

# The Research Base of the Collins Writing Program

## ***Research/Evidence-Based Education***

No Child Left Behind requires that instructional programs be grounded in research and best practice methodology. The Collins Writing Program has been used successfully over the last twenty years by schools from Kindergarten to grade twelve, and has been effective with all types of students—special education, typical learners, gifted and talented, and English as a second language. The success of the program can be traced to its core elements: using Cumulative Writing Folders, oral reading, focus correcting, and using past papers to teach new skills. Collins publications have thoroughly documented the knowledge base on which these elements are based (Collins, 1988).

The *Nation's Report Card on Writing*, conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), provides statistical data on student writing achievement. Their analysis also looks at a wide variety of factors that influence student achievement, including instructional practices. Both the 1998 and 2002 NAEP reports reaffirmed key aspects of the Collins Writing Program as having significant positive affect on student writing achievement:

- frequent informal writing about thoughts and observations
- writing across the curriculum regularly
- planning and organizing ideas before writing
- keeping compositions in a cumulative writing portfolio

## ***Meta-analysis on Writing***

The Collins Writing Program is designed to use the methods and instructional focuses that comprehensive research shows have the greatest positive effect on writing improvement. In *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, Marzano, et al, point to the meta-analysis of writing research done by George Hillocks as the best guide to classroom writing instruction. Hillocks reviewed nearly 2,000 studies to determine “what works” in teaching writing. Unlike individual studies, which sometimes yield dramatic but narrow findings, a meta-analysis reviews a large body of research to identify significant statistical trends. Hillocks’ work provides research-based guidance both for *approaches* and for *instructional focuses* on the teaching of writing.

## ***Approaches to Writing Instruction***

Since the hundreds of writing studies examined by Hillocks varied in method, he categorized them into four basic approaches—presentation, natural process, skills, and focused practice. The following is a brief description of each of the approaches and the relative effect sizes of each.

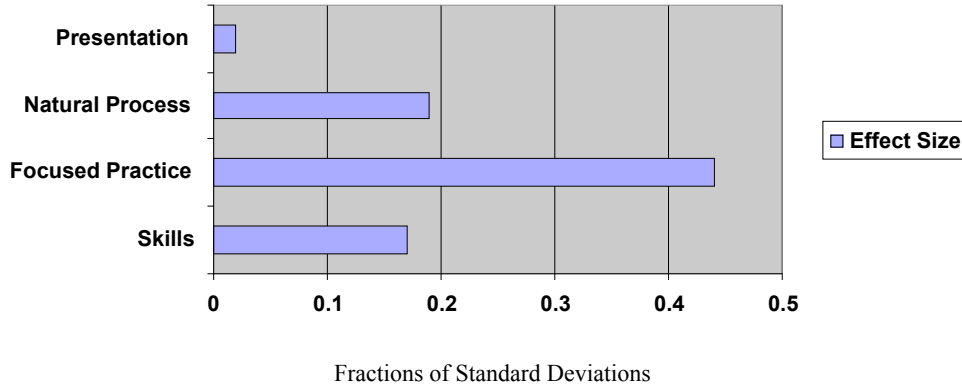
*Presentation*: teacher discusses and shows examples of good writing

*Natural Process*: teacher stresses free-writing, usually with student-selected topics

*Focused Practice*: teacher structures writing experiences to apply and practice specific writing skills

*Skills*: teacher isolates and practices component parts of writing

## Effect Sizes of Various Approaches to Writing

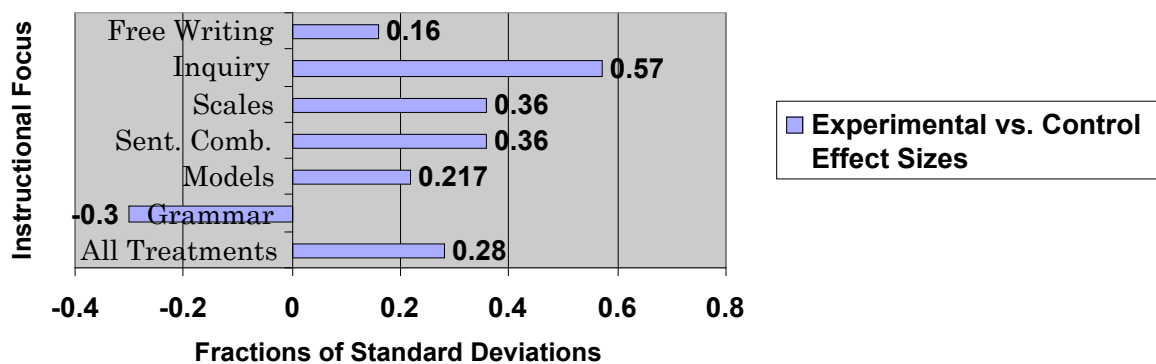


The Collins Writing Program, with its emphasis on *frequency*, *focus*, and *feedback*, falls into Hillocks' Focused Practice approach. A major tenet of the Collins approach is frequent writing in a variety of teaching and learning situations that "practice specific writing skills" called focus correction areas. This includes informal writing done in the context of in-class discussions and activities as well as formal compositions. All of these writing experiences have a clear instructional focus with explicit criteria. In all forms and types of writing, students receive feedback on the criteria, or focus correction areas (Collins, 1992; Chadwell, 1999).

### *Focus of Writing Instruction*

Hillocks' work also categorized the instructional focus of various treatments. His purpose was to determine the types of instruction that have the greatest impact on writing improvement. Hillocks identified six broad classifications of instructional emphasis: grammar, models, sentence combining, scales, inquiry, and free writing. Studies were classified in the categories, not because they had a singular instructional focus, but because a major portion of time was devoted to the strategy. Below is a summary of how each instructional strategy affected writing gains as compared to control groups.

## Focus of Writing Instruction Effect Sizes



The Collins Writing Program makes significant use of the four highest impact instructional approaches.

*Models:* Hillocks found that presenting and discussing examples of good writing had significantly more impact than the teaching of grammar.

In the Collins Writing Program teachers make frequent use of authentic student writing models. Use of the Cumulative Writing Folders (and the Primary Cumulative Writing Folder in the lower elementary grades) encourages students to use past writing examples to develop and refine skills. An essential strategy described in Collins literature and stressed in training sessions is the Three-Step Process in which the teacher uses past student writing to clarify and calibrate students' understanding of writing goals (Collins, 1997; Chadwell, 1999).

*Scales:* When students have explicit criteria to guide their writing, Hillocks found that writing was improved significantly. He also found that students tend to internalize these criteria in less structured writing tasks, as well.

The cornerstone of the Collins Writing Program is focus correcting. In this strategy, the teacher clarifies explicitly for students up to three critical criteria for a composition assignment. Those three focus correction areas become the focus of the teacher's instruction, modeling, demonstrations, and assessment. With focus correcting, students make more progress in writing by focusing on a few critical elements of writing at a time.

*Sentence Combining:* Showing students how to build more complex sentences from simpler ones has been demonstrated to be effective in enhancing student writing.

Teachers are encouraged in the Collins Writing Program to limit their mechanical focus correction areas to only one per assignment. In doing so, an appropriate emphasis can be placed on the content, organizational, and stylistic features of writing. Varying sentence lengths, in particular, is emphasized in Collins program materials, especially in the writing projects books used by teachers to design meaningful writing assignments.<sup>□</sup> Showing students how to use sentence combining and other techniques for expanding their simple sentences is a prominent part of Collins training.

*Inquiry:* Structuring writing experiences by guiding students to record, describe, hypothesize, and analyze sets of data has been identified as the most powerful instructional focus.

Hillocks is careful to clarify that by "inquiry" he does not mean "discovery learning" where students are presented a task and set free to work through it on their own. Instead he describes learning tasks structured to help students generate and organize ideas, analyze data, anticipate opposing arguments to their own, or assume different points of view for problem solving. Hillocks found that engaging students in these ways affected their planning which in turn had a positive impact on their writing products.

The Collins Writing Program stresses that effective writing begins with effective writing assignments. Challenging, well-constructed assignments can lead students to successful writing. Assignments in the Collins Program are organized around seven elements: purpose, audience, form, writer's perspective, focus correction areas, procedures (the prewriting activities), and summary. These are referred to as the essential elements of Great Writing Assignments. All Collins publications feature model Great Writing Assignments that pose authentic writing problems for students, involve them in structured planning activities, and ensure interaction with peers. One of the most powerful and popular aspects of Collins Writing Program training

---

<sup>□</sup> Collins Education Associates has published a series of books that have meaningful writing assignments for writing across the curriculum: *Writing Strategies for the Primary Grades (K-3)*; *Writing Projects for the Elementary Grades (Grades 3-6)*; *Middle School Writing Projects*; *High School Writing Projects*; *Writing About Literature (high school)*; *A Survivor's Guide to the Research Paper*; and *Summarizing, Persuading, and Preparing for the SAT*

involves teachers in designing their own content-specific Great Writing Assignments. Teacher feedback is consistent with Hillocks' findings: These structured writing experiences yield improved student writing.

• • •

The Collins Writing Program is used by thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools around the country. Its success over the last sixteen years is due to its solid, best-practice methodology, the kind that research shows makes the greatest impact on students.

## Works Cited

Chadwell, Gary B. *Developing an Effective Writing Program for the Elementary Grades*. Collins Education Associates, 1999.

Collins, John J. *Developing Writing and Thinking Skills Across the Curriculum*. Collins Education Associates, 1992.

Collins, John J. *Implementing the Cumulative Writing Folder Program*. Collins Education Associates, 1988.

Collins, John J. *Selecting and Teaching Focus Correction Areas: A Planning Guide*. Collins Education Associates, 1997.

Hillocks, George, Jr. "Synthesis of Research on Teaching Writing." *Educational Leadership*, May 1987: 71-82.

Marzano, Robert J., Debra J. Peckering, and Jane E. Pollock. *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.

National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. *The Nation's Report Card: Writing Highlights 2002* [Online]. Available: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/getdata.asp>