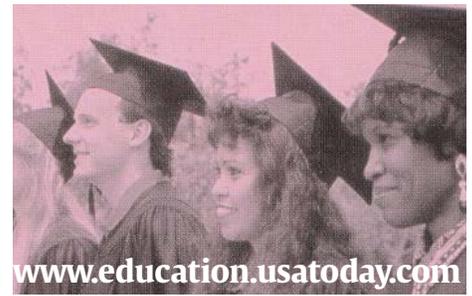


**K-12
Case
Study**



www.education.usatoday.com

'Yo, can u plz help me write English?'

By Steve Friess

.....2-3

Debate: Improving Education

Elevate writing instruction

vs.

Tests rob writing time

.....4-5

Student extensions

.....6-8

Corresponding National Standards

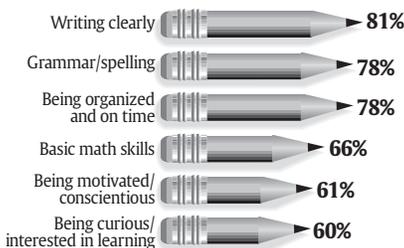
NL-ENG.K-12.5: Communication Skills
— Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

NL-ENG.K-12.7: Evaluating Data — Students conduct research. . .gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose. . .

USA TODAY Snapshots®

Much to learn, professors say

College professors who give recent high school graduates 'poor' or 'fair' ratings on:



Source: Reality Check 2001 by Public Agenda and Education Week

By Cindy Hall and Quin Tian, USA TODAY

Most students still can't write respectably

By Gregg Toppo
USA TODAY

You wake up one morning and there are clouds on your breakfast plate.

You look out the window and see stars littering the streets.

Write a story, called "The Very Unusual Day," about what happens. You have 25 minutes.

Faced with that task, fewer than one in five fourth-graders could write a respectable story, says a study released Thursday by the federal government.

Though U.S. students' writing has improved modestly in the past four years, few write well: Only one in four 12th-graders and fewer than one in three fourth- and eighth-graders can write stories or essays proficiently, says the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as "the nation's report card."

The trend mirrors the scores of NAEP math, reading and history tests in the past several years, in

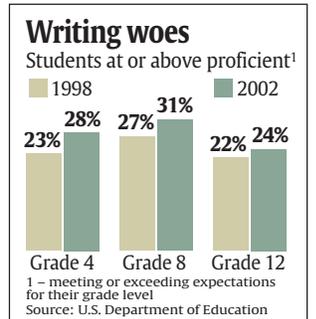
which students posted modest gains but demonstrated fairly low skills overall.

The test usually is administered every four years in a variety of subjects. The last time students took the writing test, slightly fewer rated "proficient," or showing solid academic performance. The 2002 test also shows that a few more students scored "basic" or better, meaning they were at least able to make a point in writing.

Education Secretary Rod Paige noted that schools "have to find creative ways to encourage our high school seniors," whose results haven't changed since 1998. Although the highest-scoring seniors did noticeably better than in 1998, the lowest scorers scored much lower.

The scores also showed that girls wrote better than boys at every grade level.

There were a few bright spots: In both fourth and eighth grade, low-income students scored higher, on average, than in 1998; 12th-graders scored about the same. In all three



By Quin Tian, USA TODAY

grades, however, the gaps in performance between low-income students and others "remained substantial."

Also, younger black and Hispanic students' average scores rose in 2002; those of minority 12th-graders either dropped or remained unchanged.

Education expert Gerald Bracey of George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., says the test's proficiency levels have been rejected by many researchers as setting expectations that are too high. He also criticizes the way standardized writing tests are graded. They are "scored by \$7-an-hour temps who spend, at most, 30 seconds on an essay," he says.

AS SEEN IN USA TODAY LIFE SECTION, TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2003, 8D

Education & Health

'Yo, can u plz help me write English?'

Parents fear online chatting ruins kids' language skills

By Steve Friess
Special for USA TODAY

Carl Sharp knew there was a problem when he spotted his 15-year-old son's summer job application: "i want 2 b a counselor because i love 2 work with kids."

That night, the father in Phoenix removed the AOL Instant Messenger program from the family computer and informed both his children they were no longer to chat with friends online.

"That shorthand comes from talking on the Internet, and it's unacceptable," Sharp says. "I never thought I'd be encouraging my kids to talk on the telephone, but I realized that the constant chatting on the Internet was destroying their ability to write properly."

Parents such as Sharp — and many educators — are becoming increasingly alarmed by the effect of Internet communication on the writing skills of U.S. teens, who spend an average of 12 hours a week online, according to an America Online survey. Much of that time is spent exchanging "instant messages" with software offered by AOL, Yahoo and MSN. This informal instant communication lends itself to linguistic shortcuts, shoddy grammar and inappropriate or absent punctuation.

Though the shortcuts may have a place in instant messaging, they become troubling when they creep into schoolwork and other formal writing, experts say. The lingo now infiltrates every part of youth culture; teen pop star Avril Lavigne spells the title of one of her biggest hits "Sk&r boi."

English instructor Cindy Glover, who last year taught a section of freshman composition at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, says she spent a lot of time unteaching Internet-speak. "My students were trying to communicate fairly academic, scholarly thoughts, but some of them didn't seem to know it's 'y-o-u,' not 'u,'" Glover says. "I wanted to

teach them to communicate persuasively, but I couldn't get past the really horrific spelling or grammar."

Writer David Samson of Beverly Hills, Calif., notices the same problem. Teenage fans of his humor books e-mail him and show little regard for formality. He cites one note: "yo mr dave can u plz write me a funny speech about any animal cause i need it for school."

"They seem to avoid every rule I was ever taught about how to get a response from anybody, especially an adult," says Samson, 51, author of a dozen books including *Men Who Hate Themselves* and *the Women Who Agree With Them*.

"E-mail has brought an undue familiarity. People use words like 'yo' and 'hey dude' that are perfectly appropriate for peers but not for professional communications."



By Anne Ryan, USA TODAY

"They don't want to hear it": Margie Johnson says she tries to help granddaughters Bryanna, 11, left, and Bailey Cross, 12, with their writing.

But many scholars say the problem isn't that kids are developing an alternate form of the language; it's that some don't keep in mind when it's inappropriate.

"It's not that there's never a place for this sort of thing, but it's the difference between how you would dress to go out on Saturday night versus how you dress when you do yardwork," says Leila Christenberry, former president of the National Council of Teachers of English and an English education

AS SEEN IN USA TODAY LIFE SECTION, TUESDAY, APRIL 1, 2003, 8D

professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. "Quick bursts of very insider phrases and words do fit the electronic format in some ways."

thinking the same way in school as I would online," she says. "If I'm thinking that way in school, I'm going to misspell words."

Samson says. "Every time, without fail, I've gotten back a 'thank you' and I've found those words spelled correctly in future discussions."



By Anne Ryan, USA TODAY

Tough love: Some say barring instant messaging is extreme.

Online lingo may even have roots in other languages, says communications professor Robert Schrag of North Carolina State University in Raleigh. The absence of vowels, for example, is similar to how Hebrew is usually written, he says. And the use of "emoticons" — punctuation sequences such as :-) that create smiley faces and the like to convey emotion — are a form of the pictographic characters used in Asian languages.

But Bill Doak of Las Vegas sees little value in it. He has barred his daughter, Ashley, 12, from online chatting. She grudgingly concedes that her father has a point.

"It might hurt me because I might be

"We use (a different) language structure watching a basketball game than in our place of worship. Most children will understand the difference."

— Robert Schrag, communications professor

Many linguistic experts say Doak's and Sharp's approach is extreme. Internet communication will become only more prevalent in the future, and many see the surge in written communication among youth as a positive development after years in which letter-writing seemed a dying form.

"We have always implicitly taught our children different language structures and how they function in different arenas," Schrag says. "We use (a different) language structure watching a basketball game than in our place of worship. Most children will understand the difference."

Samson says he tries to model proper language usage for his nephews and godchildren when he chats with them online and gently corrects them when necessary. "Sometimes I'll actually copy an instant-message conversation into a separate file and I'll underline misspelled words or incorrect grammar and send an e-mail a day later listing corrections,"

But Margie Johnson of St. Charles, Ill., doesn't feel so appreciated by her grandchildren.

"I take pains when I help them with their homework to say, 'This may be what you say online, but it's not what your teacher wants to see,'" Johnson says. "They groan and say, 'OK, Grandma,' but they really don't want to hear it."

Adults should set a good example

Advice for adults who e-mail or chat online with children:

- ▶ Use proper grammar, punctuation and spelling in all online communication with children, even if they don't.
- ▶ Find ways to correct the child gently without seeming preachy.
- ▶ Remind children that formality is required when writing school essays or job applications.
- ▶ Review the child's schoolwork to make sure Internet lingo is not being used.
- ▶ Send old-fashioned letters to children from time to time to show them how printed communication ought to be written.

AS SEEN IN USA TODAY NEWS SECTION, WEDNESDAY, MAY 7, 2003, 10A

Debate: Improving education

Elevate writing instruction

Our view:

Too many students can't compose thoughts, hindering future success

At the University of Maryland's College of Journalism, Kathy McAdams teaches the Grammar Slammer, a writing boot camp for smart students who make dumb writing errors. Consider one sentence turned in by an aspiring journalist: "Drinking beer and sleeping is the important thing in his life."

Many of her students were bright enough to qualify for "gifted and talented" programs in high school. Even so, their teachers failed to drill them in basic grammar rules — such as subject-verb agreement. Instead, they passed them along to concentrate on students with bigger problems. The result: Writing errors were passed along, too.

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges documented the result of this neglect last month. On federal writing tests, only one of four students ranked as "proficient." Colleges and corporate leaders complain about the poor writing they see. About 17% of college freshmen require remedial writing classes: College officials say writing tops the list of the \$1 billion a year they spend on remedial courses.

The reasons behind the weak writing skills are obvious. Most fourth-graders spend fewer than three hours a week writing — just 15% of what they spend watching TV, according to the report. About 75% of high school seniors never are asked to write papers in history and social studies classes.

Several solutions are required:

“Teachers say they're too busy preparing students for state standards to add writing instruction. But state tests are no excuse.”

► **Teach teachers to write.** Only a few states require would-be teachers to take a writing class. That means many teachers are weak writers.

► **Increase writing time.** Teachers in core subjects such as history, math and science could increase the amount of time students spend developing writing skills by increasing their written assignments.

► **Set high-quality standards.** Currently, 49 states have education standards, and 37 of them include a writing assessment. But experts who reviewed those standards said that fewer than a handful are adequate. Two states doing a good job are Kentucky and Washington.

► **Test college-bound students.** High school teachers now have few motives to teach writing skills. That may change. When current high school freshmen apply to college, their SAT admissions test will require a writing sample. The ACT admissions test will offer an optional writing test.

Teachers say they're too busy preparing students for state standards to add writing instruction. But state tests are no excuse.

Kentucky sets rigorous educational standards and backs them up with elaborate testing. The state also makes writing a priority, offering all teachers training on how to fold writing exercises into instruction.

Writing is the medium through which knowledge is expressed and shared. That's the same knowledge students need to communicate effectively on state tests — and in life beyond high school.

AS SEEN IN USA TODAY NEWS SECTION, WEDNESDAY, MAY 7, 2003, 10A

Debate: Improving education

Tests rob writing time

Opposing view:

Teachers don't have time to help students develop writing skills.

By Kathy Greeley

I have been teaching writing to middle school students for 20 years, and I applaud the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges' call for a "writing revolution." I agree with former senator Bob Kerrey (who will lead the writing campaign) that "we must learn to write in order to participate in the range of experiences available to us as human beings," including "our spiritual lives, our economic success and our social networks," and that "neither our democracy nor our personal freedoms will survive unless we as citizens take the time and make the effort needed to learn how to write."

Students become good writers when they: 1) write every day, 2) write about topics and issues they care about, 3) receive meaningful responses to their writing, 4) feel ownership over their writing, and 5) expect to make their writing public. Just like "real" writers, good student writers expect to go through multiple drafts before they think they are "done."

Good writing takes time. Unfortunately, time is a precious commodity in schools these days. Most teachers I know feel

"Good writing takes time. Unfortunately, time is a precious commodity in schools these days."

tremendous pressure to "cover" their curriculum as we careen down the path of high-stakes testing and rigid curriculum frameworks. When you are expected to cover 5,000 years of world history (as we are in one year of the Massachusetts social studies frameworks), what teacher is going to take class time to write a poem, a story or personal narrative, much less go through multiple drafts of one piece? Increasingly, schools tend to focus on what is being tested, especially when the tests are high stakes.

If we want to improve student writing, won't high-stakes testing provide the appropriate "stick" to prod teachers to teach writing skills and students to learn them? On the contrary. When the motivation is to meet the criteria of standardized tests, instruction is often rigid and formulaic, hardly contributing to the conditions it takes to inspire real high-quality writing.

If we want students to write well, if we want students to read well, indeed, if we want students to think well, we need to rethink this national trend toward standardized curriculum and testing, and give the kids the time to do the real work.

Kathy Greeley taught middle school in Cambridge, Mass., for 18 years and now works as the middle school program developer for Cambridge schools.

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING: Brainstorming

Overview

In addition to free writing, there are several ways that students can “warm up” to more complex activities. Brainstorming and webbing — sometimes called mapping or clustering — are ways for students to organize their thoughts before they put pencil to paper (or fingers to keyboard!).

Activities

✔ **Brain Trust:** Brainstorming is an excellent technique for problem-solving and idea development that should involve a spontaneous contribution from every member of the class. Some guidelines for a good brainstorming session:

- ▶ Select a topic or goal. For example, the goal of the session might be to choose an issue of concern to students for consideration as a USA TODAY editorial.
- ▶ Have students take a few minutes to jot down some ideas of their own. It will be important for each student to have more than one idea in case it is mentioned by another member of the class.
- ▶ As you or a student leader compile a list on the chalkboard, ask each class member to contribute his or her ideas. Students should not evaluate or comment on others’ ideas until everyone has had a chance to speak.
- ▶ When everyone has offered their ideas, accept others at random. At this point, students may debate which topics are most important to them.
- ▶ Ask each student to narrow the list by choosing the five best topics and writing them on a piece of paper. Tally the lists and rank the topics in order of number of votes. A tie can be broken by a show of hands once the topic is narrowed to two choices.

Bonus: Have a class member write a letter to the editor of USA TODAY suggesting the students’ topics for an upcoming editorial. Ask the student to explain to the editor the steps the class took to arrive at the topic.

✔ **Spinning the Web:** Webbing — often referred to as mapping or clustering — is a way to help writers organize their thoughts and elaborate on main ideas and issues. It can also help students put an abstract idea into a more concrete

Skill

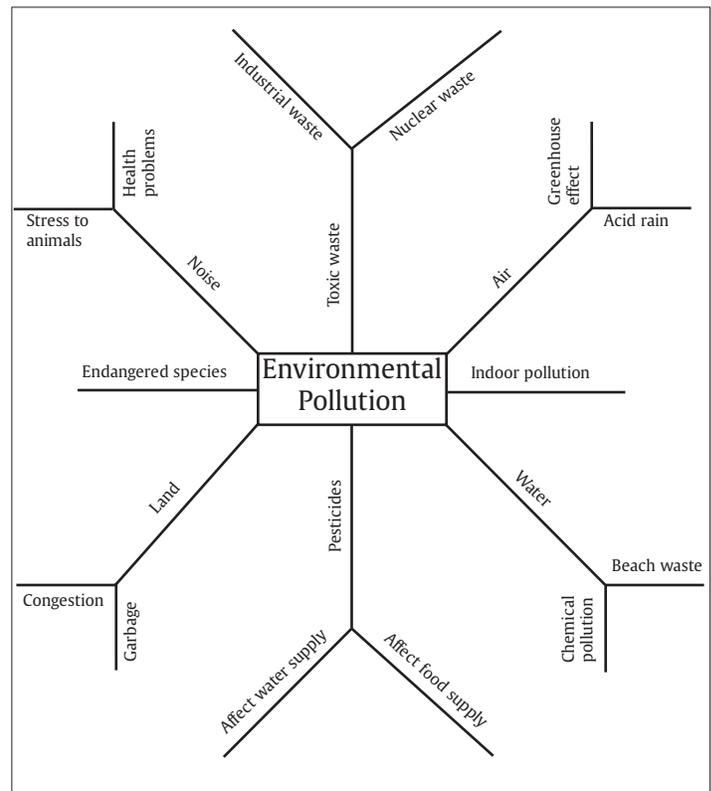
Thinking:

Focus

Focusing, information-gathering, evaluating

Writing:

Content- and idea-building, linguistic choices



form. Explain to students the importance of organizing information in preparation for writing. Using the example that follows, explain the form and purpose of a web. The example takes a main idea — environmental pollution — and breaks it down into four concepts: land, water, air and noise.

✔ **Branching Out:** The activity sheet gives students practice in the use of webs to organize thoughts and ideas. Depending on the needs of your students, let them choose a main idea to begin the web or assign one yourself. The editorial topic that came out of the brainstorming session in the activity above would be a good place to start. You may need to draw additional lines on the web to guide the thinking of younger students.

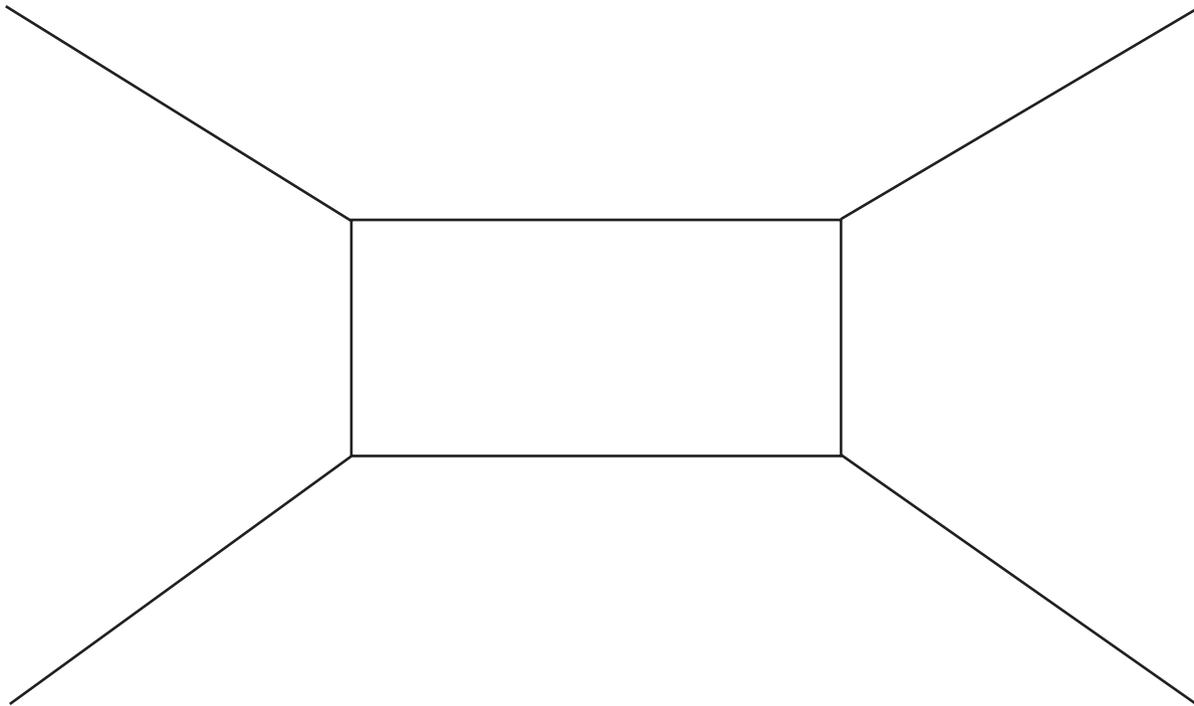
STUDENT EXTENSION: Branching Out

Name: _____

Date: _____

DIRECTIONS: As you have learned, a web is a graphic organizer that writers can use to organize their thoughts and ideas in preparation for writing. Fill in the rectangle below with a main idea that appears on today's Editorial or Forum pages. Use that topic to begin writing a news story or feature for USA

TODAY. The four lines extending from the rectangles corners can be used to expand on your main idea. From those lines, use as many additional lines as you need to fully develop your writing topic. Refer to the sample web if you need help getting started.



STUDENT EXTENSION: Analyzing an editorial

Name: _____

Date: _____

DIRECTIONS: Editorials – just like news stories and features – require research and interviews. Readers are not likely to be persuaded by your opinion if you haven't carefully gathered facts to support it. Read Today's Debate on the editorial page of USA TODAY. In the space provided

below, summarize the stance expressed by one side of the debate. In the rectangular spaces on the left-hand side, list three of the opinions you find in the piece. In the spaces on the right-hand side, record the facts that the writer presents to support those opinions.

Main Idea of editorial or opposing view

Opinions

Supporting facts

Did the editorial writer convince you that her/his opinion is the right one? Why or why not? _____

Finally, write a well-thought out response in favor of or opposed to the editorial. Use a separate sheet of paper.