic instruction as well as for those unsure of what is meant by "good writing" or at a loss to frame engaging writing tasks. Addressing these multiple needs, Strong tells us that "this book focuses on increasing student motivation, enhancing long-term learning, and easing the workload shouldered by teachers across the middle school and high school grades. It's about working smarter, not harder" (1). These are aggressive promises, yet Strong makes good on each of them.

Strong's core claim is that the flow of words onto paper—thoughtfully attended to by the writer—provides insights. This is not a fresh idea for experienced users of writing as a classroom thinking/learning tool, but for many it is a radical revisioning. Strong uses aptly chosen personal narratives from his own writing life to demonstrate the power "emerging meanings" have to lead writers forward in their analytical thinking. For Strong, a key purpose for writing is to generate insights—"flashes of enlightenment or surprise, a sudden 'seeing from within'" (1)—and the learning and intellectual pleasure that such discoveries engender. Designed to be "a teacher education book with an attitude" (3), *Write for Insight* helps teachers reconnect students to authentic intellectual work. If developing students' abilities as critical thinkers and writers is at the core of our educational agenda, Strong contends writing instruction is the vehicle by which that agenda is most likely realized.

Obliquely addressing prescriptions that misrepresent the nature of academic discourse, Strong reclaims the intellectual power of personal knowledge recovered through narration. To write well in any discipline, he reminds us, we have to write from the inside out, writing from what we know. Because narrative often provides the most accessible route to personal information, Strong suggests beginning with literacy autobiographies, recounting difficulties and triumphs with an eye to experiential learning that positions students to move forward as expository and persuasive writers. This book warrants by example what it advocates for students. Sharing his own stories, Strong demonstrates their power to generate understanding and new perceptions. Then he demonstrates how those stories form the basis for the unmistakably academic exposition in the book itself. Additionally, he includes "Write for Insight" activities at

the end of each chapter that invite readers to apply each chapter's points to their own writing and their own teaching, while experiencing similar writing "insights."

In Chapter 2, Strong rethinks the nature of authentic writing (purposeful writing to communicate meaning to real audiences) and takes on the "hidden curriculum" of writing. Most school writing is done, he reminds us, "to tell the teacher what the teacher already knows, not to explore a topic or idea." He continues, "the central intellectual activity in school writing is to guess what the teacher wants, not to figure out what's worth saying or how to say it most effectively" (31). Strong provides concrete strategies for confronting and transforming this hidden curriculum in order to create writing opportunities for students that require authentic intellectual effort and produce authentic written communication.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 help teachers develop a repertoire of specific strategies for incorporating writing instruction, working with disparate student populations, and developing thinking skills. In Chapter 6, "Designing Assignments and Rubrics," Strong turns to what may be the thorniest issue in writing instruction: "What makes a good writing assignment?" He develops his answer via three essential criteria: 1) it engages students with a problem to solve, 2) it asks them to apply what they have learned recently in order to solve the problem, and 3) it specifies an audience for their response. Strong then offers 10 assignment design principles and an acronym (CRAFT= Context, Role, Audience, Format, Topic) to provide a targeted heuristic for designing effective assignments. Abundant assignment examples provide clear models that teachers can borrow or modify as needed.

Having offered basic tools for effective writing instruction, Strong's next chapters anticipate two areas of potential concern. Chapter 8 responds to a probable question from teachers convinced in theory, but uncertain in practice. "Okay," they might say. "I can see that integrating writing into my coursework has value. But *how* do I do this?" Distinguishing between coaching writers and judging writing, Strong presents a clear picture of effective writing classrooms, how teachers create them, and how they can support students working there.

In Chapter 9, Strong takes on the thorny issues surrounding research writing and offers several alternative (but still academic) modifications. Saturation Reports, I-Search Papers, and Multigenre Research Projects each offer frames for in-depth student exploration and reporting on specific topics in ways that focus on students developing subject mastery. In each, attention is paid to both the *processes* of exploring a topic and the presentation of material in genres that demonstrate mastery. In addition, recognizing the needs of teachers uncomfortable with abandoning traditional research

papers, Strong offers suggestions for integrating them into effective classroom practice as well. At the same time, he takes the opportunity to address issues of “fakery” and plagiarism that often arise with such projects.

The final chapter, “Writing as a Means to Meaning,” umbrellas and again foregrounds the book’s key argument: writing enables meaning creation for writers, even as it presents meanings for readers. That is, for writers, the act of writing is a powerful thinking, learning, and understanding *experience*. For classroom teachers in all disciplines, learning to hinge instructional practices on this pedagogical truth will enable students to make curricular content personally meaningful, accessible, and permanent. *Write for Insight* empowers teachers to do just that. By coupling concrete examples of teachers from many content areas experiencing insightful writing with content-specific, classroom-ready instructional models, Strong provides a valuable resource for individual teachers interested in developing student writing abilities or for professional development leaders seeking a single text that speaks persuasively to teachers from many disciplines.

Works Cited

- ACT. (2005). *Crisis at the core: Preparing all students for college and work*. Available at: www.act.org/path/policy/pdf/crisis_report.pdf.
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