

Preparing for College Writing Demands Best Practices for the AVID Classroom

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I. Why should we be concerned about student preparation for college writing?

- College instructors estimate that 50% of high school graduates are not sufficiently prepared for their writing assignments (Achieve, Inc., 2005).
- Secondary student literacy skills in the U.S. are considerably lower than those in most developed nations (OECD, 2006).
- Writing remediation costs American businesses as much as \$3.1 billion a year. (National Commission on Writing, 2006).
- Most American students come to college with a very narrow view of what writing is (e.g., the five paragraph essay) for two reasons: many of the high stakes assessments are based on a traditional English class essay format, and most of the writing in secondary schools (which may not be much) is assigned by English/Language Arts teachers (Johns, 2002).

II. What do we know about writing in colleges and universities?

- Most student writing at all undergraduate levels takes place on tests---as short answer responses. These are often called "essays," but they can be quite different from the "essays" that students have been assigned in secondary school. (Melzer, Rodriguez)
- Written responses are remarkably varied, across---and even within---disciplines, further complicated by the fact that instructors use a variety of terms to refer to texts, particularly for out-of-class assignments (e.g., observation paper, article review, case study, lab report, lecture response essay, project, explanation). (Melzer, Rodriguez). Often, the term employed by faculty is a vague one ("essay," or "research paper") which could refer to a variety of text types (Johns, 2011).
- Out-of-class writing assignments tend to be short, 1-2 pages (Melzer, McClish & Johns).
- For nearly all writing assignments that really count, students must draw from outside sources (readings, lectures, observations, data presented in graphs or charts), often specified by the instructor (Melzer, McClish & Johns).
- In almost all cases, the students need to demonstrate in writing an understanding of the source(s) in the form of summary or paraphrase before they are asked to evaluate or critique or synthesize. (Graham & Perin, 2007a, Melzer, Rodriguez, McClish & Johns). Thus, students need to be effective and focused readers before they can be successful academic writers.

III. What does this mean for the AVID (or other secondary) classrooms¹?

[In this section, the list of strategies identified by Graham & Perin, 2007a in their meta-analysis of the research. The texts and instructional materials are drawn from Johns, 1997, 2002, & 2009 and classroom materials I am developing for secondary schools and developmental writing students in their first years of college.]

¹ *AVID College Readiness: Working with Sources* includes activities that were developed in response to each of these research findings. However, the volume currently centers around a theme, "The Leader as Catalyst for Change." This workshop demonstrates how the same research-related strategies can be used with other materials.

Students need:

- *Specificity in their prompts for both in- and out-side of class written products---and, for purposes of student success, these products need to be varied over time.* [Prompt analysis/policy assignment]
- *Students need to approach the "predatory reading" (Hjortshoj, 2001) of sources with a focus and prompt in mind.* [Selective and purpose-driven reading]
- *Text (i.e., reading) or data summary should be required in most prompts.* [Problem-solution summarizing]
- *Students need extensive instruction on how to pre-write, plan (and replan), revise, and edit their work.* [Planning activity]
- *Metacognitive activities relating to writing **processes** should be encouraged.* [Post-draft re-planning activity]
- *Students should be given models for what good writing looks like in a variety of classrooms.* ["Writer-responsible texts"]
- *Students need to view their writing strategies as transferable and think and write about how they can be transferred.² (Wardle, Wells).* [Metacognitive Awareness Response]

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² Additional effective approaches to student success discussed in Graham and Perin (2007b): Students should use word processors; plan and/or write collaboratively, and use writing as a tool for learning content ("writing to learn"). Inquiry activities often lead to student motivation and effective writing. Also see Anderson, 2011.