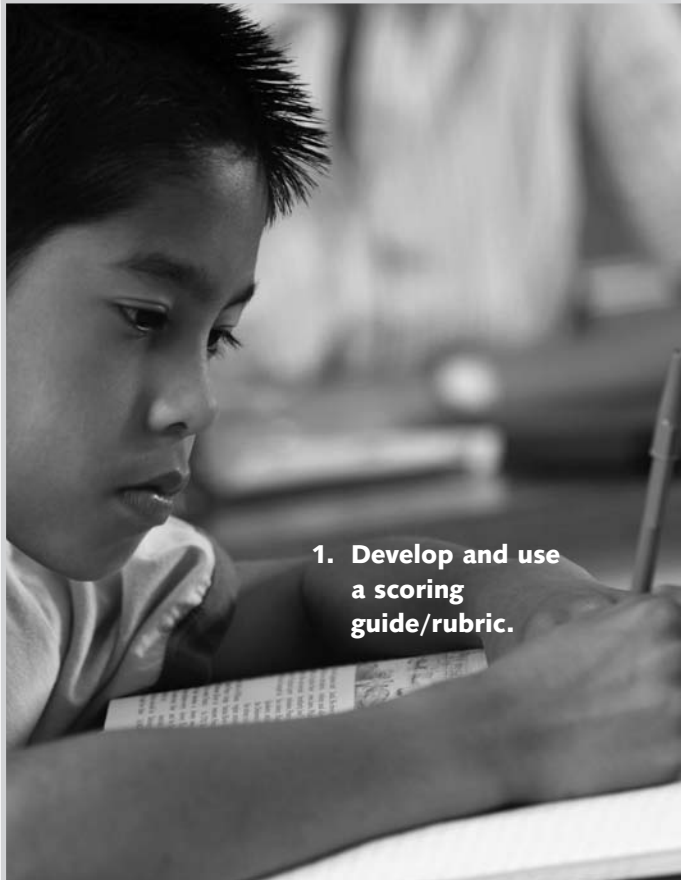


4 KEYS TO LOOKING AT STUDENT WRITING



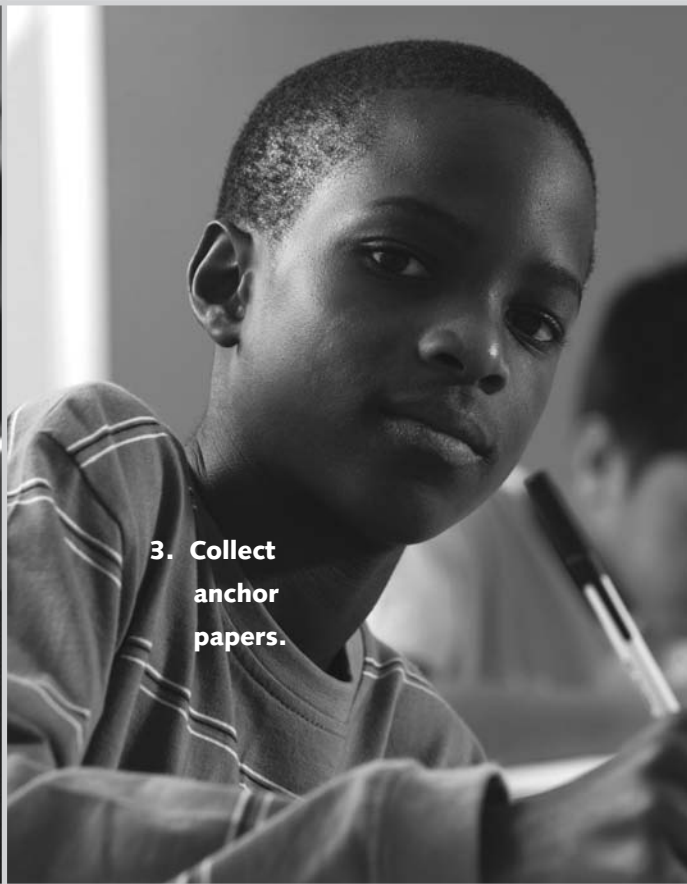
1. Develop and use a scoring guide/rubric.



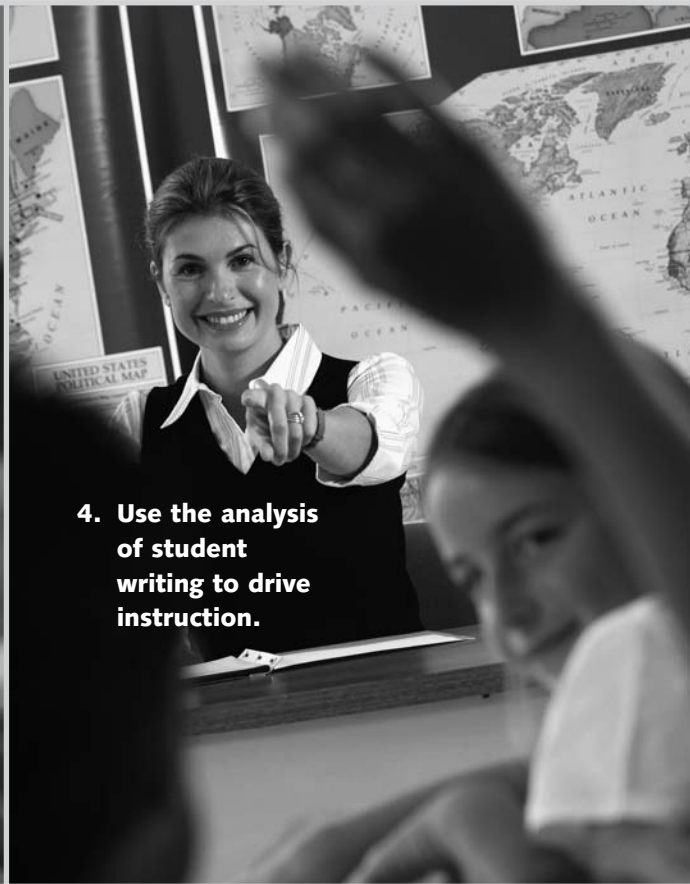
2. Collaborate with colleagues to analyze student writing.

# STUDENT WORK

DRIVES HIGH-QUALITY  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



**3. Collect anchor papers.**



**4. Use the analysis of student writing to drive instruction.**

BY JULIE BLAINE AND MARCIA HASKIN

Most elementary school teachers have taken at most a two-hour composition class in college focusing on their own writing, not on how to teach it (Urquhart & McIver, 2005, p. 4). The key to helping teachers teach writing is to embed professional learning in their real work with students and students' writing. The Central Regional Professional Development Center (CRPDC) uses a process that encompasses the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development, with an in-depth focus on being data-driven, collaborative, and evaluative.

A district or school typically contacts the center when

it has received poor scores on the Missouri Assessment Program test. Since Missouri's state assessment includes items that require students to write text-based responses to questions, the writing process has increased in importance and urgency throughout the state. In work with more than 72 school districts in Missouri, staff from the center have found that many of the low-performing districts have not adopted the full scope of the state writing standards in their work, and many teachers do not have a background in how to teach writing or how to assess more than the mechanics of what students have written. As the CRPDC works with the teachers, the teachers not only learn specific instructional strategies, but

**The key to helping teachers teach writing is to embed professional learning in their real work with students and students' writing.**

also to understand the full range of student knowledge and skills that are needed for students to be proficient writers.

**GETTING STARTED**

The first step in working to improve writing is to collect any available data. One source of external data is the annual Missouri Assessment Program, derived from the writing performance event. Other sources of data can be common assessments and prewriting samples. In most cases, CRPDC staff introduce the concept of prewriting data collection to teachers to illustrate the power of value-added data collection.

To help set the stage for the work, the professional development facilitator spends substantial time talking with the building principal. During these conversations, the facilitator and principal discuss how to introduce the professional learning effort, the existing level of trust in the building, creating time to meet collaboratively during the day, and expectations of participating teachers — which includes bringing class sets of student writing

**The first step is to collect any available data.**

around common prompts for any targeted grade level.

The first challenge is carving out a block of time each month for grade-level teams to meet. For a few districts, finding common time is relatively easy as released time is built into the teaching schedule. However, for most districts without regularly scheduled released time, the most effective means to allow grade-level teachers to meet has been to provide substitute teachers so that teachers

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Student name or number	Homeroom teacher	Teacher A	Teacher B
Student 1			
Student 2			
Student 3			
Student 4			
Student 5			

**CREATING A BLIND SCORE**

- Teacher A “blind scores” in the far right column.
- Then Teacher A folds the column under and passes the student papers and the scoring sheet to Teacher B.
- After Teacher B scores the writing samples, the scoring sheet and student papers are returned to the students’ classroom teacher (homeroom teacher).
- The homeroom teacher then scores her own students’ papers while the prior scores remain concealed.
- The process is: score, fold, and pass.

have time to collaborate. Districts have used building-based professional development funds or grant money to pay substitutes. In a few cases, districts have paid teachers stipends for extended learning time.

If a building makes the commitment to improve student writing, then teachers are given an assignment before their first session — to have their students write to a prompt that reflects their curriculum. Each grade may choose its own prompt, but everyone at a common grade level must write to the same prompt.

Professional developers next work with teachers from one or two grade levels at a time, during the school day, in monthly blocks of 1½ to two hours. This ensures that all teachers participate in standards-based profes-

sional development designed to create a common vocabulary, level of understanding, and curriculum expectations. This critical schoolwide knowledge base also creates continuity so students experience common expectations from teachers. Over time, this consistency extends to every grade level in the building, which helps to increase teachers’ understanding of high-quality student writing. This, in turn, helps families understand the goals and increases their ability to work with their children on writing.

Since the CRPDC works with many teachers who do not know the facilitator, the first time CRPDC staff meet with a grade-level team of teachers, the teachers’ typical reaction is to explain why they do not have writing samples from all their students, why the writing is not as good as it should be, or how “low” their students are. The staff developer must use coaching strategies, such as clarifying questions and drawing on teachers’ knowledge of high-quality instruction, to carefully build trust.

This assurance is reinforced when teachers realize that the center's copies of student writing have no teacher identifier information.

Once trust is established, teachers have the option of using the state's scoring guide for writing or creating (or using) their own. Many teachers are unsure of grade-level proficiencies in writing and opt to use the state scoring guide or a CRPDC variation refined to specific grade-level needs, which still reflects the six-traits writ-

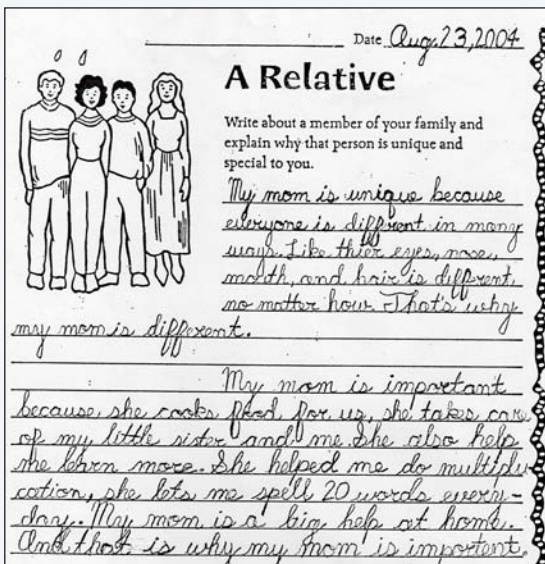
ing standards that are embedded in the state scoring guide.

#### **USING THE SCORING PROTOCOL**

The scoring protocol uses a system that the center calls a "blind score," in which multiple teachers from a grade level score a class set of writing. Each teacher scores each paper in the set before unveiling others' results, using a scoring sheet (see box on p. 24). The paper is folded accordion-style after each teacher

scores that set of papers. As the teacher passes the scoring sheet to the next scorer, the next teacher is unable to see the prior teacher's scores, which are now folded under. This folding occurs after each teacher scores the set, with the final scorer being the homeroom teacher. A minimum of two, but preferably three, teachers score each class set. Teachers are allowed up to 1½ hours for this activity. Many times, teachers don't have time to score the entire set. However,

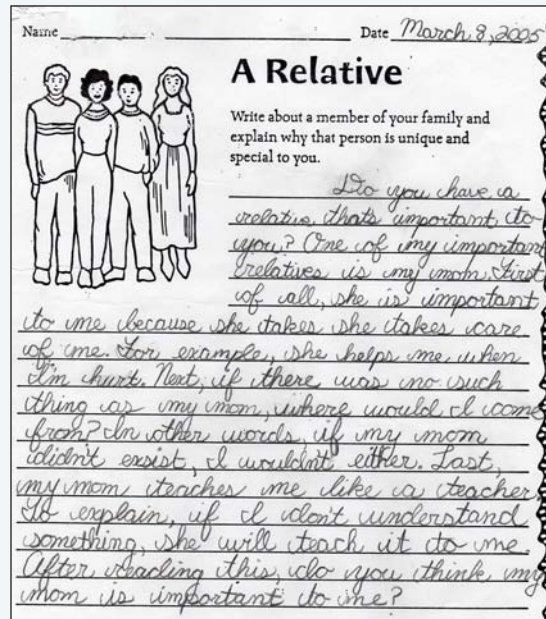
HOW TO COMPARE WRITING SAMPLES



WRITING SAMPLE FROM AUGUST

- Using the state writing scoring guide on p. 24, assess this writing sample.
- What score did you give it? Would you consider this "proficient" writing? Why or why not? Reference specific scoring guide standards and citations from the student response in your rationale.
- Now, take the writing sample and the scoring protocol and have a colleague score the same writing sample.
- As a team, discuss the strengths and weaknesses and decide what writing skill should be the focus of instruction for this student and work with your colleague to collaboratively plan the instructional lesson.

Source: "September journal jump starts," p. 7 from *Daily Writing Prompts*. © Frank Schaffer Publications.



WRITING SAMPLE FROM MARCH

- Using the scoring guide on p. 24, what score would you give the 3rd-grade student who composed this sample?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses?
- If this was representative of your students' work in March, what would be the next area of writing instruction for your students?
- Do you know how to teach it?

each teacher should score at least half a class set.

**From the state's perspective, proficient is a constant standard. As a result, the initial anchor papers may not exhibit appropriate rigor.**

Once this process is complete, the homeroom teacher unfolds the scoring sheet, and the group immediately can analyze and discuss the results.

**• Baseline data.**

Each homeroom teacher counts the number of students at each level of the scoring guide. This gives each teacher a snap-

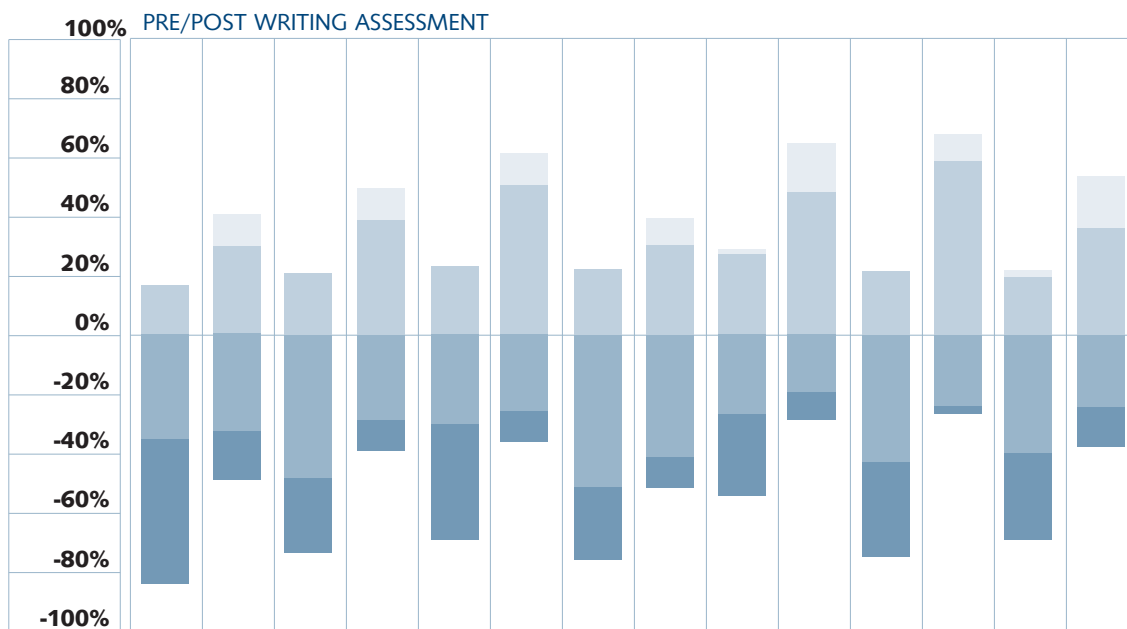
shot of where his/her class is in writing and offers teachers the opportunity to find common strengths and weaknesses in student writing at a grade level.

**• Benchmark anchors.**

Teachers pull out writing samples that received the same score from all scorers. These agreed-upon papers become the benchmarks for that score. A challenge in this process is that teachers want to change the definition of "proficient" depending on the time of year, and so they are more

willing to give papers higher scores earlier in the year, when students have had less instruction. From the state's perspective, proficient is a constant standard. As a result, the initial anchor papers may not exhibit appropriate rigor. An analogy often used in working with teachers is the process of learning to play the piano. When you go to a piano lesson and get a practice book or musical piece to learn, you then practice that piece between lessons — you don't go to a recital right away. But the standard





	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post	pre	post
WRITING TRAIT	BEGINNING/MIDDLE/END	CONTROLLING IDEA	ADDRESSING THE TOPIC	SPECIFIC WORDS	COMPLETE SENTENCES	AWARENESS OF AUDIENCE	GRAMMAR, ETC.							
STEP 1	-51.9%	-19.0%	-30.8%	-10.1%	-41.3%	-13.0%	-25.0%	-10.1%	-35.0%	-10.1%	-34.6%	-4.0%	-32.7%	-16.0%
NEAR PROFICIENT	-30.8%	-39.0%	-48.1%	-29.3%	-35.6%	-26.0%	-51.0%	-42.4%	-33.0%	-22.2%	-43.3%	-26.0%	-42.3%	-26.0%
PROFICIENT	-17.3%	29.0%	20.2%	45.5%	23.1%	50.0%	23.1%	36.4%	30.1%	49.5%	22.1%	58.0%	-20.2%	39.0%
ADVANCED	0.0%	13.0%	1.0%	15.2%	0.0%	11.0%	1.0%	11.1%	1.9%	18.2%	0.0%	12.0%	4.8%	19.0%

for playing the piece proficiently does not change.

• **Significant discrepancies.**

The facilitator leads a discussion about why teachers scored the papers the way they did, modeling writing terminology that can be used in student-teacher discussions. In addition to beginning to analyze teaching through using student work, this discussion also gives the facilitator valuable information about teachers’ knowledge base and assists in planning future sessions.

In the initial session, few teachers mark papers as proficient. Most of the emphasis in the discussion is on areas of student weakness, which in turn serves to drive instruction that targets an area of common need in a grade level. This discussion often leads to the recognition that the teachers do not know how to teach the particular

area identified as a weakness. Teachers make comments such as, “The paper has no organization, but I’m not sure I know how to teach organization!” Teachers know the paper is not proficient, but they don’t have a repertoire of instructional strategies to teach writing skills. This leads to the next stage of professional development.

The hard work for the staff developer/facilitator/coach is done. Teachers have a reason and purpose for meeting in their grade-level teams. From here, professional learning is approached from two levels.

The first enables the professional development facilitator to help teachers collaborate around strategies that they currently use to teach a particular concept — organizational skills, for example. For many teachers, this collaboration is the first time they have shared their expertise in a profes-

sional way around student writing.

In addition, the facilitator shares research and best practices on the writing process, targeting the skill under discussion and providing specific instructional strategies around writing.

At the end of the first session, the teachers develop a common grade-level learning goal that addresses specific writing skills they identified as a need. Before the next monthly collaboration, they will instruct their students in the targeted skill using the strategies they learned and discussed.

They then bring a class set of writing based on a common prompt to the next session. The entire process repeats itself.

**At the end of the first session, the teacher develop a common grade-level learning goal that addresses specific writing skills they identified as a need.**

**EVALUATING THE RESULTS**

Does this model work? Results from Ridgeview Elementary School in the Warrensburg School District, one of the schools the CRPDC has worked with for three years, indicate that the 3rd-grade teachers are gaining expertise in teaching writing with improved student achievement. The 2004-05 results from a local writing assessment highlight this growth. (See Pre/Post Writing Assessment above.) In August 2004, 104 students were assessed. The following March, 100 of those students were assessed. For each writing trait assessed, the percent of students who wrote at the proficient level improved, with an average increase in proficiency of 35% and a range of increases from 23% for “use of specific words” to 48% for “awareness of audience.”

In addition, all students met their adequate yearly progress goals in communication arts on the Missouri

**Teachers involved in this type of data-driven, collaborative, and results-based professional development improve their ability to teach writing.**

Assessment Program exam, as did the single identified subgroup of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

Finally, in comparison to the state,

Ridgeview Elementary 3rd graders were 5.6% above the state average in the top two levels in communications arts and 5.3% below the state average in the bottom two levels.

A more concrete example of the results is a March student writing sample from that same school. (See student samples on p. 26.)

As the CRPDC works with a school over multiple years, the intensity of professional learning increases as teachers focus on specific strategies to address writing skills that target specific subgroups of students, with a high priority on identifying strategies to meet the learning styles and needs of high-need writers and to develop differentiated student writing groups.

**STATE WRITING SCORING GUIDE, GRADE 3**

**4 points** is considered “advanced”

THE PAPER:

- Has an effective beginning, middle, and end;
- Contains a clear controlling idea;
- Clearly addresses the topic and provides specific and relevant details/examples;
- Contains words that are specific, accurate, and suited to the topic;
- Consistently uses complete sentences;
- Clearly shows an awareness of audience and purpose; and
- Contains few errors in grammar/usage, punctuation, capitalization, and/or spelling.

**3 points** is considered “proficient”

THE PAPER:

- Has a beginning, middle, and end;
- Contains a controlling idea;
- Addresses the topic and uses relevant details/examples;
- Contains some words that are specific, accurate, and related to the topic;
- Generally uses complete sentences;
- Shows an awareness of audience and purpose; and
- May contain some errors in grammar/usage, punctuation, capitalization, and/or spelling that are not significantly distracting to the reader.

**2 points**

THE PAPER:

- Has evidence of a beginning, middle, and end;
- Contains a general sense of direction, but may lack focus;
- Generally addresses the topic, but may contain some details that are not relevant;
- Uses words that tend to be repetitive, imprecise, and ordinary;
- Contains some incomplete sentences that may be distracting to the reader;
- Shows some awareness of audience and purpose; and
- Contains errors in grammar/usage, punctuation, capitalization, and/or spelling that may be distracting to the reader.

**1 point**

THE PAPER:

- May lack evidence of a beginning, middle, and/or end;
- Is difficult to follow and/or lacks focus;
- Attempts to address the topic, but lacks development;
- Uses words that are consistently repetitive, dull, and colorless;
- Includes incomplete sentences that are distracting to the reader;
- Shows little or no awareness of audience and purpose; and
- Contains repeated errors in grammar/usage, punctuation, capitalization and/or spelling that may be distracting to the reader.

Source: [www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/curriculum/ModelCurriculum/writingsg3.doc](http://www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/curriculum/ModelCurriculum/writingsg3.doc)

**WHY THIS MODEL IS SUCCESSFUL**

Teachers involved in this type of data-driven, collaborative, and results-based professional development improve their ability to teach writing, and in the process, improve their students' quality of writing. This structure uses:

- Consistent professional development design reflecting the NSDC and Missouri professional development standards;

- Authentic work for teachers that is part of their daily work;
  - Data-driven focus and analysis;
  - Frequent opportunities for teacher collaboration;
  - Common strategies for improving skills that are schoolwide; and
  - Shared commitment for teachers and students to improve over time.
- Evidence of the impact of this effort can be seen by changes in teacher behavior in integrating writing into their instructional practices

and students' improved writing. This impact on writing translates into teachers' belief in their efficacy and student achievement in writing. This is truly what high-quality professional development is all about.

**REFERENCE**

**Urquhart, V. & McIver, M. (2005).** *Teaching writing in the content areas*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD and McREL. ■