

Teaching Writing is Every Teacher's Job

Can your students write complete sentences? Are their sentences grammatically correct and properly punctuated? Do they select the right words to express their ideas and spell them correctly? Can they write well-organized, coherent paragraphs? More important, do they have ideas to express? If not, why not?

Many students do not write well for one or more of these reasons: (1) they have never learned the mechanics of writing; (2) they are not aware that they know anything worth writing about; and (3) they have no particular desire to write.

English teachers work to overcome these impediments to good writing. They teach the mechanics of writing. They make writing assignments and conscientiously evaluate and criticize their students' efforts. Many even try to help students discover what they know to write about and encourage them to do so. For students to retain these writing skills, they must continue to write. The only way to reinforce and further develop writing skills is to write—regularly and frequently.

Teachers of all subjects can give students opportunities to practice writing. Biology teachers are in a particularly good position to do this because much biology content is directly related to the everyday lives of students. Biology applies to human health, environmental issues, and agriculture. Students can use their own experiences to write about familiar biology-related topics; they can be encouraged to do research on and write about less-familiar topics.

In science teaching, we often use so-called objective tests to evaluate our students' knowledge. Using such tests exclusively reflects the view of science as a set of objective facts. Of course, information obtained through objective observation is part of science; but science progresses by experimentation and the communication of experimental results. And these results are communicated in writing. Even when scientific results are reported on television or radio, they are first communicated to the newscaster in writing. Thus, written communication is an important part of science; and teaching students to write about science is an important part of teaching biology. We must give students opportunities to write about science. Furthermore, we should evaluate their efforts, at least in part, on the basis of their ability to write clearly and accurately.

Writing about science poses special problems. To overcome these problems, students should be encouraged to follow these suggestions: (1) define all scientific terms the first time they are used; (2) use active, not passive, voice; (3) anticipate questions the reader might have and try to answer them as you write; (4) write vividly—turn facts into images by using forceful verbs and strong nouns; and (5) offer examples to illustrate ideas.

Some biology teachers will balk at the suggestion that they should teach writing. They will say that they hardly have time to cover the objective facts of biology, they certainly have no time to grade essay questions, and it is not their business to teach writing. Were I to meet such a teacher, I would simply remind him/her that we all have the time to do what we are convinced is important.

If we believe writing is important, we will have our students write. We will find ways to do this. We might have our students criticize one another's writing; though they might not be experts at writing, our students can point out to each other where writing is not clear. We might also work with English teachers to arrange for our students to write essays or themes on biology; their efforts could then be evaluated by the biology teacher for scientific content and by the English teacher for writing quality. (English teachers might appreciate having some ideas for the content of writing assignments.) We might also consider enlisting the services of parents or advanced students as readers.

If you share my view that teaching writing is every teacher's job, you will do your share of the task. Could you start now to plan writing assignments for the fall.

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Editor