

National Writing Project: Portraits of Content Area Literacy Instruction

Four NWP content area teachers from around the country responded to the following prompt:

“What do you want your students to be able to do as a readers and writers when they leave your classroom?”

DAVID GRIBBEN

**History Teacher, Bronx International High School, Bronx, NY
New York City Writing Project**

There are essential skills or aspects of being literate in history that I want students to acquire. Making connections is very important in history class—the ability to prioritize information, understand causal relationships, and see multiple perspectives, even when you are reading just one perspective. I want my students to question why some stories are told from one perspective and not others, to understand power dynamics. I want them to constantly question: Why is this happening? Why are things this way? Could it be different?

Sadly, most students think the reason they need to read and write in history is to pass tests. That’s horrible. To me, what’s most important is to give purpose for reading and writing. Reading and writing in a history classroom is about being able to read a newspaper and understand the issues. It’s about understanding your life and why you are here and how to change it. It’s about understanding power relationships and the choices people make. These are just some of the components of literacy in history.

Good readers in history should be able to put a story in context. They should ask how this story fits into their overall understanding of history. A good reader in history reads to understand the world today. He or she is searching for connections between past choices made by people and choices and conflicts we face today. Students should read to explore the impact of history on their own lives. For instance, a student in my class studying the transatlantic slave trade needs to understand the transatlantic slave trade in the overall context of race relations today in the United States.

As a teacher in an ELL school, I have to think ahead about language and text when selecting and using a reading. Vocabulary is a major concern. What are the key concepts and discipline-specific words students need to know? Which of these do I introduce beforehand and how? How do I build on native language? I use word walls, and we analyze words in context. I often introduce content readings through a heavy use of visuals. And even as a history teacher, if you work with ELL students, you need strategies for helping them grapple with English syntax and text structure. So I also want my students to acquire approaches for comprehending English language text.

Our ultimate goal is to be able to analyze history. A good writer in history is able to clearly communicate a viewpoint (thesis) and use examples both present and past to convince the reader of his or her position or, at least, communicate it so that the reader understands. But there are lots of different writing forms you can use, not just the essay required on standardized texts. This year we've written business letters to history publishers evaluating their textbooks. We've done dialogues and lots of jotting on big chart paper in response to quotes—to create more dialogue. We had a mock trial where students submitted briefs in support of their positions, while other students who were on the jury had to write decisions.

I find writing in a journal is essential in history. It forces students to think about history and themselves—makes it personal. Too often students feel history is removed from their daily lives. History should be taught more as a sociological course: why things are the way they are and why we act as we do. If you are exploring conflicts in war, ask the students to write about conflicts in their lives. While studying reconciliation, students can explore when an apology is accepted and when it is not. I want kids to know history is about themselves and the choices they make.

Of course, there is essay writing, but I think it is important to demystify the essay. I started with business letters this year, and students put forth a point of view in the letters. What I want to do with the essay this year is to encourage students to see essays as an opportunity to argue. Kids love to argue, and essays should be fun. Take a position, use an argument from class, and start using *words* to fight. What kids struggle with in essay writing is that controlling idea/thesis. They often have more than one. Doing a lot of writing and reading beforehand can help them identify what they really believe.

Reading and writing in the history classroom are not separate. One informs the other. Often I start off with journal writing or a chart paper activity to help us understand a complicated reading assignment. I use writing often as a formative assessment to see what students have understood from a reading and also so that the students can have a record of their understandings. Much of what my students write about comes from class readings. The most important thing for my students to be able to do when they leave my classroom is to be able to articulate both what they understand and what they don't understand about the world we live in. A movement back and forth between reading and writing helps them learn to do that.

BRAD MARTIN

**Biology Teacher, Corning Union High School, Corning, CA
Northern California Writing Project**

At our school we teach biology as a college prerequisite class, and life science as a lower-level graduation requirement. In my biology classes, I expect students to be able to articulate ideas clearly in all assignments. In homework, I expect answers to be written in complete sentences and with complete thoughts. In biology I also have the students write informal lab observations in response to prompts that are included in the labs. These are required to be written in complete sentences as well, and I expect to see in students' writing a clear connection between their observations and the concepts we are learning in class. These lab writings always include two or more analytical questions that require students to go beyond the facts into some type of interpretation of their observations. I also require two to three formal review or research papers in biology. These must include an abstract, an introduction, background (methods), and conclusions (or analysis). These papers must also have three or more correctly cited references within the text, and a correctly formatted reference page. We use a study of local oak galls, which involves students in collecting their own data, researching existing media, and then interpreting their data based on all available information. All of their data and research must be presented in formal research format. This project helps students see how the science process is connected to the writing process.

Life science writings are more informal and mostly revolve around using "writing to learn" rather than "learning to write." The writings in life science are used to help students put vocabulary into the context of a written response, so students use definitions and concepts to explain an observation or to answer a question I pose. I do not expect high-level writing, but rather I look for understanding or misconceptions within their writing. I also have life science students do a monthly "science in the news" report that helps them connect classroom concepts to the real world. These are required to be at least one page, but I still grade primarily on content rather than structure, spelling, etc.

Biology students are required to read and interpret a number of different text sources. We use a standard biology text, which they must read on a daily basis. My expectation is that they be able not only to read the text, but also to connect concepts from various chapters. I give students questions that require them to read sections from different chapters and then interpret connections between different facts or concepts. Biology students are also given a number of supplemental readings from periodicals, books, and alternate texts, which give them alternate or expanded ideas that they must summarize

and compare to the concepts in the primary text. In life science the students must be able read the text well enough to find answers to specific questions that I give them. They are also expected to be able to read short sections of several paragraphs in the text and then summarize the information into only one or two sentences. Life science students must also read newspaper or magazine articles related to concepts from our current lessons and I expect them to understand the information well enough to be able to write or present orally a brief summary of the information and how it relates to our lessons.

KIM DONEGAN

**Math Teacher, Centennial High School (Alternative Education), Fort Collins, CO
Colorado State University Writing Project**

My goal is to support my students in being less befuddled by the language associated with math. For many of them, it is the technical nature of the vocabulary that presents a serious obstacle. In fact, for some students, comprehending the problem is more of a challenge than the mathematical process itself. I utilize daily writing to address this issue

My daily writing activity involves a word that is pertinent to that day's lesson. Each day the students are given the prompt "What does _____ mean?" Their job is to give me a "real life" definition of the word, not something that would be found in the math glossary. Then I relate the definitions students share to the actual math definition. The intention is to alleviate some of their discomforts while helping establish an awareness of their existent knowledge.

In a high school algebra curriculum, the words *slope* and *intercept* are used regularly. Typical student responses to the prompt "What does *slope* mean?" include, "A slope is like a hill," "I go snowboarding on the slopes," or "A slope is an incline." Definitions of *intercept* typically include discussions of football or Bond-like maneuvers. Students that provide these definitions understand the *slope-intercept* concept more thoroughly than they may have predicted. Algebraically speaking, the slope of a line details the steepness of the line, and the intercept is the location at which the line crosses the y-axis. It is not difficult to correlate the real-life to the algebra definitions. Having done so, the students are able to picture these otherwise abstract mathematical concepts.

Often the most difficult part of my class for students is not so much the math itself, but the need to dissect a word problem or prompt in order to figure out what formulas and methods to use. By looking at the language of math and its meaning in other contexts in their writing, they have improved their ability to break a word problem down, often decreasing their anxiety and increasing their confidence.

The familiarity of the definition provides students a comfortable, concrete foothold in otherwise confusing, incomprehensible math theories that have seemingly no practical application or value. Students find it reassuring that they already understand some part of the new material. As a result, I see an improved attitude and willingness to try. The comfort level provided by existent knowledge minimizes fear. This, in turn, increases the likelihood that the previously resistant student will make a genuine effort to learn a new concept. As a teacher, I find great satisfaction in watching my students make an effort to learn. As readers and writers, my students are better able to dissect the meaning of a problem and utilize life knowledge to help interpret that meaning.

BRIGITTE DOBBINS

**German Teacher (Levels 1–4), Jamestown High School, Williamsburg, VA
Eastern Virginia Writing Project**

Foreign language teachers, when asked about their literacy goals for their students, often focus on functional literacy: reading a map or a bus schedule, writing a recipe or a note. Thus the primary objective in most foreign language classes is for students to be able to communicate in everyday situations, and their reading and writing tasks focus on achieving this goal. Here Brigitte Dobbins describes a more multidimensional role for herself as a language teacher. In addition to the functional goals, she describes the importance of literature and creative writing for the language student.

I want to instill the love of reading and writing in my students; I feel it is very important for them to learn to love reading and writing.

In level 3 we read (all in German) mostly funny stories that students can relate to. Students can imagine that the same things could happen to them. In level 4 we read harder stories and books. The students are challenged with many vocabulary words; however, by focusing on context, by identifying similarities between English and German, and by making connections between new words and words they already know, the students learn to overcome the challenges. Literature provides a unique lens for understanding culture, so in the advanced conversation and advanced placement classes we read works from a variety of German authors, such as Johann Sziklai, Christa Wolf, Till Rachter and Anne Heitmann, to name a few. These texts move the students beyond the challenges presented by the language, asking them to grapple with themes, philosophies, and ideas central to the study of literature in any language.

Writing is a core component of language. We start the writing process in level 1. Of course, the writing is very simple in the beginning. However, simple sentences lead to simple stories and these lead to more difficult stories. To capture the students' interest and creativity, we normally write about things that are fun. German 2 students love it

when their assignment is to create a cartoon that has a moral to it. Each student has to do the written part as well as the drawing part. It is important that students learn that their writing (and therefore their language) has a purpose. Even though their writing is in German, they need to know that an audience will read their words and understand their message. In level 3 we write poems and I am always amazed at what talented students we have. This year for the first time I contacted the teacher in charge of the literary magazine here at Jamestown High School. I am proud to announce that we have about 10 German (I translated each one) poems published in this year's literary magazine. The students need an authentic purpose for writing beyond simply practicing a new verb structure. My students publish their writing in many forms: they use a binding machine to create children's books, they send letters to other German students, and they read their writing to their peers. I believe the opportunity to publish their writing helps my students to find their voice in German, and it is only with that voice that true communication can take place.