

Formal Writing, Reconsidered.

A position:

Comprehensive formal language study

prepares students to write correctly.

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1. We must focus on formal, academic writing. There are many genres of writing, but they are not equally important for students to master. Formal academic writing—to be used for tests, essays, and research papers in high school and college—is essential.
2. The difficulties students have with formal writing do not spring exclusively from the writing process; they are also a symptom of the fact that students may not know the elements of correct grammar, may not have formal academic vocabularies, may not be conversant with the techniques of sound that we associate with poetry but use in prose, and may not have a literature experience that would expose them to effective amounts of serious, standard English.
3. Many writing models attempt to teach writing in isolation, using complex, multi-staged models. The more complete (complicated) a model is, the less likely it is to be internalized or have a permanent, beneficial effect on student writing.
4. Trendy approaches should be shunned in favor of teaching students the classical knowledge of grammar and essay structure that is the common language of writing in academia, in editorial rooms, and in publishing contexts.
5. The serious development of formal academic writing ability requires a total writing strategy both in the classroom and in the entire school system. It means an emphasis on formal academic essays about formal academic topics. It means research papers prepared according to a national standard (MLA is recommended).
6. The idea that errors in student writing should not be corrected must be rejected.
7. A systematic implementation of instruction in traditional grammar must be established. Four-level analysis is recommended.
8. A program of direct instruction in highly academic vocabulary is necessary, including a strong foundation of Latin and Greek stems. This stratum of vocabulary cannot be acquired through literature.

9. Students should receive a thorough grounding in the elements of poetry because though these techniques are common in great prose, they are not learned through prose; they are learned from a study of poetry. Students must learn how to notice and control the sounds of language, both in prose and poetry.

10. A writing program is unlikely to rise above its concomitant reading program. Students should be continually involved in a powerful literature program of fiction and nonfiction classics, and texts that have strong vocabularies and standard English should be emphasized. Several strong texts per year are not sufficient to provide the necessary level of exposure to powerful writing.

11. The formal academic research paper is the most valuable assignment available in teaching students to write academically. It clarifies the expectations of the academic world at large, and causes students to apply complexes of grammar, vocabulary, essay form, and academic knowledge. One such assignment per year is insufficient; this is a process that demands multiple attempts. The grading should exhibit the same standard as the paper itself. Standard proofreaders' marks should be used by all teachers. School systems should commit to one national standard, and implement it consistently across the grade levels and disciplines. MLA is recommended.

12. Correct academic writing is in many ways an end-talent. It implies correct grammar, intellectual vocabulary, clear paragraphs, exact essay form, and an approved approach to quotation and bibliography. These elements, as well as a massive exposure to standard English in literature, can only come from school. Student will not be exposed to them in today's profoundly informal culture.

13. A school-system-wide commitment to teaching correct, formal, academic writing can be extremely successful, but the solution does not lie solely in a writing program. It requires a comprehensive commitment to formal language study.