

What works is work!

Writing to Support Achievement in the Content Areas

Writing helps students clarify and solidify what they have learned and helps them respond to what they have read. Teacher expectancies supported by the Hanlon, vocabulary, reading and writing are seen as important expectancies because of their connection to language acquisition. Educational researchers have identified vocabulary as the single most important factor that leads to comprehension – student understanding.

Classroom teachers should incorporate a number of writing tasks into their daily instruction. Students might be asked to explain a concept, write a word problem, illustrate a concept, give examples or make lists, describe or define, reflect, justify a solution, write a summary, predict what might occur, and compare or contrast what they are learning. The simple fact is that if our students are not required to write, if they are not given feedback on their writing in the content areas, then our students will not perform well on NAEP – considered to be the nation's report card.

Hanlon has long recommended that tests, quizzes, notes, and homework assignments include writing. In mathematics, which is considered a language by many, vocabulary and notation are seldom tested at the upper grades despite what the research suggests.

As part of the homework, teachers might ask students to write a procedure or explain a concept. During note taking, if something appears out of the ordinary – a trick, students should be given time to write an explanation of what occurred so when they study their notes later, the problem makes sense.

Teachers might ask their students to use concept cards. On one side of the card the students write the basic concept or procedure, on the other side the students explain how they might address a variation in the concept or procedure.

By asking students to write about what they understood about a lesson or what caused them difficulty or confusion, teachers would gain insight into how they might address their own instruction to increase student achievement.

It is important to realize that when Hanlon recommends writing in the content areas, he is doing so to increase student understanding that will result in increased student achievement in that content area. Writing in the content areas will cause students to think, reflect, and organize their thoughts. Writing in the content area is different from teaching students to write. Writing in the content area should not be graded based on grammar, spelling, etc. Writing in the content areas helps teachers understand student thinking – it's another way to monitor student learning and understanding.

Instructional leaders should encourage their teachers to incorporate writing into their daily lessons by making suggestions, recommendations or giving directions and providing helpful feedback on implementation of writing in the content areas.