Writing Across the Curriculum:
A Guide for Administrators

You know writing across the curriculum is important. Here’s how to make it a reality.
Writing Is the Path to Critical Thinking

When you write about a concept – whether it's an argument, an analysis, or a reflection – you work through ideas. You spot the holes. You learn to understand opposing viewpoints. You evaluate how evidence supports a claim.

In short, you practice critical thinking.

The problem is, only about a quarter of both 8th- and 12th-grade students can write proficiently, according to the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. And what's more, as The New York Times points out, "40 percent of those who took the ACT writing exam in the high school class of 2016 lacked the reading and writing skills necessary to complete successfully a college-level English composition class, according to the company's data."

To think critically, to be prepared for the world ahead, and to achieve college success, today's students need regular practice writing. With this guide, you'll learn everything you need to empower your students with the literacy skills that will last a lifetime.

Jobs Are Changing: Students Need High-Level Literacy Skills to Succeed

According to the World Economic Forum, we're approaching a fourth Industrial Revolution, a time when jobs may be rapidly displaced by automated machines.

"I am convinced of one thing," writes Klaus Schwab, the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum. "That in the future, talent, more than capital, will represent the critical factor of production. This will give rise to a job market increasingly segregated into 'low-skill/low-pay' and 'high-skill/high-pay.'"

By 2020, the WEF estimates that the most highly valued skills students will need to succeed in the workforce are:

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity

These are the kinds of skills that students should be developing in collaborative classrooms, where rigorous thinking, effective
Speaking, listening, and writing are all the focus of instruction.

“Workers of the future will spend more time on activities that machines are less capable of, such as managing people, applying expertise, and communicating with others,” McKinsey Global Institute reports. “The skills and capabilities required will also shift, requiring more social and emotional skills and more advanced cognitive capabilities, such as logical reasoning and creativity.”

Regular writing practice can help students attain these 21st-century skills.

As Dr. Ronald T. Kellogg of St. Louis University notes, highly skilled writers are “able to maintain and manipulate in working memory representations of the author’s ideas, the text itself, and the prospective reader’s interpretation of the text.” They anticipate how their ideas might be perceived by others and account for multiple perspectives. Thus, highly skilled writers exercise problem-solving and critical thinking throughout the writing process.

With technology driving dramatic shifts away from low- and medium-skilled jobs, today’s students urgently need high-level literacy skills to help them access economic opportunities in the Information Age.

Civic Readiness Also Requires Critical Thinking

In addition to workplace preparedness, for students to succeed in life, they must be able to evaluate information with a critical lens. These days, anyone with access to the Internet can distribute information, regardless of whether it’s accurate or not. Today’s students have access to that information, but they don’t necessarily have the skills to assess it.

Newspapers of record are no longer the only gatekeepers of news. Blogs, forums, and social media accounts can dispense stories, theories, and opinions without hesitation or the fact-checking resources of prominent newspapers. Even when corrections are issued, inaccuracies often travel far wider than corrections.

As the RAND Corporation states, “Disagreement over facts appears to be greater than ever. Opinions are crowding out and overwhelming facts in the media, and Americans are placing less faith in institutions that were once trusted sources of information.”

Even on reputable news sites, advertisements
Writing Across the Curriculum Guide

Writing Across the Curriculum

Throughout their lives, students will be asked to solve problems, analyze information, think critically, and communicate their ideas effectively about myriad topics. In order for students to develop these skills, writing needs to be taught and practiced across disciplines.

In fact, decades of research from the University of Chicago confirms that reading and writing five or more times per month across subjects helps students become college- and career-ready.

However, chances are that not every teacher is as accustomed to developing students’ reading and writing skills as your English teachers are. Therefore, as a school or district leader, it’s essential that you understand – as well as communicate – the why and the how behind a writing across the curriculum initiative. When the right processes, pedagogy, and professional learning are put in place by a visionary leader, every teacher can truly become a literacy teacher.

Strategies to Implement a Writing Across the Curriculum Initiative

It’s one thing to believe in the benefits of a writing across the curriculum (WAC) initiative. It’s another to make it happen in your school or district. For instructional leaders looking to make writing instruction a priority, here’s how to successfully plan, implement, and iterate on a school- or district-wide literacy initiative:

Empathize with Concerns & Provide Support

The first step towards implementing a successful WAC initiative is to understand and address the potential unease your team may have with writing.
When it comes to a cross-curricular writing initiative, administrators must empathize with the fact that many non-ELA teachers do not have significant training in writing instruction. Asking them to shift their practice is akin to asking a 15-year English language arts teacher to suddenly bring quadratic equations into their lessons. They might feel like the rug’s been pulled out from under them.

Instructional leaders must therefore make it clear to teachers that it’s okay if the initiative feels like a challenge. In many ways, it is. However, there are ways to collaborate across teams to make these instructional shifts doable by any teacher.

What’s more, teachers need to feel supported in addition to feeling heard. When Georgia’s Fayette County Schools implemented a WAC initiative across its five middle schools in 2015, they set the expectation that every teacher, regardless of content area, needed to view themselves as a literacy teacher. But they didn’t stop there.

To make sure teachers felt supported and comfortable, the Fayette team held regular PDs throughout the year in literacy best practices, as well as in the tools they were asking teachers to use. As such, teachers were committed, informed, and prepared, which translated to student growth on assessments at the end of the year.

In many cases, a crash course in argumentative writing may be required as part of the launch plan, with discipline-specific writing workshops to follow. Be sure to build in the professional learning time required to support your team with teaching and evaluating writing. Remember none of the teachers in today’s classrooms have the lived experience of new standards and assessments to draw from in their teaching. Devoting time to improving teacher writing will pay dividends in professional learning about how to teach writing to students.

Set Clear Goals

Integrating writing across the curriculum requires a comprehensive strategy that includes relevant and tangible next steps for everyone involved. Once teams feel heard and supported, it’s important to communicate and reinforce expectations through clear and measurable goals. Get started by taking a page out of Google’s playbook and use the OKRs framework to set ambitious goals for your WAC initiative.

OKRs Vocabulary:

O = Objective
KR = Key Results
First, set an inspiring **Objective** that outlines your vision and sets a purpose for the entire team. Second, map out three to five **Key Results** for measuring your progress on a regular basis. And finally, outline tangible key activities for how your team will get there. Here’s an example of what this could look like in practice:

**Objective**

*What’s the purpose of the initiative?*

Launch a rigorous WAC initiative that empowers every student to succeed in a world where critical literacy skills will put them on the path to success.

**Key Results**

*What qualitative metrics will give you insights into overall progress?*

1. X% of students on track to complete 10 significant pieces of writing across subjects by the end of the school year
2. X% of students meeting growth goals on baseline writing assessments
3. X% of students proficient at writing claims, as measured by baseline writing assessments
4. X% of teachers incorporating writing into instruction

**Key Activities**

*What action items will your team put into place to achieve your objective?*

1. All teachers receive PD on writing instruction best practices at the beginning, middle, and end of year
2. Every student completes beginning, middle, and end-of-year baseline writing assessments (conducted and graded by ELA teachers)
3. ELA teachers complete two writing units by end of the first semester
4. Social studies, science, and math teachers complete one writing unit by end of the first semester

By using a framework like OKRs, not only are you communicating why you believe in your WAC initiative, you are communicating how everyone can support it. Change won’t happen overnight, but dedication over the long term will help convince your team to invest in your plan and view it as a lasting implementation. Many teachers face "initiative fatigue." Being clear about your strategy and goals will ensure that this isn’t another idea that only lasts a year.

**Use a Common Framework**

Traditional learning happens in silos, with ELA, social studies, science, and math teachers
often speaking different languages — to one another as well as students. As such, one of the bigger challenges instructional leaders face when implementing a WAC initiative is getting everyone on the same page.

By implementing a unified, shared language for teaching writing across disciplines, colleagues can collaborate more easily around instruction and improving individual student performance. Furthermore, it creates consistency for students by reinforcing the same literacy skills and concepts across content areas.

ThinkCERCA’s recommended literacy framework, CERCA, provides students with a research-based approach for engaging in the writing process – no matter the discipline. With CERCA, writers learn how to:

- State their Claim
- Support their claim with Evidence
- Explain their Reasoning by linking the evidence to the claim
- Address Counterarguments
- Use Audience-appropriate language

With the CERCA Framework, a thesis in ELA and a solution in math would both be referred to as a claim.

The clarity and organization of CERCA can also help teachers make the instructional shift of bringing writing into their practice. When students, teachers, and administrators use the same words and framework to discuss writing, everyone can collaborate on the process with ease.

**Emphasize the Importance of Feedback**

In order for a WAC initiative to have real, lasting results, students need specific, actionable feedback to improve their writing. They need to know if their argument was compelling, whether they organized their thoughts effectively, and how they can clarify their writing for the next piece. Without teacher feedback, students may write again and again without learning how to improve.

Finding the time to provide personalized feedback for every student, however, is no simple task. But given the benefits of feedback – a review of research by John Hattie shows that, among possible factors, feedback from a teacher is the most effective influence on student achievement – it’s essential to find ways to incorporate regular feedback into your writing initiative.

Luckily, feedback can take many forms. Here are some ways your team can create
environments that promote rapid teacher feedback.

Ideas:

- **Speed Conferencing** - Teachers can deliver rapid feedback during the drafting process via short, one-on-one conferences with students. During this time, the rest of the class rotates through an activity.

- **Grows & Glows** - On a student’s piece of writing, teachers can quickly describe “one grow” (something to work on) and “one glow” (something the student did well).

- **Free Grammar Tools** – Free resources like Grammarly can be used to provide real-time feedback and instruction on mechanics and conventions, so teachers can focus on giving content- and organizational-specific feedback to students.

- **Peer Feedback** - Ask teachers to make use of peer-to-peer editing to improve student writing. Note, feedback from peers is effective only when the students are well-trained, have very specific guidance, and are given feedback on their feedback.

Devote Time to Discussion and Debate

For any writing initiative to be successful, it must include engaging discourse as well. Discussion and debate help students to clarify their thoughts, consider alternative perspectives, and engage more thoroughly with a lesson.

Deanna Kuhn, a Columbia professor and leading expert on critical thinking, writes that “conversation has a naturalness and, most of all, a purpose that essay writing cannot match. Hence, serious, focused discourse can serve as a bridge between talking and writing” in the classroom.

When students discuss their ideas – whether one-on-one with peers, in small groups, or as a whole-group discussion – they can hone their thoughts by engaging with alternative points of view.

For students learning English, discussion and debate also provide a verbal entry point to grapple with the course material. As you implement a WAC initiative, make sure that students regularly discuss their ideas with peers prior to writing formal arguments.
Make Team Collaboration a Central Focus

To ensure students regularly write across disciplines, it’s critical that your team supports each other and holds one another accountable for progress.

Before the school year begins, take your established goals one step further by partnering with lead teachers on an implementation schedule that fits into everyone’s instructional plans.

It’s also important to set aside time for cross-curricular collaboration throughout the year via PLCs or dedicated planning meetings so teachers can align on topics, share resources, and discuss and reflect upon shared materials. When teachers work together to plan out activities and lessons across content areas, they share the burden of creating materials, which saves everyone time.

In regards to holding each other accountable, start by making measurement a priority and share out results regularly with your team. During the goal-setting process, establish a plan for measuring writing results against your goals for the beginning, middle, and end-of-school year. As you start to share your results (as well as learnings from the field), all stakeholders will have a view into what’s working/not working. Writing progress can be visible to learners and teachers sometimes faster than in any other academic area, so it’s important to celebrate this growth early and often.

Seeing Results

The impact writing can have on students’ cognitive abilities cannot be understated. Not only can a well-thought-out writing across the curriculum initiative help students develop the necessary critical thinking skills to prepare them for the future, it can help them succeed on today’s rigorous assessments.

In fact, instructional leaders all across the country are seeing positive results by implementing thoughtful WAC programs across their schools and districts. Here are just a few examples of how writing across disciplines can transform learning:

Adopting a District-Wide Initiative and Seeing Double-digit Growth

After Farmington Municipal Schools in New Mexico implemented a district-wide literacy initiative across all its middle schools (in partnership with ThinkCERCA), ELA
proficiency for those middle school students increased 13 percentage points on the PARCC assessment in just two years.

By summer of 2017, New Mexico’s education secretary noted that Farmington had become one of the highest-performing school districts in the state.

As described in a case study of Farmington’s results, third-party researchers “found a statistically significant connection between students who received feedback on their writing and an increase in PARCC writing subtest scores.”

The Impact of Regularly Writing, Discussing, and Defending Ideas on ACT Scores

A research report compiled by the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research examined ACT scores of students at three high schools and found that literacy instruction – like writing and defending ideas across subjects – impacted students’ achievement on multiple assessments.

The researchers write that “students who reported writing five or more papers, across all of their classes, in which they defended their point of view or their ideas had significantly higher English scores than other students with similar backgrounds.”

Furthermore, the study states that:

“Science subject test scores were particularly high in classrooms where students regularly used evidence to support an argument or hypothesis and found information from graphs and tables—skills directly tested on the ACT. Reading subject test scores were particularly high in classrooms where students regularly debated the meaning of a reading, and math subject test scores were particularly high in classrooms where students discussed solutions to problems with other students.”

Making the Largest Gains in Massachusetts

ASCD author Mike Schmoker writes about how a writing curriculum helped the formerly lowest-performing high school in Massachusetts advance into the top 10 percent of Massachusetts schools in a matter of five years.

The school’s principal “specified weekly and end-of-unit writing assignments grounded in content in every discipline,” Schmoker writes. After just one year of focusing on writing across subjects, the high school “made the
largest gains in the state on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System in every tested subject.”

Becoming California’s Top-Achieving Majority-Minority High School

As detailed in Educational Leadership, View Park High School in Los Angeles adopted a writing across the curriculum initiative that was guided by an inspiring objective (“by graduation, every student will be able to write a 500-word sustained argument free of mechanical error, reflecting his or her ability to reason”). The initiative was supported with classroom discussion, essential questions, and regular feedback on argumentation.

This approach produced strong results for the students in the district. After implementing the writing curriculum, the high school (which is more than 95% African American) “had the highest test scores among African American high school students in California.”

Getting Started

In today’s increasingly complex and ever-changing world, the ability to write well is the difference between being empowered and being powerless.

As outlined in this guide, writing helps students to sort through ideas, analyze complex concepts, and articulate their thoughts. It also prepares them for a world in which they will need strong critical thinking skills in order to succeed.

Students are only in school for a short time and society is changing faster than the systems that serve them. There’s no time to waste when it comes to preparing students with the literacy skills that will last a lifetime.

By implementing a writing across the curriculum initiative across your school or district, you can unify your team around the commitment to a deeper level of learning and improve the life trajectories of your students in the process.

Our team of former teachers, administrators, and literacy experts has spent years helping schools and districts successfully adopt literacy initiatives. If you’re ready to take the next step towards personalizing literacy for your community, please get in touch. We believe that writing is the path to critical thinking, and we’re here to make your literacy vision a reality. Contact us at thinkcerca.com/contact.