

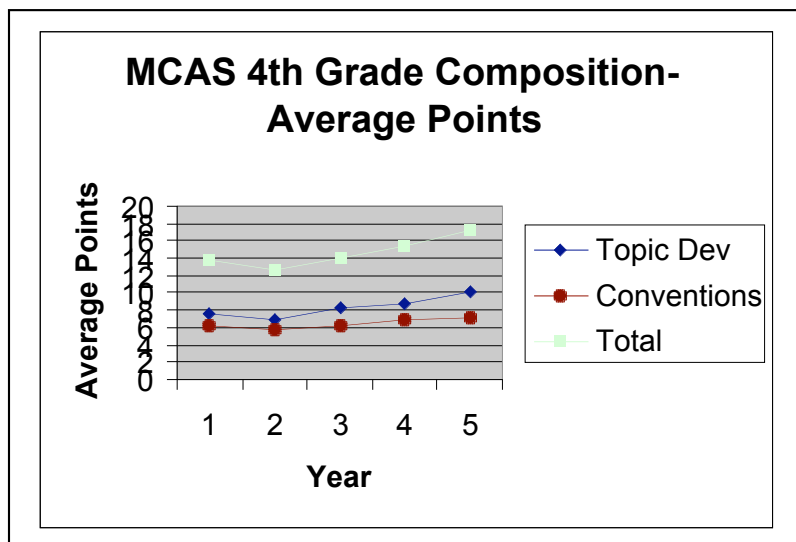
## Writing Across the Curriculum: Does it help? (also known as the John Collins approach)

Beginning in 1999, the Estabrook faculty set the goal of improving student writing based on our own observations of student writing as well as standardized test results. During the first year we joined with the Bridge and Fiske schools who had similar goals to examine student writing and identify common areas of strength and weaknesses. The three schools were joined by Harrington as we applied for and received a grant from the Lexington Education Foundation to act on what we had learned. During the 2000-2001 school year, the grant funded professional development in Writing Across the Curriculum, an approach designed to help children develop fluency and quality in writing. The approach can be used with any other writing program or approach used by a teacher, including Writer's Workshop. The following year we received a second LEF grant to follow up. During both years we engaged in lectures, observation and model teaching using the approach. (NOTE: Videotapes of the model lessons and lectures are now available for new teachers and training has now been offered for teachers at all Lexington elementary schools.) During the 2003-4 school year we have been solidifying our use of the approach. (For a description of the approach, see the end of this article.)

So, how successful have our efforts been? We look to a variety of sources for information. One is teacher observation of student writing. Overall, Estabrook teachers report that our students write more often that they did in the past and that they are much more comfortable writing (that is, they are becoming fluent).

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A second type of data are our All-School Writing Samples, which all students complete on an assigned prompt 2-3 times a year. We have been collecting and scoring these using the state scoring rubric during the past two years. Teachers review and score these compositions,



and I make it a yearly task to read at least one piece of writing completed by each Estabrook's children. These results show an overall increase in the quantity of writing (a certain amount of writing is essential for sufficient topic development, say 1 -2 pages at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level). We found some variability between students and classes in terms of the length of

writing as well in terms of topic development (organization, details, voice, etc.) The area where most Estabrook students seem to be fairly strong is Conventions (capitalization, punctuation, grammar, etc.).

A third measure is the writing component of the MCAS, both the written composition for grade 4 and the open response questions in all subject areas for grades 3-5. These results have shown a steady increase for the past several years. (Keep in mind that the scores compare one group of children to another rather than one group's progress one year to the next.)

*Last year our students' average score (out of 12 possible) was 8.7; this year it was 10.1!*

Of particular note is our students' improvement in topic development, which includes things like overall organization of the piece, a main idea with supporting details, voice, and rich vocabulary usage. In 2002, our 4<sup>th</sup> grade students' average score (out of 12 possible) was 8.7. Last year, in 2003, it was 10.1. Sixty nine children scored 10, 11, or 12 points, and overall, even the lowest scores now appear to be what our middle scores were in earlier years. It is risky to assume that any one year's results have significance, since groups of children vary greatly. However, the trend indicates that overall students have been doing better for three years.

Another area we can examine is our students' answers to "open response" questions. These questions, which are asked in all subject areas, including math and science, require students to explain their thinking and reasoning in writing. Again, our students have shown improvement over the last several years. In previous years, many children did not attempt to answer these questions or gave a minimal response that earned only 1 or 2 points out of a total of 4. Many students now receive 2, 3 or 4 points.

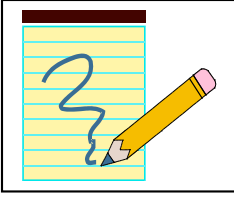
So given our successes, are we ready to say the goal is accomplished and move on?

We certainly have lots to be proud of. However, we continue to look at our data to understand where we can improve. Recent federal legislation (No Child Left Behind) requires the disaggregation of test data by race, predominant language, special education status, and socioeconomic status. When looked at this way, we see that Estabrook's trend is similar to that of schools across the country and state.

Overall African American students, those who speak predominantly another language, disabled students and those of lower socioeconomic status score significantly lower than other students in our school. Our next challenge is the find ways to help these children improve their writing while simultaneously continuing help all children improve.

I am proud of Estabrook's teachers for their commitment to continuously updating their teaching practices and in particular, for the work they have done and will continue to do to improve students' writing.

For those of you who are new to the school or who may need a refresher on the Writing Across the curriculum approach, following is a summary.

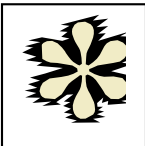


## **Quick Writes–Type 1 and 2 Writing**

Teachers ask children to do **Type 1 or 2 “quick writes”** on a daily basis in any area of the curriculum. These short pieces of writing are focused on the child’s thoughts or ideas rather than composition and revision. The goal of a quick write is for children to learn that they can get their thinking down on paper, thus developing writing fluency. Teachers use these short pieces of writing to determine children’s prior knowledge before teacher, to get a quick measure of what they have learned (a quiz) and to understand children’s thinking and feelings. Another benefit of quick writes as a strategy is that ALL children are required to respond, thus improving student engagement in learning. Students and teachers who talk about writing in science journals, writer’s notebooks or learning logs are likely engaging in quick writes.

The primary difference between a Type 1 and 2 piece is whether or not there is a correct answer.

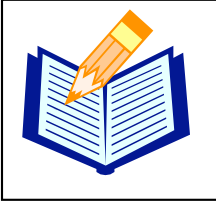
- **Type 1** writing does NOT have a correct answer. This might be a students’ response to a piece of literature or a students’ prediction of what will happen in a science experiment. The criteria for success is that the student answered the question, worked diligently during the writing time, and/or answered using at least the minimum number of items, words, or lines.
- **Type 2** writing DOES have a correct answer (essentially, a mini-quiz). For example, a student may be asked to explain why a particular mathematical principal works or list the causes of the Revolutionary War. The criteria for success is whether the child answered correctly or not.



### **Hints for parents when reviewing a child’s quick writing at home.**

- Do NOT feel the need to become very involved, except to ensure that the child has done the task.
- If the child has not done the task, DO ask the child what the question was that he or she was responding to. DO focus on the content of the writing and engage the child in discussion about his or her thoughts or ideas.
- If the child is asked to do a quick write at home, DO ask the child to read his or her response aloud and to make corrections.
- Do NOT find the errors yourself or insist that it be perfect. DO remember that the teacher wants to know what the CHILD knows.
- DO remember that a quick write is supposed to be *quick!* Don’t make it into a major production.

Teachers do not generally take these quick writes home to grade. They simply look over the child’s shoulder and give a quick look, perhaps putting a check on the child’s paper.



## Compositions–Type 3-5 Writing

The second type of writing is more **akin the traditional composition** (but with twist). In **Types 3-5 writing**, students write a piece that may be on a pre-assigned topic or something of the child's choosing. Typically students might complete 2-4 Type 3-5 pieces in a month following a writing process that involves prewriting activities, writing, and revision. As students write they are expected to tend particularly to up to three **“focus correction areas” (FCAs)** identified by the teacher. These areas vary by grade level and might include things like: using a catchy lead, varying sentence type, following the form of the genre being taught; including a beginning, middle, and end, or using correct punctuation. Teachers may select focus correct areas based on the grade level expectations and their assessment of the current needs of the class, however a individual student may also be assigned a particular FCA. Educators have found that in asking a child to focus his or her writing, the child knows what is required to succeed and is able to do so.

Many of us may have received compositions covered with red ink in which errors of all types were highlighted. We have found that children 1) tend to be overwhelmed with this amount of correction, and 2) are not learning to take responsibility for finding their own errors—the teachers are doing all the work. Using the FCA method, children can clearly check to see whether they have met the criteria and teachers can quickly give feedback. Often the teacher provides direct instruction and modeling about a particular strategy in a “mini-lesson” and then assigns it as an FCA. An FCA may be assigned multiple times until the children have mastered it. Once the teacher judges that the students are routinely uses that FCA, it may be put on a “No Excuse” FCA list, and the students are expected to use the strategy in all writing in the future.

The difference between a Type 3, 4, or 5 piece is related to the number of reviews and revisions given to the piece during the writing process.

- In a **Type 3**, the student is expected to proofread and revise his or her own work.
- In addition, **Type 4** pieces may be edited by a peer with a subsequent revision.
- A **Type 5** piece is a **“publishable”** piece of work that is as close to error free as possible. This type of writing is very time consuming and generally involves multiple revisions and the editorial assistance of the teacher or another adult. Examples of Type 5 writing might be bound books in the primary grades and formal written reports or published pieces of fiction in the intermediate grades. Since Type 5 pieces are labor intensive, a student will likely complete a limited number of Type 5 pieces during a school year.

Especially with Type 4 and 5 pieces, a teacher may engage in one or more conferences with a child, focusing on the child's individual goals and next steps in the writing process.



### **Hints for parents when reviewing a child's composition (Type 3-5 writing)**

- DO ask the child what the focus correction areas were for the piece (normally listed at the top left of the page) and whether she or he followed them.
- DO ask the child to read the piece *aloud* at least once and make corrections, especially related to the focus correction areas.
- DO comment on the focus correction areas that were successfully implemented. DO ask questions to help the child take the next step. For example, “I see two reasons here. How many reasons are you supposed to include?”
- Do NOT correct all items yourself and ask the child to copy your corrections—children do not learn to find errors independently using this process. If your child is having difficulty finding errors, DO provide developmentally appropriate support. For example, for a younger child, you might say “I see one word that needs a capital on this line, can you find it?” With an older child, you might say, “I see four misspelled words. Can you find them?”
- DO have the child practice using the dictionary, but if there are lots of spelling errors, do NOT ask the child to look every single one up—the child may likely begin using words that are easier to spell (but less rich vocabulary).