Ideas for Preparing Students for Upcoming Writing SOLs

Secondary teachers are busy preparing students for upcoming SOL tests, including the 8th grade and EOC writing tests at the end of March 2017.

To support teachers and administrators in this process, we are publishing a series of “Teacher Tips” focusing on key SOL achievement areas and “high-yield strategies.”

The ideas included in this first volume focus on ways all teachers—especially those in Language Arts—can enhance student performance in using the writing process. They will also revisit key reading comprehension strategies that current data suggest should be addressed.

The writing process should emphasize students’ active involvement in writing as a tool for self-expression and communication. The Teacher’s College Writing Project and the Northern VA Writing Project both encourage students to engage in the following stages:

1. **Prewriting:** Students initially respond to the writing prompt via brainstorming, free-writing, and journaling.

2. **Drafting:** They generate the first version of their response, using a rubric or scoring guide to guide their writing.

3. **Peer Review and Conferencing:** Peers and teacher provide criterion-based feedback.

4. **Revision/Editing:** Students use feedback to complete their final draft.

5. **Sharing and Publication:** Students present their final product(s).

The Importance of Genre Instruction

The ACPS writing curriculum focuses upon four key writing genres: (1) descriptive, (2) narrative, (3) expository/informational, and (4) persuasion. Students also write poetry and multi-media presentations at each grade level.

They need support to understand organizational structure. It is important to engage students in discussing the following essential questions:

How do your purpose and audience shape how you organize your ideas?

Finally, all learners benefit from direct instruction and coaching in the use of transitional expressions and other language features.
What Does 2016 SOL Writing Data Tell Us?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Question</th>
<th>% Correct in Division</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporting Category: Research, plan, compose, and revise for a variety of purposes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguish among diverse sources to gather information for a specific purpose.</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revise writing to vary sentence structure by combining sentences.</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguish among sources to gather information for a specific purpose.</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting Category: Edit for correct use of language, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate correct placement of quotation marks with dialogue.</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate correct use of commas with conjunctions.</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit writing to correctly use apostrophes.</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit writing to maintain consistent verb tense across sentences and paragraphs</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate the correct placement of commas with interrupters.</td>
<td>55</td>
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Resources to Address Writing Needs

- **ACPS Genre Chart**: On the Curriculum Blackboard site, you will find a detailed scope and sequence of writing genres aligned with unit transfer tasks. A "how-to" video is also available on the ACPS Professional Learning website.

- **ACPS Literacy Framework**: This comprehensive guide—also available on the Curriculum Blackboard site—provides a detailed overview of the principles, strategies, and recommended techniques for improving student literacy.

- **SOL Toolkits**: Available on the Curriculum Blackboard site, these toolkits are organized by SOL and grade level and provide extensive suggestions and strategies for promoting student achievement in each SOL-tested area, including ideas for integrating literacy in the content areas. Find the Writing Toolkit [here](#): Find links to all toolkits in the SOL Toolkit tab of Blackboard.

- **VDOE Writing Resources** including grammar progressions and sample lessons

- **Teachers College Writing Project** videos and resource

- **Northern Virginia Writing Project** resources

Comparing Perspectives and Sources

A major way in which writing can reinforce student understanding of key content is an emphasis upon two key elements: **comparison of perspectives** and assessing **reliability and validity of sources**.

Students benefit from identifying, analyzing, and comparing differing perspectives and ideas expressed by authors. They also should consider points of view and potential areas of bias in the sources they may use to support their written ideas.

Considerations for evaluating sources include: **What is the expertise of this source?** **To what extent is this source appropriate?** **How can I anticipate counter-arguments to my ideas?**
The Reading and Writing Connection

Reading and writing are powerful tools for promoting learning. Writing can become a catalyst for helping students to process information, retain key concepts and skills, and self-monitor.

1. **Anticipatory Activities:** Framing student learning, including demonstrations, visual displays, and thought-provoking questions.

2. **Vocabulary Instruction:** Helping students to be actively involved in word learning, using context clues, prefixes, and affixes and using words and phrases independently.

3. **Comprehension Strategies:** Modeling and coaching students to make inferences, summarize, self-monitor, analyze text structures, and compare ideas.

4. **Visual Representations:** Helping students to use graphic organizers and a variety of note-taking strategies to decode and store key information.

5. **Reinforcing Standards and Scoring Criteria:** Using a range of writing-based assessments (diagnostic, formative, summative) and clearly articulating scoring criteria to guide student work.

The Power of Questioning

Students benefit from a focus on higher-level—rather than factual-recall—questions. Helping them to understand different types of questions—and using follow-up question probes—can enhance student understanding and engagement.

Students need to learn the "vocabulary" of questions, including: (1) **Application:** How can I use this in new or unique ways? (2) **Analysis:** How can I identify key components and infer causes or motives? (3) **Synthesis:** How can I create a new product using information in an original way? (4) **Evaluation:** How can I make judgments and defend my opinions? What criteria will I use to make judgments?

Once again, students benefit from teachers asking them to give evidence to support their ideas, inferences, and judgments.

**Wait time** is key. Waiting just 3-4 seconds before posing a question and asking for an answer (Wait Time I) and allowing 2-3 seconds after a student responds before giving feedback (Wait Time II) can greatly enhance student engagement and focus.

The Power of Student Discourse and Voice

Great learning requires that students engage in active and sustained speaking and listening tasks.

Teacher-dominated discussion should be balanced against small group and one-on-one interactions that focus on key aspects of narrative, informational, and persuasive text.

Strategies to promote student discourse and analysis include:

1. **Brainstorming**
2. **Think-Pair-Share and Collaborative Pairs**
3. **Socratic Seminars**
4. **Literacy Circles**
5. **Debates**
6. **Small Group Discussions of Essential Questions**
7. **Presentations and Performances**

“Students who struggle to read in middle and high school are a diverse group. Some have learning disabilities, others have motivational issues, and still others have been under-taught... Regardless of their areas of need, remember that adolescents who struggle to read often have complex thoughts based on their understanding of the world. As such, wise teachers remember to activate and build background knowledge with their students knowing that every one of them has lived experiences.”

*Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, Improving Adolescent Literacy*
A Reflective Questionnaire:
What Should We See in a Language-Rich Classroom?

1. **Speaking, Listening, and Student Discourse:** My classroom provides students extensive opportunities to speak, listen actively, summarize and paraphrase, and interact with peers.

2. **Reading Comprehension:** Students have extensive chances to engage in close textual analysis and critique, including text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world interpretations.

3. **Writing:** My students have frequent opportunities to express themselves via both formal and informal writing using the stages of the writing process.

4. **Higher-Level Questioning:** We emphasize application, analysis, synthesis, and interpretation questions throughout the lesson—rather than emphasizing factual-recall questions.

5. **Diagnostic, Formative, and Summative Assessment:** Students play an active role in monitoring their own progress, including using rubrics and scoring criteria to self-assess and adjust their own learning.

6. **Presentations and Performances:** Summative assessments should include student presentations and performances rather than just multiple-choice tests.

7. **Publication and Acknowledgment of Student Work Products:** Bulletin boards, digital products, and other classroom displays dignify student work with students honored as successful writers.

8. **Opportunities for Research:** Students are encouraged to pose and investigate questions of interest to them and use multiple sources to back up claims and assertions.

Writing Across the Content Areas

Writing is a powerful tool for students to express their understanding of content in all program areas. All content area teachers can help students by reinforcing:

1. **Daily Writing:** When students write (both informally and formally) on a daily basis, it becomes a clear part of their skill set.

2. **Clarity of format, audience, topic, and purpose** in formal and informal writing assignments.

3. **Writing for a variety of purposes**, including research and multi-media production work.

4. **Expressing and supporting main ideas** within an essay and/or paragraph response.

5. **Elaboration and development**, including modeling and direct instruction in main ideas, supporting sentences, and use of evidence.

6. **Using a variety of sentence structures and transitional expressions**, varying sentence beginnings and using compound and complex sentences.

7. **Demonstrating effective word choice (diction)**, including attention to audience needs and purpose.