TEACHERS’ WRITING INSTRUCTION
ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES IN GRADES 9 AND 10

by

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Abstract

This study was aimed at addressing the adolescent learners’ writing needs by assessing teachers’ needs on writing instruction across the disciplines in Grades 9 and 10 in one school in Southwestern Ontario. The research employed a mixed-methods approach using qualitative data from focus group and one-on-one interviews, and quantitative data collected through document analysis. The data revealed that there is a range of beliefs about writing instruction and that participating teachers offer many valuable writing opportunities to their students; however, there is a reluctance to provide more instructional time on writing according to the content area. The findings also pointed to the influence school administrators have in leading the instructional program. These findings concur with existing literature on writing instruction and the role principals play in literacy instruction.
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Chapter One - Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

Over the past several years, educators in Ontario have attempted to improve adolescent literacy development in an effort to meet the Ministry of Education’s commitment to reach every student. The government’s plan, found in, Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario, 2008 (MOE, 2008a), describes the vision for education in a system that “energizes” everyone. This document speaks about the ministry’s commitment to working with all partners of education to deliver what it calls an “ambitious agenda” (p. 4). The work of the government since 2008 has been to focus on three core priorities of higher levels of student achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement, and increased public confidence in publicly-funded education.

As Ontario educators strive to meet these goals and to deliver on these priorities, results from provincial test scores indicate that educators are not reaching and meeting the needs of all adolescent learners in literacy development. Results from the 2012 Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) indicate that 82% of first-time eligible students were successful on this single standardized provincial test that is administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), an arm’s-length agency of the government of Ontario. Though OSSLT results are not the only data used to determine learner needs, as a high-stakes test, the OSSLT is important because it is a requirement for secondary school graduation. Yet through the efforts of many educators at all levels, there continues to be a slight decrease in the percentage of successful students since 2009. Examination of the OSSLT data shows a widening gap in success rates between males and females, as well as between students studying at the applied level and those at the academic
level. Secondary courses in the Ontario curriculum are not only organized by discipline and grade, but also by course type, which regularly is referred to as level of study. In Grades 9 and 10, three types of courses are offered to develop students’ knowledge and skills of essential concepts of a subject: academic courses are designed to develop students’ learning through the study of theory and abstract problems; applied courses focus on developing students’ learning through practical and concrete examples; and open courses are designed and intended to broaden students’ learning in subjects that reflect their interests. Unlike applied- and academic-level courses, open-level courses do not have the specific requirements for the educational pathway courses of university preparation, college preparation, or workplace offered in Grades 11 and 12 (MOE, 2011, p. 65). From the OSSLT results, supporting adolescent literacy development of students in the applied-level stream has become part of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s “Adolescent Literacy Strategy” where the belief that educators can reach every student by reaching every teacher has become a focus.

The Necessity of Literacy Skills for School, Work, and Society

Understanding that literacy is constantly evolving requires that students develop sophisticated literacy skills so they are prepared to continue to learn and to adapt in order to contribute to society (Lester, 2000). With changing demands of reading and the rise of mass writing in the workplace, a stronger correlation between education and income can be found in the number of jobs and careers that require higher levels of literacy (Brandt, 2005; Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). To prepare adolescents for success in school and in their careers, students need to understand the types of thinking associated with each discipline. Recent reports (Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009) claim that
professors complain that students are not prepared for the complex thinking that is demanded in post-secondary school. As they prepare students for the next level, high school teachers must ensure that they are concerned with teaching students the cognitive skills rather than over-emphasizing teaching the content. In addition to preparing students for success in school, teaching them how to think for success in the world that has shifted from a manufacturing-based industry to an information-based industry permeated with written texts, is another argument for teaching thinking and writing skills across the content areas (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Reasoning and thinking skills are of more value to students than bits of knowledge that they have learned in isolation without being able to situate the knowledge in a meaningful context. Thus as literacy evolves and demands use of more complex skills, it is educators’ responsibility to ensure that students have the skills to be the writers that they need to be once they leave secondary school (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

**Writing in the Content Areas**

For many teachers of all content areas, the belief exists that students already have the literacy skills to read and write before they arrive in Grade 9, and so responsibility for teaching students to write in secondary school regularly falls exclusively to English teachers. To promote the importance and power of writing in all content areas, understanding subject-specific literacy is crucial. As students encounter more complex and challenging texts across the content areas in Grades 9 and 10, teachers must see their role in supporting their students’ abilities to think, express and reflect (Literacy GAINS, 2012).

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) outline how literacy develops from basic literacy to disciplinary literacy. They refer to basic literacy as the skills, such as decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words, found in most reading tasks. These basic literacy skills
are typically developed during the primary grades. Intermediate literacy follows in the upper elementary grades when students begin to use more sophisticated strategies as they learn to respond to texts that grow in complexity. Then, during middle and high school, students begin to use more specialized skills for reading as increasingly more complex literacy tasks are encountered in the disciplines. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) report that these high-level skills are difficult to learn because they “are rarely taught” (p. 45). By the time students reach secondary school, they have already learned a lot about reading and writing, but there is still more to learn as they are being challenged by disciplinary texts and discourse (Conley, 2008). For adolescents, writing along with reading instruction “should become increasingly disciplinary, reinforcing and supporting student performance with the kinds of texts and interpretive standards that are needed in the various disciplines or subjects” (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008, p. 57).

In the US, a pedagogical movement, writing across the curriculum, was influenced by the research of Emig (1977) and Britton (1975). The writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement began when university instructors who shared the same philosophy that writing instruction should happen in each content area, met to explore ways to help instructors link writing in their courses to learning goals and to help students begin writing. WAC programs in secondary schools followed the university initiative where teacher collaboration across disciplines and academic levels improve both teaching and learning. Though no such formalized program exists in Ontario, a movement is afoot in supporting teachers in all content areas to understand that each discipline has its own unique conventions and structures in thinking and in communicating.
Writing tends to be a preferred form of communication (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009). In many content areas in secondary school, student learning that has been demonstrated through writing determines a significant percentage of the final grade. Without specific instruction on the forms of writing and thinking used in the content area, students are at an unfair advantage. In addition, some traditional forms of writing and thinking do little to prepare and develop these skills for forms of writing and thinking that are necessary in subsequent levels of school and in the workplace. Burroughs & Smagorinsky (2009) strongly dispute some traditions of writing forms that are a “highly codified school genre” (p. 174). The five-paragraph essay, they argue “bears almost no resemblance to the texts produced within disciplinary genres; indeed, it bears almost no relationship to genres found anywhere but in secondary school and some first-year college composition programs” (p. 274). Rather than maintaining traditions of instruction and form, teachers must reflect on their practice and consider other forms that could be used to facilitate students’ development of thought that are necessary for today’s world.

Teaching writing in all content areas is a means to promoting thinking, even if the written product is not traditionally valued in the subject area (Smagorinsky, 1995). Interestingly, while little time is devoted to writing instruction, it is through writing that students demonstrate a significant amount of their learning. In writing in each discipline, Smagorinsky (1995) asserts that the ways of thinking and the forms that are used should be considered “culturally appropriate” for the discipline (p. 173). In other words, each discipline has a language that is peculiar to that discipline and thus favours some forms of writing and thinking (Anders, 2008). Discipline-specific ways of thinking, reading and
writing can help students not only understand the content of the discipline, but also develop advanced literacy skills (Monte-Sano, 2011).

Writing in all content areas is believed to be a solution to complaints from teachers that students are unable to think sufficiently. If teachers in each subject area accept the notion that making meaning of the content is the goal of learning, then the process of writing enables the development of thought, regardless of the content area, and helps to mediate thinking, particularly when knowledge is discipline specific (Anders, 2008; Monte-Sano, 2011). Take as an example, a science class where students write their observations of a demonstration that the teacher has performed. In writing about their observations, students describe the scientific phenomenon and expose their thinking about the relevant concepts. If a demonstration is counterintuitive to a student’s normal experience, the writing about wonderings and questions extends and challenges student thinking (Llewellyn, 2007).

Most people learn how to naturally conduct themselves in familiar cultural situations. While in unfamiliar cultural situations, they need to learn the appropriate behaviour for the different context. Similarly, because each academic discipline has its unique and specialized ways of knowing, thinking, and doing, writing in different content areas requires explicit teaching (Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2009). In response to questions students pose about writing assignments, such as, “What does the teacher want?” the teacher may not be clear in explaining the unique ways of reasoning in the discipline and how they need to be considered when writing. In history, as an example, students are required to use critical thinking and research skills as they think from a historical perspective (MOE, 2005). In the arts, students are required to use creative thinking processes (MOE, 2010b), and in science, students are required to use an inquiry-based approach (MOE, 2008b). These examples provide a
glimpse of different types of thinking that students are expected to practise within each
questions how teachers conceptualize the “ground rules for successful writing” (p. 241).
These different thinking processes, in addition to how to write from these various
perspectives, are part of the ground rules that must be directly and explicitly taught to
students.

Particular writing tasks require and foster particular types of knowledge (Newell,
2008). Langer and Applebee (1987) suggest that teachers need to know about the
components of the disciplines they are teaching. Teachers must be writers in their disciplines
in order to know, understand, and articulate ways of knowing and reasoning in the discipline.
Discipline-specific reasoning might be taught, but teachers must also be overt and explicit in
pointing out this thinking to their students (Newell, 2008). Through the practice of writing,
teachers’ awareness and understanding of how to generate ideas, gather evidence, and
develop effective arguments keeps them in touch with the needs of their learners. Their own
practice of writing also promotes and models self-reflection and the use of metacognition to
enhance their instruction. By knowing the ways of thinking and expressing in content areas
and sharing these with their students, teachers create classroom communities where students
clearly understand the characteristics and expectations of writing in the subject area (Newell,
2008).

**Background of the Study**

In keeping with the MOE’s focus of better addressing the adolescent learner’s needs
by reaching every teacher, this study identifies teachers’ needs in terms of writing
instructional and assessment practices in several Grades 9 and 10 subjects in a secondary school in Southwestern Ontario.

When I began my teaching career as an English teacher in 1990, I am not certain if I really understood the phenomenon of writing and the complexities of teaching writing. A lot of what I did in my practice was intuitive or based on what I recollected from my experiences as a student. I recall a content-area colleague complaining about his students not being able to write an essay in his math course and, in what I interpreted as an accusatory tone, he wanted to know what I, as the students’ English teacher, was teaching our students about writing. From that moment on, I was resolved to make certain my students were receiving effective instruction that would foster their abilities to think and express themselves in writing, not just in my English classroom, but in all courses and in their lives outside of school. I was also determined to help my colleagues understand that they, too, had a role in developing students’ skills in writing as they related to their subject areas.

With time, leadership opportunities arose and so did opportunities for me to grow professionally. Currently, in my role as a provincial literacy lead through the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Literacy GAINS initiative, I have been involved with research and the development of resources on adolescent learning. With the goal of supporting boards to expand and build teaching capacity for adolescent literacy through professional learning, collaborative inquiry, and coaching, I am aware of some of the needs of teachers in supporting adolescent learners. This study will provide me with better insight into teacher needs as I seek ways to support school boards achieve their goal of reaching every student.
**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to analyse the practices and beliefs and to assess the needs of teachers of Grade 9 and 10 career studies, civics, English, French, geography, history, religion, and science when their students are required to think, express and reflect through writing. The following questions guided my research and were used as an organizational framework for data analysis. Each question addresses a specific area related to writing instruction in a general manner in an attempt to better understand and assess teacher efficacy and needs in promoting students’ ability to think, express and reflect through writing in several Grade 9 and 10 subjects. The last research question was added when the topic around the role of administrators arose during interview analysis.

1. What knowledge, beliefs, and practices about writing in their subject area do teachers have and how do teachers facilitate deeper student thinking and learning through student writing?

2. What types of writing tasks are assigned and how do they inform writing instruction?

3. What are participating teachers’ perceptions of how school administrators could and do support them to develop their writing instructional practice?

The research questions reflect the key instructional issues of writing in the subject areas of career studies, civics, English, French, geography, history, religion and science. These subjects were selected because students are regularly asked to write to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of course content. With the Ontario Ministry of Education’s current strategy to improve literacy achievement and close the gap between applied- and academic-level courses, this study helps to bring to light the role that writing
and writing to learn might play in meeting this goal. It is not uncommon for teachers of the previously mentioned subjects to have experience teaching these courses at both the applied- and academic-levels of study, or at the open level, where students are not streamed into a particular level of study, as is the case of the subjects of career studies, civics and religion. For this reason, the study explored participating teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about writing, their perspectives on the role of assessment and their practices in relation to writing instruction at all levels of study in their subject areas.

**Significance of the Study**

In spite of the Ontario Ministry of Education’s focus on subject-area literacy, there are few studies that specifically examine Ontario Grades 9 and 10 content-area teachers’ needs as literacy teachers. Since the inception of the OSSLT, the high-stakes standardized literacy test, several studies have been conducted that report on the impact of the test on students (Van De Wal, 2013), on English language learners (Stock, 2010; Zheng, 2006), and on teacher practice (McWhorter, 2003; Van De Wal, 2013). Van De Wal (2013) explored the impact of failure on the OSSLT and students’ subsequent enrolment in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course. Her findings provide a starting point for educators to develop and deliver effective strategies, supports, and services that would benefit all adolescent learners. My study extends the research from Van De Wal’s study in that it helps to identify teacher needs from the perspective of teachers in order to provide students with the strategies, supports, and services to develop their literacy skills. McWhorter’s (2003) study was conducted after the first administration of the OSSLT. In her study she found that the OSSLT raised awareness of the importance of adolescent literacy. She also reported that
there was little impact of the OSSLT on teacher instructional practice to benefit students. Though students might have been doing more reading and writing in preparation for the OSSLT, there was no indication that teachers in all subject areas were explicitly teaching reading and writing. Another finding McWhorter (2003) reports is that there is limited collaboration among teachers outside of their own departments. The potential consequences of the test that were recognized a decade ago in McWhorter’s study are identified in studies on the impact of English language learners who have failed the test (Stock, 2010; Zheng, 2006). In examining Van De Wal’s (2013) and McWhorter’s (2003) recommendations for supporting all students on the high-stakes test, it is clear that there is still work to be done in supporting teachers to reach every student.

Though there are a few Ontario studies that explore literacy teaching and learning at the secondary level in English and literacy development courses (Pasquerella, 2009; Watkins, 2007; Wilson, 2005), I was only able to locate one study that examines improving literacy in another subject area, French (Armstrong, 2006). With the exception of this master’s thesis on using a writing portfolio to address the inaccuracies of Grade 11 French Immersion students (Armstrong, 2006), I was unable to locate other studies on teachers’ needs with respect to writing instruction and writing in Grades 9 and 10. In addition to the aforementioned studies on literacy, there were some Ontario studies that not only reported on literacy in the content areas, but also professional development to support literacy learning of both teachers and students (Donohoo, 2010; Jones, 2011; Wilson, 2005). These studies suggest that teachers require deeper understanding of literacy methods and strategies at the secondary level. Other existing writing-to-learn and writing-across-the-curriculum research
literature focuses more on elementary or post-secondary levels outside of the province, so this study will contribute to the growing research at the secondary level in Ontario.

The findings from my study have already been helpful to me in my work in determining next steps to build on reaching every student for overall improvement in achievement and to close the gap in achievement levels. In so doing, I am working with educators to help support meeting the development of adolescent learners who are equipped with the literacy skills for their education and career goals.

This study is important because research on writing instruction is limited at the Grade 9 and 10 levels. As a needs assessment study, it will help to determine areas of need from beliefs and knowledge about writing to teacher roles in writing instruction and assessment. This study supports the current development of writing-to-learn resources that connect research and practice. From a practical standpoint, this study has provided me with better insight into practices in a variety of subject areas that are targeted provincially for concentrated efforts through the Applied Literacy Strategy. Also, since I conducted the research, the senior administration of the school district in which my study took place, has requested that I work with its secondary school administrators and department heads to improve teacher instructional practice and student literacy learning. Because teachers have shared their needs and some of their assumptions about writing, it is easier to link their needs to the needs of their students by providing resources that help to address the identified area of focus.
Chapter Two – Literature Review

Introduction

Writing is an important part of the learning experience at the secondary level. However, many students find this process to be disengaging and overwhelming, particularly when it is factually-based writing, as they are not sure what their thoughts are on a topic, or even how to begin writing a response. As a result, many adolescents become frustrated and reluctant to write (Calkins, 1994; MOE, 2003a). To engage students in writing and to support their development of cognitive processes, teachers in all content areas must share the responsibility of using writing-to-learn activities and explicit writing instruction while also providing assessment throughout the writing process.

The purpose of this literature review is to describe the theoretical framework underpinning the research and to examine current research on writing in the content areas. Although, there is extensive research on this topic, there is limited research from Ontario at the intermediate level. I focus only on those topics that are central to my inquiry in assessing teachers’ needs on writing instruction at the Grade 9 and 10 levels. Therefore, the literature I reviewed on writing in the content areas, writing to learn, writing instruction and assessment practices suggest that writing is an essential component in supporting adolescent writers’ abilities to think, express, and reflect.

Theoretical Framework

With rapid advances in digital technology and social media, along with growing understanding of the complexities of literacy and learning in the 21st century, teachers are
required to develop practices that nurture and support the learning of adolescent learners while equipping them with the necessary skills in order to achieve personal goals and contribute to society (Brown, 2008; Moje, 2009; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Teaching adolescents demands that teachers be innovative in creating learning conditions to support the needs and interests of all students in a culture where communication emphasizes critical and creative thinking and collaboration (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).

Sociocultural theory and social constructivism contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of writing instruction. Both highlight the importance of the social environment and its effect on students’ development of thought and their learning, emphasizing that learning is a profoundly social phenomenon in which learners use their social experience to make sense of their understanding of the world (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Brown, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Social Constructivism

From a social constructivist perspective, Vygotsky (1978) argued that what “children can do with the help of others may be more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (p. 85). Knowledge is individually constructed and socially mediated. By participating in a variety of activities with others, learners internalize the experience and results produced by working in collaboration. These outcomes could include new strategies, skills, and knowledge (Hoy, 2011). Vygotsky’s studies on learning and development provided ideas on thinking and speech that are alternatives to Piaget’s theories. He presented the idea that cognitive development pivots on interactions with others and that these interactions are more than simple influences. They create cognitive structures and thinking processes: “Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to
operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). He suggested that cognitive development is fostered through interactions with people, like parents, teachers, or more capable peers, who are more skilled in the task or thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Cognitive development.** Vygotsky (1978) maintained that there are two levels of cognitive development; that for every learning task and for every learner, there is a cognitive zone of actual development and a zone of proximal development. In essence, this is the zone where a learner can do the task without any assistance. In this circumstance, there is neither new learning nor development of new skills. Vygotsky argued that through social interaction, children’s development is mediated by what he termed more knowledgeable others in the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky (1978) describes this second level of development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). Most beneficial for students’ learning is the collaboration with more skilled partners—peers, teachers, parents, or siblings—when the experienced partner provides an intellectual bridge for the less experienced partner to accomplish a more complex task than by doing it alone (Wilhelm, 2001). As new learning occurs, the zone of proximal development constantly shifts.

Vygotsky was concerned with the link and interdependence of learning and development. He was critical of Piaget’s theory in which “maturation is viewed as a precondition for learning but never the result of it” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 80). From his point of view, he proposed:
Learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers…learning is development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions” (p. 90).

Vygotsky’s theory regarding the zone of proximal development has many educational implications for assessment and writing instructional practices.

In her review of research on the development of writing abilities in children, Rowe (2008) points to the important role of social interaction in writing processes. Children learn the culture of their community—the ways of thinking and behaving—through cooperative structures and dialogues with more capable peers (Hoy, 2011). Much of Vygotsky’s studies focused on developing writing skills. He emphasized the cultural activity and the thought processes of writing rather than the physical motor control required to form letters. Vygotsky’s argument was that writing develops from speech and can be associated with gesture, play, and drawing: “Gestures, it has been correctly said are writing in air, and written signs frequently are simply gestures that have been fixed” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 107).

Vygotsky’s concept of gestures plays an important role in promoting the learning of writing and in facilitating the positive interaction between participants. Because all knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, what and how students learn to write depends on the opportunities that teachers provide.
**Scaffolding.** Scaffolding is a concept that has emerged from the research on how people learn. The theory of scaffolding was originally introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to describe the adult-child interaction when the more experienced and knowledgeable adult assists the child to complete a task that the child would be unable to do on his or her own. Scaffolding comes from Vygotsky’s (1978) idea of the zone of proximal development. This type of instruction is based on the notion that at the beginning of learning, students require a significant amount of support. With the help of scaffolds, learners can complete more advanced activities and engage in more advanced thinking (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). As the learner works toward mastering the new skill, the amount of support is gradually taken away to enable the learner to perform the skill more independently (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Decreasing the support or fading (Collin, Brown, & Newman, 1989) is a key characteristic of scaffolds. Similar to Pearson and Gallagher’s (1983) instructional model of the gradual release of responsibility, the teacher provides the support to target individual or group learning needs and to help students master a skill and to move to independence. This support could be through breaking down the learning task into steps, providing concrete examples, clues, reminders, or any form of support that allows the student to move toward independent learning. Essentially, scaffolding acts as temporary support between what learners can already do and what they cannot do on their own and relates to Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (McNeill, Lizotte, Krajcik, & Marx, 2006).

**Writing in collaborative and cooperative structures.** In order to increase “the level of potential development” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), students need to work with others. Thus in planning for writing instruction, teachers must consider the value of collaboration.
Supporting Vygotsky’s (1978) theory, having students work together to teach and learn from each other promotes active engagement in learning. Vygotsky’s social interaction theory plays a fundamental role in cognitive development. Unlike Piaget’s understanding of child development in which he states that development precedes learning, Vygotsky (1978) claims that social interaction precedes development. He states, “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (p. 57). He focused on the connections between children and the sociocultural context in which they interact in a shared experience. The role of collaboration stems from the notion that learning is social and occurs when “speech and practical activity … converge” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24). Vygotsky argues that learning does not originate from within us, rather, we learn from our environment as we internalize “external knowledge” (p. 71). To learn, according to Vygotsky, requires that students become collaborative participants. To engage students and foster active learning requires that writing in school “be relevant to life” and “meaningful for children” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 118).

**Writing development through social interaction.** Because we are born into a social world, learning is contingent upon the interactions with others and the cultural settings in which the learning experience is shared (Brown, 2008; Wilhelm, 2001). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that with time and through interactions along with the use of cultural tools—today, they would include computers and digital technology—and symbols (e.g., language, numbers, graphs), culture is transmitted, thinking develops, and knowledge is created (Hoy, 2011; Wilhelm, 2001;). From this perspective, the construction of meaning is mediated by both the situated social practice and cultural context (Brown, 2008).
From the social constructivist perspective, interaction and collaboration foster learning as students negotiate meaning to improve their understanding of course content (Fisher & Frey, 2012). To establish such a discourse community where students develop thinking through writing practices with peers, teachers in their instructional practice must pay attention to norms and practices associated with cooperative and collaborative learning (Bennett & Rolheiser, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1989). The goal of instruction is to engage students in learning opportunities that are consistent with the use of tools and language, and practices of the discourse community (e.g., scientific/historical) in which the students are learning (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In this setting, it is not the teacher who is the only source of knowledge. Rather, in a classroom community it is all participants who “bring a unique constellation of knowledge, experiences, and skills” (Brown, 2008, p. 122) to enrich the learning experience through inquiry-based approaches (Wilhelm, 2007). Practising writing using the language and the thinking of the content area fosters learning in the context of the discipline’s community. As members of a classroom writing community, collaborative structures give students access to various roles and knowledge about the discipline’s discourse while through “participation, children learn valued relations to text, to other participants, and to the world” (Rowe, 2008, p. 411).

Talking. Smagorinsky (1995) explains, “meaning construction involves tool use as the means through which learners mediate thought and activity” (p. 163). He argues that emphasis should be shifted from “writing” to “composing” whereby it is the making of meaning situated in the culture of the discipline that is valued (p. 179). This argument is similar to that of Vygotsky (1978), who asserts that tools such as speech and writing are used to mediate their social environment. As children, these tools are first used only as social
functions as a way to communicate; however, it is the appropriation of these tools that leads to development of higher thinking skills that in adolescence continues to require support and practice: “We speak not only to be understood but to understand. … Language is the exposed edge of thought” (Britton, 1975, as cited in Glass, Green, & Lundy, 2011). When students engage in talk, they naturally make their thinking visible to one another (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Fisher, Frey, & Rothenberg, 2008; Schoenberg & Greenleaf, 2009; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). The mere utterance of words helps people express and clarify their thinking. For adolescents, the social aspect of classroom conversations with their peers encourages them to explore emerging perspectives, discover their voices, and contribute to the building of knowledge (Glass, Green, & Lundy, 2011). Newell (2008) uses the metaphor of “curriculum conversations” (p. 244) where student participation in curriculum conversations are contingent on knowing the academic language of the discipline—what to talk about and how to talk in the domain. From these conversations, students learn to write in the discipline.

**Adolescent Learner**

In a study that seeks to assess the needs of teachers on the topic of writing instruction in Grades 9 and 10, it is essential to have an understanding of the recipient of this instruction: the adolescent learner. Adolescence is considered a transitional stage in the development from childhood into adulthood (Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009). Conventional views of young people between the ages of 11 and 19 quite often label them as hormone-raging, identity-seeking and peer-conforming youths who rebel against proper norms of development (Lesko, 1996), while those who work more closely with youths better
understand and respect the intensity of the changes that they are experiencing (Langer, 2009). Lesko (2001; as cited in Christenbury, Bomer & Smagorinsky, 2009), states that:

Youths are simultaneously young and old, learning and learned, working and in school. This idea of time (that is, of past, present, and future) as holding seemingly opposing identities simultaneously is, I believe, a necessary dimension of a re-theorizing of adolescence (p. 4).

Growing interest and research in adolescence in recent decades has contributed to re-theorizing that helps to provide new understandings about the complexities of this stage. This research leads to the understanding that adolescents are not all the same. They perform differently, have different attitudes, and experience the world in their own unique ways. The experience of adolescence varies according to many factors including the sociocultural environment (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). During this stage of rapid change, physical changes are most obvious, while cognitive, emotional and social changes may not be as apparent. Educators must remember that adolescents are not adults and so they must not place unrealistic demands and expectations on them (Price, 2005).

Many new findings in the fields of neuroscience and developmental psychology suggest some approaches that educators might follow to support adolescents in this time of excitement, growth, and change. By the time adolescents have reached puberty, neuroscientists believe the brain has undergone profound changes so that they can think in ways that are more advanced than when they were children (Price, 2005). Adolescents have the ability to think more abstractly and are learning to think and reason about hypothetical situations (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; Steinberg, 2008). Yet, though adolescents engage in more advanced and sophisticated thinking, some aspects of cognitive functioning are still
developing (Price, 2005). Their cognitive abilities develop through practice, so instruction and writing-to-learn opportunities that target these skills are critical.

The emotional development of adolescents is closely linked to their social development and to their identity (Yurgelun-Todd, 2007). Because adolescents feel emotions more intensely, a focus for them should be the development of emotional self-regulation (MCYS, 2012). Teachers can support these developmental needs not only by modeling and teaching positive communication, but also providing writing-to-learn opportunities for students to explore their thoughts and feelings, and to analyse a variety of perspectives. Closely connected to emotional development and to adolescents’ sense of identity is social development (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). One way teachers can tap into students’ developmental needs is by valuing their voices and identities and by providing them with opportunities to draw on their interests and backgrounds in writing and learning activities (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007; Moje, 2010).

Though there might be conflicting identities and desires all in one moment, adolescents still seek to be connected with others, particularly with the adults in their lives (Christenbury et al., 2009; Langer, 2009). For many students, it could be their teachers with whom they spend more time in the day than with their parents. This connection nurtures a relationship without the same level of intensity, emotion, and conflict that quite often exists in adolescent-parent relationships (Hume, 2011). Teachers might serve as significant role models and mentors for many of their students. Hence, because teachers are generally in a privileged place, it is essential that teachers consider adolescents’ needs, interests and dispositions when designing writing tasks. Clear understandings of adolescents’ needs for autonomy, to be heard, to make a difference, and to belong are essential in planning for
instruction. Along with these understandings, their interests in technology and media, the disposition to debate and to have a sense of accomplishment, must be considered in order to engage students in deeper content understanding (Irvin, Meltzer, Mickler, Philips, & Dean, 2009). By providing meaningful tasks and appropriate scaffolded instruction, teachers can help students to become confident and competent writers, readers and learners (Hume, 2008).

**Writing to Learn in the Content Areas**

Writing in all content areas is a start to improving students writing. However, thinking, reflecting, and expressing can be enhanced with writing to learn in all content areas. Providing students with writing activities can also “support the content goals in a variety of high school subject classes” (Langer & Applebee, 1987, p. 136). It is the writing-to-learn element that can make the difference and perhaps help teachers assume the practice of using writing as a learning tool.

Applebee (1981) promoted “writing to learn” that works on the premise that through engaging in the process of writing, thinking develops. Writing in the content areas can support students to gain knowledge and experience that is relevant as they prepare for new activities. In addition, writing in the content areas allows students to review and consolidate what they have learned while also extending their ideas and experiences (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Yet though there are convincing arguments for the benefits of writing as a mode to demonstrate content area learning, it still has not been received by all teachers as a way to support student thinking and learning. Newell (2008) suggests a few reasons for the limited effects on the benefits of writing to learn reported in some studies. One reason is that writing-to-learn approaches failed to consider the unique ways of thinking, knowing, and
doing as previously discussed in “Writing in the Content Areas” found earlier in the “Introduction to the Problem.” The second reason is that early beliefs about writing to learn were linked with process-oriented writing instruction that focused on using new writing activities and routines rather than on the learning that occurs during the process of writing (Newell, 2008).

Britton (1975) offered a different perspective to the traditional view of writing instruction that stressed the importance of mechanics and structure. Instead, Britton emphasized the use of both written and oral language to explore, organize, and refine ideas about the writer and about the subject of writing. Influenced by Vygotsky (1978), Britton stressed writing as a tool for learning and opposes the “transmission” models of education where knowledge is seen as fixed rather than a process (Miller, 2008). Britton also opposed the transmission model where the teacher is the keeper of privileged knowledge and the student, when deemed appropriate by the teacher, becomes the recipient of the knowledge (Durst & Newell, 1989). In the transmission model of teaching, the teacher introduces a topic and poses a question to which the teacher already knows the answer. Students play the guessing game to answer what the teacher has in mind. This type of teaching prepares students for thinking and writing that is nothing more than the purpose of filling in the blanks (Fowler, 1989).

One of Britton’s greatest contributions to writing is the discourse category system that provides a way of classifying written texts according to function and audience. The discourse scheme that Britton (1975) and his colleagues developed considered the “cognitive and linguistic dimensions of school writing” (Durst & Newell, 1989, p. 4). Perhaps in anticipation of the information age in which we are immersed today, Britton’s system
captures the range from informational uses of language to literary uses by distinguishing the transactional, poetic, and expressive functions of language (Freisinger, 1982).

The language of transactional function is used to record or convey information. Most writing in schools is transactional writing: writing to accomplish something, to inform, to instruct or to persuade (Britton, 1975). Language of the poetic function is imaginative and represents the writer’s experience. With the focus of the text as art form, the writer creates a virtual experience for the reader. In this writing, the literary uses of language that can be found in poetry, fictional narratives and drama, are used to represent the writer’s experiences (Durst & Newell, 1989). Expressive writing is informal and exploratory and closely connected to the writer’s experience (Durst & Newell, 1989; Freisinger, 1982; Melzer, 2009). In being expressive, this writing can reveal as much about the writer as it does about the topic through the language that the writer uses when writing to think and draft important information (Freisinger, 1982).

In writing to learn, a writing style similar to how one talks to others is used as a way to discover and work through thoughts and perceptions of concepts and ideas. Hillocks (2008) describes freewriting, an example of writing to learn, “as a means of helping students discover what they have to say and their own voices for saying it” (p. 320). Britton (1975) refers to this function of writing as expressive, where the primary function of expressive language is not to communicate, but rather to make some sense of order and sense of one’s understanding (Smagorinsky, 2006). The expressive function of writing enables writers to rehearse what they know and still need to learn about a concept or an idea. It is essential in expressive writing that students write in their own language; that connected to personal experience, as Vygotsky (1978) observed. The expressive function of language is critical to
inquiry because students must be able to explore their understanding by building on prior knowledge and experience. The goal of inquiry is to engage students in activities that help them develop ideas and content for a writing task to expand their understanding (Graham & Perin, 2007). Fundamental in this inquiry is that the connections be personal so as to lead to understanding: “Expressive language, both oral and written, promotes open-ended exploration of new experiences” (Freisinger 1980, p. 164). Language provides a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovery and shaping meaning and for reaching understanding (Smagorinsky, 2006). Building knowledge involves going through the process of reaching understanding. The phenomenon of writing enables the writer to think to learn in all content areas.

**Process Approach Versus Product Focus**

Theoreticians on writing, like Britton and Emig, agree that writing promotes critical thinking and learning. Emig (1977) argues that

Writing represents a unique mode of learning – not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique. The thesis is straightforward. Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process-and-product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies (p. 122).

Writing freely for themselves enables students to better think and reflect. Though research claims that writing to learn is a means for further learning and deeper meaning making (Knipper & Duggan, 2006), secondary and post-secondary teachers continue to encounter common problems with student writing as reported several decades ago: the inability to think critically, to synthesize, and to organize logically (Freisinger, 1980). Teachers are uncertain
of how to balance the development of thinking and writing skills within a process-oriented approach with the constraints of subject matter coverage, large classes, and a diversity of learners (Troia & Maddox, 2004). Writing to learn in the content areas can be an approach to address these concerns by providing more writing strategies, time for student-driven inquiry and exploration, and more opportunities in class for talking and writing so that students experience the process of learning.

Similar to Smagorinsky’s (1995) argument on writing versus composing that was discussed earlier, many students are unaware of the process of crafting a written product and the learning that evolves. Elbow (1998) also rejects the idea that writing is linear and that the writer must move from the beginning of a piece of writing step-by-step to the end. He describes writing as recursive in his description of the “loop writing process,” (p. 59). In this process, he uses the metaphor of an elliptical orbiting voyage where the writer goes back and forth, and back and forth again, on “the voyage out” and “the voyage in” (p. 60). On the way out, writers develop their thinking, while on the way in, writers focus on the goal of writing and revising their writing. In writing to learn in the content areas, students require opportunities to discuss their thinking and work with their teachers and with their peers. They need time to write and then go back and revisit and rewrite. These are critical steps that teachers must teach in supporting the students’ development as a writer and thinker in the discipline. They must support this learning through a flexible approach to the use of process writing.

In many courses, it is the finished essay or report that is valued and not the process. So when writers attend only to surface structure—the product—they lose sight of the development of deep thinking that occurs through the process of writing. If writing is used in
the classroom to simply test for information, then students are repositories of knowledge that the teacher has determined they should store and writing is only something that is done after learning (Freisinger, 1982). When students have not had the opportunity to work through ideas prior to presenting them to be judged by others, then they are working with a limited development of their thoughts (Freisinger, 1982). Calkins (1994) refers to writing to learn as the rehearsal of ideas. Much like any artistic or athletic performance, there has to be practice where suggestions to improve are offered before performing for some form of judgment.

A process approach to writing should be facilitated by teachers: they should identify and assess students’ abilities that are in the process of developing, and predict what the students will independently be able to do next (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Teachers’ observations of students’ progress help to determine the learning needs of either individual students or groups of students. Teachers then scaffold learning within the zone of proximal development. Through this approach, the focus shifts from assessment and evaluation of solely the final written product to assessment and feedback throughout the process of learning during which students are provided assistance (Hattie, 2012; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). With this in mind, we can see the importance of using the writing process to facilitate opportunities for students to check in with the teacher while writing rather than after the writing task is completed and submitted.

**Writing Instruction**

Good writing instruction provides writing activities to deepen students’ thinking, knowledge, understanding and retention of subject matter, while at the same time developing students’ confidence as writers. Though there are few studies available on writing in the
content areas at the secondary school level and even fewer Canadian studies, findings from existing research on effective writing instruction can be compared between the levels. Many of the studies at both the elementary and the secondary levels focus on trends in writing instruction that include the process approach, explicit strategy instruction, and the role of genre (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Boscolo, 2008; Chapman, 2006; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Hillocks, 2008; Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; McCarthey, 2008; McCarthey & Ro, 2011). Some studies also refer to the role of technology or word processing in supporting student writers (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Graham & Perin, 2007). In a Canadian study on writing instruction in the middle grades, Peterson, McClay and Main (2011) report on similar trends and challenges in instruction as discussed in studies from the United States as teachers wrestle with teaching writing in a digital world. Their findings show that daily time for writing is provided throughout the curriculum in elementary grades, however, participating teachers make no mention of writing to learn. Computers were used primarily to type handwritten tasks rather than as an approach to support writers while composing. In terms of assessment, the study reports that most feedback on writing is verbal. Gilbert and Graham (2010) and Kiuhara et al. (2009) refer to use assessment practices to inform instruction, such as the types of adaptations that are made for weaker writers. Their findings suggest that teachers use these adaptations infrequently.

Much of the research literature describes the qualities of good writing instruction as using a process-based approach (Calkins, 1994), providing direct instruction around writing skills (Graham & Perin, 2007; Kiuhara, et al., 2009), and scaffolding the teaching of writing (Fisher and Frey, 2008). However, according to a meta-analysis of writing instruction by Graham and Perin (2007), schools are not providing adolescents with writing instruction that
is adequate enough for them to write proficiently. A national survey on writing instruction in some content areas at the secondary level also raises concerns about the quality of writing instruction (Kiuhara et al., 2009).

Graham and Perin (2007) identify effective instructional practices to support the adolescent writer. These practices include: strategy instruction, summarization, peer assistance, setting product goals, word processing, using a process writing approach, inquiry, pre-writing activities, study of models, and writing to learn. With these practices in mind, Graham and Perin (2007) recommend several writing interventions to improve students’ writing skills to meet the demands of school and the workplace: use of a process-writing approach, explicit teaching of skills, processes, or knowledge, and scaffolding students’ writing. The primary goal of these interventions is to teach students specific skills, knowledge, or processes, and to provide some form of assistance through interactions so students are eventually able to use these skills independently. By planning for active learning opportunities, students work in ways that have meaning for them where they connect to their prior knowledge and experiences. When students see themselves as participants and contributors to their own learning, teachers create the conditions to build on students’ disposition to have a sense of accomplishment (Irvin et al., 2009; Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009). Though there is strong research on highly effective writing instruction as previously described, limited research has examined if classrooms contain such research-based practices to improve adolescent writing (Lacina & Block, 2012). In several studies, it was reported that teacher preparation for writing instruction was inadequate (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Kiuhara et al., 2009).

To teach writing well, most teachers do not need to be given more activities,
strategies or techniques. Instead, they need to be more intentional in their teaching of writing. Each content area has its own sense of what is essential in writing. Typically when asked what is fundamental about writing, teachers respond with “thinking” and “communicating.” At the same time, many secondary teachers are conflicted because the demands of teaching their curriculum limit their ability to teach thinking and communicating through writing. Ultimately what happens is the priority falls to product rather than process. Improved understanding and training in writing instruction will support teachers’ ability to balance the writing process with the demands of curriculum content.

**Gradual Release of Responsibility: An Instructional Model to Support Writing**

In learning how to do any activity well, that is move from a novice level to a skilled level, most people were probably taught through a series of lessons, each of which clearly focused on targeting a specific skill that needed attention. As apprentices, they probably followed models, received feedback and support from others while they practised developing the skill. Reflecting on the learning of this new skill, one sees that it is mediated by the social interaction with others and the cultural setting in which the learning experience occurred. As outlined earlier in the “Theoretical Framework,” Vygotskian theory suggests that for students to acquire new knowledge, they must witness and participate in activities where a more knowledgeable other uses the skill being demonstrated (Vygotsky, 1978).

This type of learning environment is called the *gradual release of responsibility* (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The gradual release of responsibility follows the framework of “I do it; we do it; you do it together; you do it alone” (Fisher & Frey, 2008, p. 4). Rather than being linear and sequential, the model outlines an iterative process of transferring
cognitive loads that are determined according to individual needs of students (Benko, 2012). Throughout much of this framework, collaboration is central. A well-versed teacher in this approach uses “a combination of step-in and step-back moves” during the learning process (Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore, 2008, p. 210). Formative assessment plays an important part in determining each phase of this teaching and learning continuum and as discussed previously, the theory of scaffolding is a crucial component of instruction to support students’ abilities to write.

The first phase of the gradual release of responsibility instructional framework is the focus lesson that addresses the needs of learners and establishes a purpose for learning. The lesson might last five to twenty minutes and is usually taught with a whole group. With many similarities to a mini-lesson in a writing workshop, the teacher focuses on a specific teaching point such as generating ideas for writing or focusing on discipline-specific writing conventions. In this lesson, teachers model writing as proficient writers, demonstrating how they think when composing (Gallagher, 2011; Kittle, 2008). Making thinking transparent for students is crucial when modeling because students learn new skills and knowledge when a more knowledgeable other demonstrates the strategy for them (Fisher & Frey, 2008, Vygotsky, 1978). To be effective in modeling, teachers must be writers, so through metacognitive awareness, they are able to recognize and articulate their own thinking processes when writing in the discipline.

In the second phase of this instructional continuum, “We do it together,” the cognitive load begins its transfer from teacher to student leading to more active engagement on the student’s part. Though Fisher and Frey (2008) and Pearson and Gallagher (1983) use the term “guided” for this second phase, shared might be a more appropriate term as teachers
provide explicit instruction and students participate in the learning: they share the cognitive load. During shared writing, lessons are usually linked to the focus lesson for further practice with the writing strategy while also providing students with thinking tools, such as sentence or paragraph frames, to help students internalize conventions (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

The third phase of the gradual release of responsibility model, “You do it together,” calls for students to work collaboratively to consolidate their understanding of the content for writing or the strategy. Following the MOE’s terms from the “Strategy Implementation Continuum” (Literacy GAINS, n.d.), I refer to this stage as guided practice. Guided instruction is usually done with small groups that have been purposefully determined according to the needs or interests of students. In this phase, planning for instruction is crucial while also planning for the rest of the class. Adolescents need opportunities to problem solve, discuss, negotiate, and think with peers (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Collaborative learning ensures that students practice and apply their learning while interacting with peers.

The final phase of this instructional framework is independent practice: “You do it alone.” Here, students have the opportunity to apply what they have learned through the focus lesson or mini-lesson, shared and guided instruction. At this point, students use the strategy or concept and the teacher provides support, as needed, and assesses the students learning (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983).

Collaboration and Cooperation

Collaboration and cooperation underpin the previously discussed phases of the gradual release of responsibility instructional framework and are quite often treated as the same concept, but it must be noted that each has unique connotations and classroom
applications. Cooperation is a structure for interaction that is designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a particular goal or task, while collaboration is a philosophy of interaction when individuals are responsible for their actions, learning and respect for others (Oxford, 1997). Though there are distinct differences in these two terms, for deeper understanding and learning, the collaboration and cooperation must exist simultaneously.

Johnson and Johnson (1989) established a definition of cooperative learning that identifies five basic elements that are necessary for a process to be considered cooperative: face-to-face interaction; collaborative skills; processing; and positive interdependence. Many of the elements in cooperative learning may be used in collaborative settings (e.g., think-pair-share; jigsaw). Working together, sharing resources and information, and acting in trustworthy and trusting ways promotes more positive social relationships and results in greater understanding that would likely have occurred if one worked independently (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). Also through collaborative learning structures, spoken and written interactions contribute to this understanding. Englert et al. (2008) refer to research that reports “that participation in a collaborative and interactive discourse fostered students’ engagement in rehearsal and reflection, yielding alternative viewpoints of their texts and problem-centered conversations that resulted in texts that surpassed the quality of texts produced by any member of the student pairs when writing alone” (p. 210).

Research literature has shown that student success is related to school cultures with high expectations around student behaviour and academic achievement, as well as cooperative and collaborative organizational structures (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). Not only does creating a positive classroom culture support the development of a community of writers, but it also supports adolescents’ need to belong and their social development
(Bromley, 2008; Irvin et al., 2009; Roseth et al., 2008). Collaborative groups draw upon the strengths of all members. Teacher knowledge of students’ abilities and the dynamics of relationships must be considered as groups are established. Although one student may be stronger in critical thinking, another student may excel in creative thinking while another may be skilled in organizing. “Rather than practicing writing skills in solitary situations, students acquire writing knowledge through discursive interactions with others, and through these dialogues talk their way into deeper understandings about writing practices” (Englert et al., 2008). By working in groups on individual or collaborative writing tasks, students learn from each other, while also developing teamwork skills that are essential in today’s workplace.

Collaborative learning can be used at any stage of the writing process for both individual and collaborative writing tasks. Ideally each collaborative learning task will have a group function combined with a way to ensure individual accountability (Bennett, 2008). With peers, students can develop ideas and check in for understanding of content or structure perhaps using Elbow’s (1998) elliptical orbiting voyage metaphor of the voyage out and the voyage in. Students working in collaborative groups can take advantage of group members for built-in peer review as they complete writing projects: “When you revise someone else’s writing you are, in effect, collaborating” (Elbow, 1998, p, 124). In collaborative settings, students can quickly check with one another for understanding of mechanics and conventions of content area forms without having to be dependent on the teacher. Finally, collaborative structures can be an efficient way for students to receive feedback during the revising or editing stage of the writing process. Students must practise using content area discourse in speaking and in writing if they are to learn it. Having a peer audience is an efficient way to
rehearse using the language and receiving immediate feedback.

Assessment Practices

The thought of being laden with lengthy papers to grade could be offered as an explanation for why teachers shy away from requiring their students to write in their subject area. For students, perhaps one of the main reasons they dislike writing is the criticism that their writing must endure. Rather than viewing responses to their writing as feedback that responds to what they have done well and that offers suggestions for areas of improvement, students are more inclined to see these responses as criticism that has been summed up in a numerical grade (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Teachers tend to draw attention to mistakes on student papers more often than they comment on strengths and suggestions for improvement. Peterson’s (2008) research on writing assessment shows that “many teachers tend to correct every convention error they see in students’ writing. This not only takes a huge amount of time but also creates a burden on the struggling writer. Regardless of the colour of the ink, a blanket of corrections laid on a piece of writing overwhelms and often paralyzes struggling writers” (p. 79). Perhaps learning about the benefits of writing and the concept of writing to learn, it is possible to unload this burden from teachers and students, and to shed light on approaches where assessment and feedback guide their instruction and provide direction for students to improve their writing and learning.

The MOE’s explanation of assessment found in the policy document, Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools, First Edition, Covering Grades 1-12 (2010a) sets the context of assessment in Ontario:

The primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning. Assessment for
the purpose of improving student learning is seen as both ‘assessment for learning’ and ‘assessment as learning’. As part of assessment for learning, teachers provide students with descriptive feedback and coaching for improvement. Teachers engage in assessment as learning by helping all students develop their capacity to be independent, autonomous learners who are able to set individual goals, monitor their own progress, determine next steps, and reflect on their thinking and learning (p. 28).

In contrast, evaluation is explained as being “based on assessment of learning that provides evidence of student achievement at strategic times throughout the grade/course, often at the end of a period of learning” (p. 38). Essentially, assessment for and as learning differ from assessment of learning in that the information gathered is used for the purpose of helping students improve while they are still in the process of acquiring knowledge and practising skills (www.edugains.ca).

Huot (1996) explains that all teachers need to think about evaluating writing in new ways, “not so much as the ability to judge a piece of writing or a particular writer, but to be able to describe the promise and limitations of a writer working within a particular rhetorical and linguistic context” (p. 564). Elbow (1997) argues that if a distinction is made between high- and low-stakes writing, then teachers will receive more productive student writing.

Low-stakes writing tasks are in essence writing-to-learn tasks that are intended to get students to think about, learn, and understand better subject matter. These tasks are examples of formative assessment where writing is assessed as learning occurs. High-stakes writing assignments on the other hand, also reflect learning, but are used to evaluate the writing for content and clarity. By assigning frequent low-stakes tasks, students are better prepared to perform in high-stakes settings (Elbow, 1997). For example, “when students regularly write
about the assigned readings for a class and then read and respond to what their classmates have written, they often learn the concepts and subject matter of a course better and remember it longer” (Sargent, 1997, p. 41).

Essentially writing-to-learn tasks, are short informal writing pieces that help students think through key concepts or ideas presented in class. Examples of writing-to-learn activities used in the classroom can include, reading journals, focused summaries, learning logs, expressing doubts, asking questions, and warm-up writing activities. Studies show that such writing in all subject areas helps to increase both interest in writing and perception of the usefulness of writing (Hidi & Boscolo, 2008). Writing-to-learn activities provide teachers with a better sense of how well students understand course matter and what areas on which to offer further instruction about content or writing. Not only does this feedback during the writing process strengthen students’ understanding, but also it can increase effort, motivation, or engagement when students have a greater sense of clarity by providing information about their current achievement with respect to a goal and by identifying next steps (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Effective assessment practices can significantly improve student writing because some form of checking for understanding accompanies every phase of instruction as outlined previously with instructional models.

Feedback

Growing Success (MOE, 2010a) is very clear in explaining assessment policy for all educators in Ontario, yet high-quality formative assessment is not always a consistent routine. Teachers are not always completely familiar with the necessary knowledge to use formative assessment practices (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). When teachers use assessment to promote student learning they engage students as partners in the learning process and start by
sharing and co-constructing learning goals and success criteria with their students (AER GAINS, 2011; Peterson, 2010). They provide descriptive feedback during the learning, give comment-only marking, and model and embed opportunities in lessons to support the students’ development of peer- and self-assessment skills (Black & Wiliam, 2009).

One way to lighten the marking load, is to provide students with oral feedback about strengths and areas of focus for improvement. This form of feedback can be highly valuable because it can be provided easily in the teachable moment and in a timely way. Conferencing is an effective way to offer students feedback individually and to provide “both the opportunity to clarify inaccurate understandings of concepts and support for students’ writing development” (Peterson, 2008, p. 78). Conversations with students present excellent opportunities to provide feedback, as well as to receive feedback, particularly when teachers ask students metacognitive questions that have them reflect on their learning. Written feedback, though viewed as more onerous by most teachers, provides students with a record of what they are doing well, what needs improvement, and suggested next steps. Students and teachers might use a log to track how well the student has acted on the feedback that promotes the development of ideas.

Feedback provides information to students and teachers about learning. Depending on the nature and delivery of the feedback, it can have powerful positive effects on student learning and engagement (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). Hattie and Timperley (2007) outline four significant issues about feedback: the timing of feedback, the effects of positive and negative feedback, the optimal classroom use of feedback, and the role of assessment in feedback. They also suggest three major questions that should be used so that feedback and instruction match students’ current understanding: “Where am I going? How am I going?
Students’ writing and thinking can improve when they have greater awareness of learning goals and their progress. Being explicit in outlining learning goals is good for all students, but necessary for students who might be struggling with writing. Stiggins & Chappuis (2005) also suggest three similar questions that students should pose during the process of learning: “Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I get there from here?” (p. 15). The aim in answering these questions is to enhance learning when there is a gap between what is understood and what is aimed at to be understood.

Giving more feedback is not necessarily the answer to improved learning and beliefs that adolescents have about themselves as learners (Hattie, 2012). Instead, teachers must consider the nature of the feedback, the timing, and how students receive this feedback (Smith, 1997; Voerman, Meijer, Korthagen & Simons, 2012). Hattie (2012) states that: “The aim is to provide feedback that is ‘just in time’, ‘just for me’, ‘just for where I am in my learning process’, and ‘just what I need to help me move forward’” (p. 122).

With an understanding of adolescent development, educators know that adolescents can be selective listeners. What they choose to listen to and how they interpret feedback information is crucial to supporting not only their ability to write, but also their self-efficacy (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Indeed, “just as positive persuasions may work to encourage and empower, negative persuasions can work to defeat, and weaken self-efficacy beliefs” (Pajares & Valiante, 2008, p. 160). Thus, as teachers provide feedback, they have to know how to encourage students to realize their own capabilities in reaching the learning goals (Diogenes, 1986; Ferris, 1997; Sugita, 2006).

**Self- and Peer-Assessment: Tools for Metacognitive Awareness**

In reporting on student achievement in Ontario, teachers must also assess and report
on six learning skills and work habits: responsibility, organization, independent work, collaboration, initiative and self-regulation (MOE, 2010a). The development of these skills and habits is important to student learning and success: “Self-regulation involves an interplay between commitment, control, and confidence” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007 p. 93).

Feedback for the purpose of assessment as learning supports the development of self-regulation and metacognition and engages students in the assessment process. Self-regulation is not only a metacognitive issue, but also motivational one that encourages student writers to be active in attaining their learning goal (Harris, Graham & Mason, 2006). Studies show that metacognitive strategies, even at the early phases of self-regulation development “can contribute to improving not only students’ writing performance but also their attitude to writing, including self-efficacy (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006, p. 152). Feedback that lets students know how well they are using the strategies also contributes to students’ competence as writers as they internalize a repertoire of process writing strategies that they have purposefully selected (Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Pajares & Valiante, 2008; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2008).

Peer assessment, as another form of feedback, has the potential to enhance student learning (Harris et al., 2006). In a meta-analysis, Graham and Perin (2007) report a large positive effect size for peer feedback during writing instruction when compared to students writing individually. However the positive value of peer feedback is dependent on training of how to provide meaningful comments (Hattie, 2012). A study by Nuthall (2007), as cited in Hattie (2012) reports that 80% of verbal feedback is provided by peers—“and most of this feedback information is incorrect!” (p. 131). In addition to students’ inability to provide meaningful comments, there are several reasons why teachers and students are not receptive
to using peer feedback for writing assignments. One reason is around the issue of power relations and the perception that assessment disrupts these relations (Liu & Carless, 2006). There can be two groups to this issue: those who dislike having power over peers and those who dislike peers having power over them. Students also tend to avoid using the extreme ends of a marking scale and find it uncomfortable to grade friends or peers (Beach & Friedrich, 2008). Perhaps most significantly is the effect peer assessment can have on a student’s reputation during a critical time of emotional, social, and intellectual development (Hattie, 2012).

Teachers’ resistance to incorporating self- and peer-assessment as part of their instructional practice, also stems from teachers’ reluctance to give up more instructional time (Anson, 1997). Yet these forms of assessment can be more efficient as students receive more feedback more promptly than when the teacher has to provide feedback to every student. Peer assessment also fosters more time on task with students thinking, analysing, comparing, reflecting and communicating with one another (Harris et al., 2006).

Despite these reasons for resisting use of peer feedback, there are many approaches that make peer feedback an enriching experience for students to develop their ability to think, express, and reflect in all content areas (Englert et al., 2008; Literacy GAINS, 2012). Students need an environment where they feel comfortable sharing their questions, thought and opinions. When a positive classroom learning environment has been established, the feedback is more likely to be considered constructive and less hurtful (Hattie, 2012). Teachers can enhance peer assessment by creating classroom resources, such as word walls, sentence prompts, and guiding questions, that are visible to all students and can be referred to in order to model and support student learning. These resources provide suggestions that
peers can offer one another to improve writing and support training students how to give meaningful descriptive feedback to their peers. Peer assessment—revising, editing, providing comments—is a skill that must be built and practiced over time. Teachers should begin building these skills with a limited focus from the determined success criteria for the task. With success criteria in mind, peer editors should not be expected to correct all errors or weaknesses on a paper since the quality of the final product is still the responsibility of the writer. Providing sample tasks may inspire students into actively participating in the exercise of peer assessment and thus help to consolidate learning (Graham & Perin, 2007).

An additional benefit of peer feedback is that students can receive more feedback from peers and more quickly than waiting on the teacher to meet with them or return a paper (Gielen, Dochy, Onghena & Struyven, 2010). Writing pieces may be peer assessed by more than one student so that each student receives feedback from a number of peers and learns to write for larger audiences other than the teacher and a few selected peers. To avoid potential risks for students, such as loss of privacy or embarrassment, this can only be carried out once a positive classroom culture of learning has been created.

This strategy can be facilitated in collaborative groups of three to four students whereby students may benefit from working together to edit one piece of writing at a time. As with forming any collaborative groups, teachers need to consider skill sets of students. Capable writers can act as models for students who have not yet consolidated some writing skills while also extending their metacognitive skills through peer assessment. Peer assessment supports the ability to critically reflect and justify their thinking and comments (Englert et al., 2008). Hattie (2012) links benefits of peer assessment to self-assessment through the enabling of metacognitive skills. The experience of feedback is enriched because
as students use prompts to offer suggestions for improvement to their peers, they start to use the same prompts to reflect on their own learning approaches (Liu & Carless, 2006).

**School Administrators’ Role in Leading the Instructional Program**

Growing knowledge about leadership at the school level highlights the importance of school administrators’ ability to provide direction and exercise influence for improved student learning (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Research-based conclusions about successful school leadership claim that school administrators have a significant impact on student learning, second only to the impact of the quality of curriculum, assessment, and teachers’ instruction (Mascall & Rolheiser, 2006). With this in mind, school administrators must have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to set directions, build relationships and develop people, develop the organization, lead the instructional program, and secure accountability, as described in the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2012).

From research about successful leadership, “school leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment, and working conditions” (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008, p. 3). Strong leadership is required to promote the professional community and a shared commitment to use of evidence-based instructional practices (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstom, 2004) that support writing. Katz and Dack (2013) refer to leaders as those who “lead learning” (p. 45). This type of leadership is instructional leadership that is focused on curriculum, teaching, and learning (Katz & Dack, 2013). This study is concerned with school administrators who, when exploring how best to improve students’ ability to write and to write to learn, can influence students’ learning and teachers’ instructional
practice by helping to “promote vision and goals, and by ensuring that resources and processes are in place to enable teachers to teach well” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 4).

In effective schools, administrators prepare the conditions for professional learning communities (PLC) where the goal is to improve student achievement. To encourage deeper student learning requires “mobilizing the energy” and building the capacities of teachers for improved morale (Fullan, 2002, p. 16). PLCs are a means for improving student learning when principals and teachers from all content areas are involved together in the process of reviewing student work, identifying areas of need for both student and teacher learning, researching evidence-based strategies to support student learning, planning for student success, and reflecting and learning together (DuFour, 2004). Indeed, “leadership isn’t about imposing the leader’s solo dream; it’s about developing a shared sense of destiny” (Kaser, Mundry, Stiles & Loucks-Horsley, 2006, p. 94). Leadership is about working with others to achieve shared goals. School administrators play an important role in promoting collaboration and in facilitating and supporting these learning communities to ensure teachers are using effective practices (Fullan, Hill, & Crévola, 2006; Katz, Earl, & Ben Jaafar, 2009).

**Chapter Summary**

Much of the research literature discussed in this chapter on writing to learn in the content areas, and on writing instructional and assessment practices illustrates the impact on student writing in earlier grades and in the United States. The literature demonstrates that more research identifying teachers’ needs with teaching writing in the content areas at the secondary level in Ontario schools is needed. In addition to reviewing research showing that school administrators have a strong influence on instructional practice, each aspect of writing
instruction that was identified in my research questions has been discussed and relevant research findings have been presented. In the following chapter, I describe the methodology used for my study and how I attempted to answer the research questions.
Chapter Three – Research Methodology

Mixed Methods Approach

A mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, was used to address my research questions (Creswell, 2012). Approaches to research are continually evolving in response to the complex and ever-changing world. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2009) claim that mixed methods research is becoming popular because of its logical and intuitive appeal as a framework to address research purposes and questions.

In this study, I conducted a sequential analysis of data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Focus group interviews took place first. Once these interviews had been transcribed and analysed, one-on-one interviews with all of the participants occurred. I analysed teacher-selected sample writing tasks and assessment tools in an attempt to corroborate the qualitative findings about writing instruction. With this in mind, the mixed methods design that was most appropriate for my study was exploratory sequential design with qualitative data having a dominant status (Creswell, 2012; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). The straightforward nature of the sequential design made the collection of data easier because of the natural steps in the process, with each step informing the next. Once the qualitative data from the focus group interviews were analysed, the results were used to determine questions that were further explored in the one-on-one interviews. From these interviews, I had a clearer understanding of teacher needs and looked to corroborate these findings with the quantitative data collected from sample writing tasks and assessment tools.

I sought to validate results from different data sources through triangulation as I strove to allow for results of the two methods, qualitative and quantitative, that did not converge or support the same conclusions (Denzin, 2010). I was aware that triangulation
could, however, become problematic and pose limitations on the findings from the research where what participants say and do contradict each other. Such contradictions between what teachers said they believe and what they might actually do as evidenced through document analysis helped to reframe the issues and further extend the research (Calfee & Sperling, 2010) to explore the needs of teachers as writing instructors rather than limit the findings from the mixed methods approach.

**Research Context**

Once approval for my study was received from the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics, I contacted the teachers who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in the study and I sent them a letter of recruitment via e-mail (Appendix A). These individuals were teachers with whom I had a professional relationship as a previous colleague and literacy lead where I supported teachers with literacy development. As a matter of courtesy, I also informed the principal of the school from which teachers were participants. The research included participants from Grange Heights Secondary School (pseudonyms are used for all names of participants and for the school) a school in a rural school district in Southwestern Ontario in which I was teaching before accepting a contract to work on assignment with the MOE. The school was chosen because of proximity to my home and because it was not in a school district that I was supporting in my role with the MOE when I conducted my research. Also, at the time of planning the study, job action was occurring with the co-terminus board, making it challenging to recruit other teachers in the same area.

Teachers in the Grade 9 and 10 subject areas of career studies, civics, English, French, geography, history, religion and science were recruited as participants because it is in
these content areas that traditionally there are more demands for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of course content through writing. Several of the willing participants in the religion and science departments suggested that I also contact and recruit a few others from their respective departments to ensure that all Grade 9 and 10 teachers in their departments had the opportunity to participate. In addition to supporting my research, they welcomed this non-evaluative opportunity to open up conversations about addressing the need of improving student writing in their content area. In order to ensure that at least 20 teachers participated in this study and because participants might not be available on the day of the focus group, I over-recruited by sending out 30 letters of recruitment (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). Of the 30 requests, I received two regrets from teachers who were unable to participate because of other obligations at the time, and one straightforward decline. As a result I had 27 teachers who participated in all parts of the study.

**Participants and their school.** Twenty-seven teachers from Grange Heights Secondary School participated in this study (see Figure 1). The school, with a student population of approximately 900, is part of a school district in southwestern Ontario that is among the highest achieving districts on provincial standardized tests (e.g., EQAO and OSSLT). The participants included 15 males and 12 females, with a range of teaching experience between five and 42 years, with a mean of 14 years teaching experience. However, it should be noted that one teacher is in his first year of teaching in the classroom, but has 15 years experience at the school in a non-teaching position. Four teachers have experience teaching at the elementary level and one of these teachers also has experience teaching at the post-secondary level. Two participants have graduate degrees in their discipline area. Traditionally, there is not a lot of turnover of teaching staff at Grange
Heights S. S. Fourteen of the participants have experience teaching only at Grange Heights S. S. Eight participants have taught at the school for over 20 years, while 14 participants have been teaching at the school for 10 or more years. Teachers remain at the school for most of their teaching career and become very much involved in the school community and its traditions. Two of the participants are graduates of Grange Heights S. S. Nine of the participants have children who are currently in the school or who have recently graduated, while 11 participants will have children enrolling at Grange Heights in the coming years. With declining enrolment in this part of the province, three of the participants lost their permanent contracts this year and are now working on long-term occasional contracts.

Fourteen participants have or have held leadership roles as department heads; department heads from all the content areas that were a focus of my research participated in this study.

Creswell (2012) emphasizes the importance of confidentiality, stating that it is of utmost importance. I assured confidentiality by using a form from Bogdan and Biklen (2007) for focus groups where the intent was to protect the confidentiality of what participants said during the course of the study (Appendix B). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that members of the focus group are asked to read and sign the form indicating that they promised not to communicate or talk about information discussed outside of the focus group. To further ensure confidentiality, participants and the school have been identified by using pseudonyms that many of them chose themselves.
Figure 1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Years Experience</th>
<th>Focus Group #</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>#1 – French</td>
<td>Head of French</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>#2 – English, Drama</td>
<td>Head of Arts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>#3 – Career Studies</td>
<td>Head of Student Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td>Former Chaplain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>#1 – Geography</td>
<td>Former Head of Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>#3 – English</td>
<td>Head of English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gord</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>#3 – Career Studies, Civics, History</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>#3 – History, English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>#2 – History</td>
<td>Head of Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeanne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>#2 – English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>#2 – English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>#3 – Geography, Math</td>
<td>Former Head of Student Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>#2 – Career Studies, Civics</td>
<td>Head of Phys Ed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td>Head of Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td>Acting Secondary Learning Coordinator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td>Head of Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>#1 – Business, English, Literacy Lead</td>
<td>Former Head of Business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>#4 – Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>#5 – Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>#1 – Career Studies</td>
<td>Former Head of Phys. Ed., Student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures for Securing Participants

Teachers were formally invited to participate through the letter and consent form that were submitted for the Ethics Review (Appendices C and D). The letter and one copy of the informed consent form were e-mailed to the participants and another copy of the letter and informed consent form were given to each participant in person. The letter outlined the purpose of the study, what teachers would be asked to do and how much time it would take for their participation in the focus group and one-on-one interviews. To expedite this process, I sent e-mail messages asking participants to let me know if they would agree to participate and then I made arrangements to collect one copy of the signed informed consent form. In addition, I included the Focus Group Protocol (Figure 2) in the e-mail message, so participants were aware of the interview questions before agreeing to participate. Once consent was granted, dates, times, and locations that were convenient for the participants for the focus group interviews were determined (Appendix E).

I received the approval for my study in mid-January, which coincided with the end of the first semester of the school year just as teachers were preparing for exams and the quick turn-around for second semester. This time was beneficial for the scheduling of focus group interviews because teachers had more flexibility throughout the day during the exam period. Most participants indicated that they preferred to have these interviews over their lunch break and at school; however, the first interview was held in the early evening at my home, after participants were served some refreshments. Lunch, dessert and drinks were provided at all the noon hour sessions. This allowed for teachers to eat and to socialize and it also helped to
establish a comfortable environment for all participants before starting the interviews. These interviews took place at the school in a library seminar room. This location was ideal in that it was spacious and quiet and promoted the conversational nature of a focus group. Because exams were only written in the morning, no students were around in the afternoon and there were fewer interruptions over the PA system.

I scheduled five focus group interviews to be held within a one-week period. This timing worked well with my own work schedule, so I was flexible to meet participants over the lunch break at the school. Once I received commitment from participants, I felt it was important to schedule the focus groups as soon as possible before their interest waned.

**Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

Mixed methods research is strengthened when multiple sources of data are considered. Calfee and Sperling (2010) suggest the importance of using multiple perspectives in exploring a problem or issue determining for increased validity of the research findings. Data sources for this study included transcripts from focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews, along with the collection of artefacts, such as sample writing tasks and assessment tools. The following sections describe the method of data collection.

**Focus Groups**

There are many different forms of focus groups that exist; however, Onwuegbuzie, Leech and Collins (2010) suggest some characteristics for effective data collection. Well-designed focus groups are guided by the research questions. They usually consist of between six and twelve people and last between one and two hours. The size of the group should be
large enough to garner a variety of responses to the guiding questions. Yet at the same time, focus groups should not include too many participants where individuals might not have equal opportunities to participate or feel comfortable sharing their thinking with a large group. The role of the moderator is essential in facilitating a conversation that recognizes equality, respects choice in responding to prompts, and encourages voice and engagement in the dialogue (Knight, 2007).

Subject-specific groupings and mixed-subject groups were organized for this study. As I had hoped, enough teachers from the science and religion departments had agreed to participate, so I was able to organize two subject-specific focus groups. One group consisted of six science teachers, and the other group of seven religion teachers. These groups were larger than I originally intended because I did not expect to have all teachers agree to participate. It would have been difficult and awkward to say to some participants that their willingness to participate was no longer required. All other teachers were organized into three mixed-subject groupings consisting of four to five teachers in various combinations of the content areas of career studies, civics, English, French, geography and history. Interviews were digitally recorded to assist with transcribing. Participant schedules determined the combination of each focus group. This consideration required flexibility in the grouping of teachers, numbers, and may also have influenced the flow and content of their conversations.

There are several advantages to using focus groups to gather perspectives on topics of study. They are efficient methods to get an overview of the group’s thinking about a topic, particularly when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other (Creswell, 2012). Focus group sessions tend to run on group dynamics and are conversational, which provides
opportunities for participants to reflect while listening and discovering their own thinking about a topic (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). A disadvantage of focus group discussions, like any collaborative situation, is what is called groupthink, a phenomenon that Katz and Dack (2013) describe as a peril of collaboration where in an attempt to maintain harmony, the thinking of the group becomes “the lowest common denominator of opinion” and discourages deeper thinking about issues (p. 80). As the facilitator of a focus group, it was important that I asked probing questions of participants to further explore and deepen their thinking around the topics (Kvale, 1996).

**Overview of focus group protocol.** The focus group protocol (Figure 2) provided question prompts that were organized around the four key areas on which I was seeking responses to help identify teacher needs: teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about writing across the curriculum; instructional practices; assessment and feedback; and, thinking – writing to learn. Below I provide an overview of each question before describing in more detail each focus group meeting.

**Figure 2: Focus Group Protocol**

*Introductory question*
Introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your teaching experience – your teaching background, how many years you have been teaching, what subjects and grades you have taught, as well as what you are currently teaching.

*Opening up the conversation*
- Tell me about a typical course or a class when your students are required to demonstrate their learning through a written task?
  - Talk about the purposes, forms, and audiences for the task.
  - How often in a semester students are required to write and how much in terms of length students usually write.

- Recall an occasion in class when students were working on a writing task.
  - Describe what all students were doing and what you were doing.

- Talk about when and where your students spend their time on writing tasks for your course?
**Introducing questions on instructional practice**

I would now like to introduce another topic for discussion and that is about teaching writing in your subject area.

- Tell me about your planning as you prepare to introduce a writing task to your students? How do you invest your time when planning your writing lessons? What are the most important aspects that you attend to when planning this lesson? What resources do you consider when you are planning a lesson on writing?

- In your opinion, what do you believe to be the most important aspects of writing in your subject area?

- Tell me about a time when you were teaching a lesson about a writing task. Describe what this looked like - what you were doing and what the students were doing?

- Talk about how students use stages of the writing process when completing writing tasks. Can you tell me how this is facilitated?

**Introducing questions on assessment practice**

Another topic that I would like to discuss is assessing writing in your subject area.

- Tell me about assessing student writing? Describe what this looks like and when do you assess their writing?

- Tell me about feedback and how you respond to your students’ writing tasks. Describe how and when you provide feedback on writing. Tell me about how students respond to and use this feedback.

- Talk about an occasion when students were involved in assessing their own writing and writing of their peers? Describe what was happening. What kinds of comments were students making? What steps did you take to insure students were involved in providing feedback to each other?

- Talk about a time when you were very pleased with written responses from students? What do you consider effective qualities of writing and what might students consider as effective qualities writing?

**Introducing questions on writing to learn**

- What does the term writing to learn mean to you and what does it look like in your practice?

- Tell me about occasions when your students have had opportunities for writing to learn?

**Introducing questions on teacher needs**

Now, I would like to hear about your needs on teaching writing in your subject area.

- Talk about what you think is important to know about teaching writing in your subject area?
• Talk about obstacles or challenges that you face in teaching writing in your subject area.

• Think about and tell me about your needs and what might be helpful for you when teaching writing in your subject area?

Concluding the conversation
• Is there anything else that you would like to share or add about any aspect of writing in your subject area?

**Teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about writing across the curriculum.** The first set of focus group questions were intended to provide me with a sense of teacher knowledge and beliefs about writing. They also provided a focus for examining the sample writing documents to see the variety of tasks and the common purposes for which students write in Grades 9 and 10. Their responses made it essential to ask teachers in the one-on-one interviews specifically about their reasons for emphasizing that student learning be demonstrated in writing rather than orally, or in a visual representation, as indicated in the curriculum documents. I was curious to learn if their reasons were to have students demonstrate their knowledge of course content, or to discover their thinking and further their understanding about the concepts that were discussed.

**Instructional practices.** The second set of focus group questions was on the topic of instructional practice. Teachers were asked to talk about their planning as they prepare to introduce a writing task to their students. They were asked to talk about where they invest their time when planning these writing lessons, what they consider the most important aspects to attend to, and what resources they access when planning a lesson on writing.

As teachers responded to these questions, they provided me with insights about their knowledge and beliefs about what they see as important aspects of writing in their content area. In addition, I also asked how students use the writing process approach and how this is
facilitated. Again, their responses helped me determine which participants I would ask further questions about the role of the writing process in their subject area.

**Assessment and feedback.** The third set of focus group questions introduced the topic of assessment practice. Participants were asked to describe how and when they typically assess student writing. The second part of these questions was on how they respond and when they provide students with feedback on writing tasks. I was also curious to know how assessment of student writing informs their next steps in terms of instruction. Participants were asked to talk about student reactions to feedback. Teachers were also asked to describe an occasion when students were involved in assessing their own writing and writing of their peers.

Responses to these questions provided me with teachers’ perceptions about some assessment practices and helped me to determine which questions about feedback I would ask in the one-on-one interviews.

**Thinking—writing to learn.** The fourth focus group question was on the topic of writing to learn. I first asked what this term means to teachers and what it looks like in their practice. In their responses teachers were able to share occasions when their students have had opportunities for writing to learn. Again, their responses to these questions helped me determine whom to ask further questions in the one-on-one interviews about their understanding about writing to learn.

The findings generated from the focus group and the one-on-one interviews are presented in Chapter Four. Similar to my research questions, the interview questions were intended to draw upon the teachers’ insights and perspectives about instructional practices,
assessment practices and the concept of writing to learn to help assess the needs of teachers with writing instruction.

**Description of each focus group meeting.** The first focus group consisted of four participants. Three males, Tony, Geo, and Alex, and one female, Rita, participated in this session that was held in the early evening at my home. Tony who has been teaching for 28 years spoke about writing in the career studies course. Geo, with nine years of teaching experience primarily in geography and history, compared his experiences between teaching writing in a provincial demonstration school with that at Grange Heights S.S., a regular school. Alex, who has a varied teaching experience, having taught French, both core and immersion, at the elementary and post-secondary level before teaching at the secondary level, shared his thoughts on writing in his French classes. Rita, who has been a teacher for 28 years and who also has experience at the elementary level, spoke about teaching writing in her business studies, English, and literacy courses. After this first group interview, I had a better understanding of the flow of questions and responses and made notes on the interview process for following interviews. In order to respect the time commitment and to keep to the time of approximately one hour, I noted that many questions might be answered through the natural flow of the conversation. I decided that at the beginning of each interview, I would inform participants that though questions would probably be answered out of sequence from the Focus Group Agenda, I would pose the questions in case participants still wanted to add to the topic, if not, we would keep moving along with the topics for discussion. I also noted that it was not necessary to video record these interviews, if I was using two systems for audio recording.
The second focus group interview was held the following day, Friday, at noon. There were five participants: Alison, Leeanne, MJ, Luke and Jeff. Alison, a drama and English teacher, has been teaching for 14 years. Leeanne has mostly taught English for 21 years. MJ has been teaching for 28 years and has experience teaching in the physical education, social sciences and student services departments, spoke mostly about her experiences teaching career studies and civics. Luke, who is a graduate of Grange Heights S. S., has been teaching for 12 years and shared his experiences about writing in his English classes. Jeff, who was qualified in the trades before becoming a teacher 12 years ago, spoke about his experiences teaching writing in history and geography.

The third focus group interview was planned for the Monday after the morning exams. This day was a snow day, so exams were postponed until the following day. Five teachers, two males and three females participated in this session. Giovanni, who has 42 years’ experience as a teacher of English, drama, visual art, and communication technology, was not able to drive to the school, so he spoke about his experiences via Skype. Gord, with 10 years teaching experience has taught numerous subjects, shared mostly his experience as a teacher of civics and geography. Jane, a teacher of history and English for 17 years, discussed her approach to teaching writing in these two content areas. Mary, who has also been teaching for 17 years, talked about writing in geography and also shared some insights about writing in math. Finally, Bernie, a teacher for 27 years, spoke mostly about students writing in preparation for post-secondary education.

The fourth group was the science subject-specific group. Because exams had been rescheduled to this day, we started a little later than planned. There were six participants, so this session went a little longer. Four male teachers and two female teachers took part in this
science focus group. Mark, who is another graduate of Grange Heights S. S., has been teaching science for 10 years. Peter has nine years experience teaching science. Max has taught for 12 years and has experience teaching science and physical education Sandra, who has been a teacher for 20 years, has experience teaching several subjects in both English and French. Kate has taught for 11 years at Grange Heights S. S., while Phil has experience teaching science at a couple of different schools for a total of 20 years.

The last focus group was held a couple days later on the Thursday at lunch. This was the largest group as all seven members of the religion department participated in this subject-specific focus group. Four participants were male and three were female. Patrick has been teaching for 14 years and has experience at both elementary and secondary. Sean, a teacher for 28 years, also has experience teaching in both panels. Janet, a teacher for 12 years, has taught mostly religion. Ian has a similar experience of teaching religion for 12 years. Holly, a teacher for 9 years, has taught several subjects, but most of her experience is in religion. Melanie, with five years teaching experience, spoke about writing in religion and in English classes. Gabe, who is new to the classroom this year, but who has 15 years as the school’s chaplain, spoke about his approach to teaching writing.

Once the focus group interviews were transcribed, I then began my analysis by reading the transcripts and looking for patterns in the conversations (e.g., holding students accountable, modeling and providing examples of writing, the use of thinking tools). My analysis followed Creswell’s (2012) inductive process of narrowing data into a few themes where analysis moved from specific observations to general themes. In an attempt to make sense of the data, I developed codes to label these patterns and then determined broad headings. I tracked the teacher participants who contributed insights to each of the codes.
because this information would help me know whom to probe for further thoughts in the one-on-one interviews. Through inductive analysis, I then highlighted similar codes and clustered them to generate the themes of students’ role, teacher practices, thinking, and assessment and feedback, which I could use for my headings when reporting the results. I determined what data to use and discarded other data that no longer fit with my themes (Creswell, 2012). In describing and developing themes from the data, I checked these with my research questions to make certain that my focus remained clear.

**One-On-One Interviews**

In preparing for these interviews, I followed Kvale’s (1996) suggestions to promote everyday-like conversations. Though one-on-one interviews are time-consuming, an advantage of these interviews was that participants had the opportunity to elaborate and clarify their thinking about issues that I had noted during the focus group interviews (see Appendix F for interview protocol). These interviews were also ideal for participants who were comfortable sharing ideas in a one-on-one setting (Creswell, 2012). Individual interviews provided the setting to get at the heart of some issues that participants may have been hesitant or reluctant to talk about in the focus groups. To get at these issues, my training and practice as a literacy lead was of great value as it allowed me to establish a non-judgmental and non-evaluative confidential relationship (Literacy GAINS, 2010; Knight, 2007). A couple of the participants acknowledged that they were a little nervous at the start, so I addressed this feeling by sharing what I was looking for and that it was not a test of their knowledge. Rather, it was an opportunity for them to share and for me to learn what they see as important to know about teaching writing in their subject area. My experience as a literacy lead was also of value as I posed questions to open up the conversations and to probe and learn more
about the phenomenon of writing in the different subject areas. Theses interviews were analysed using the same themes and coding as I used with the focus groups. It was in analysing the data from both interviews that a category around the role of school administrators in supporting professional learning and writing instruction surfaced. To further explore this topic in my study on teachers’ needs, I added a research question on teachers’ perceptions of school administrators’ role in supporting writing instructional practice.

**Document Analysis**

Artefacts, such as descriptions of writing tasks, assessments tools, and writing guides, were collected from participating teachers in an attempt to seek patterns in practice that corroborated the findings from the interviews and also to examine teachers’ evaluation practices where written tasks were involved. In this study, I was able to gather 66 different writing tasks. I received 18 samples of writing tasks from the participating science teachers, while the rest of the samples that I received were a balance from the participating career studies, civics, English, French, geography, history and religion teachers. Though this is a fairly small sample of writing, it does provide a snapshot of writing in these content areas as a follow-up to the interviews (see Appendix G for sample task). The sample shows the types of writing tasks that the teachers self-selected and were willing to provide which may help to illustrate teacher beliefs and attitudes toward writing and writing instruction, as well as to answer this research question.

I explored and coded the documents according to: forms of writing tasks; purposes of and audiences for writing tasks; length of writing task; directions that link to performance verbs in the curriculum expectations; required evidence of stages in writing; opportunities for
feedback; timelines for writing tasks, and; differences between applied- and academic-level writing tasks. Analysis of the artefacts helped to provide evidence of writing instruction that participants did not refer to in the interviews as being explicitly taught and was helpful in determining support for teaching writing in the different subject areas.

MOE curriculum documents were examined for a few purposes. First, I was curious to see in which curricula, expectations exist that indicate students must communicate through the written genre and I wanted to see if knowledge of subject-specific writing forms was also included in the expectations. Second, I wondered what types of thinking that students in Grade 9 and 10 are required to demonstrate, so I examined all expectations in the curricula of the participating subjects to track and determine the most common performance or directing verbs in each course. These were placed on a spreadsheet to be compared to all content areas that participated in this study. The verbs were then coded to determine the most commonly used verbs in the curriculum documents from participating subject areas, and then they were linked to the provided sample documents where students express their thinking through writing tasks. This analysis helped to answer how teachers use assessment and feedback to promote deeper thinking in the subject area through writing.

My research and coding of the writing tasks was primarily influenced by the research of Britton (1975) and Langer and Applebee (1987). A study by Melzer (2009) also helped to inform my thinking and to further develop my understanding of Britton’s (1975) taxonomy of function and audience from his research on British secondary schools. Britton (1975) acknowledges these different functions of writing by distinguishing the expressive, poetic, and transactional functions of language. My coding of writing tasks and assessment tools follows that of Britton’s (1975), in that I have coded writing according to expressive, poetic,
and transactional functions (Table 1 in Chapter 4). With respect to audience, again I have borrowed from Britton and divided the audiences into the categories of self, teacher, peers, and wider audiences (Table 2 in Chapter 4). Wider audiences represent an audience outside of the classroom that could include the school community, local community and beyond. In reflecting on the classroom audiences, I wanted to capture the audience that provides feedback and direction as part of the writing-to-learn opportunity. Again, influenced by Britton (1975) and Melzer (2009), I further divided these audiences into “student to instructor” and “student to evaluator.” In the “student to instructor” audience category, the audience includes, self, peers, and teachers, where feedback and further instruction on writing is offered during the assessment for and as learning stage. With this information I was able to analyse if and how the writing process is facilitated before the final product is submitted for evaluation. I chose to call the second division of audience, “student to evaluator” which is a slight variation of Britton’s “student to examiner” because I wanted to capture the practice of evaluation as assessment of learning and to make links to the MOE’s assessment, evaluation and reporting policy found in Growing Success (2010a) to help determine if knowledge of current assessment practices and policy is an area of need for teachers. I also tracked the forms and lengths of student writing assignments from the sample tasks teachers submitted to help gain a clearer sense of how much and what types of writing students do in Grade 9 and 10.

Validity of Data and Concerns About Researcher Bias

Inherent within the mixed methods approach are checks to ensure reliability and consistency between teacher perceptions of practice as shared in the interviews, and their
everyday practices, as illuminated through the analysis of artefacts. Triangulation of data sources is one of those mechanisms. The focus group transcripts were analysed and these findings were used to probe for deeper responses from participants in interviews.

A concern about validity of my findings arises when considering the documents that teachers chose to provide. Participants were asked to voluntarily provide some samples of writing tasks and assessment tools, but there was no check to validate that these were examples of what they use in practice. While the goal for researchers who are also practitioners is to answer questions of inquiry on a topic of meaning and interest to us, I recognize that as an insider in the school world, it may be difficult to remain objective. From suggestions offered by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I guarded against allowing my own biases from interfering with the research by first acknowledging my biases and including these in my notes and reflections. My professional work focuses on improving student learning according to the individual needs. I have a strong interest in writing instruction and seeking ways in which to support adolescent learners to become better writers. I also know through my practical experience that teachers are adult learners and so their perspectives and experiences must be honoured and respected as we seek ways to support the students who are at the centre of the work we do. It is the teachers’ perspectives and needs that I sought to help address the needs of students and so I was open to their perceptions to advance my understanding.
Chapter Four – Results

Introduction

In this study, I attempted to better understand and assess teacher self-efficacy and needs in promoting students’ abilities to think, express, and reflect through writing in several Grade 9 and 10 subjects.

In this chapter, I first describe my research findings collected during both sets of interviews using the themes that emerged from the data: teachers’ assumptions on students’ writing abilities; teachers’ beliefs about thinking and writing in their content area; and teachers’ perceptions on the role of school administrators. Then, I explain my findings from the quantitative data collected from sample writing tasks and assessment tools.

The analysis of data provided answers to my three research questions:

1. What knowledge, beliefs, and practices about writing in their subject area do teachers have and how do teachers facilitate deeper student thinking and learning through student writing?

2. What types of writing tasks are assigned and how do they inform writing instruction?

3. What are participating teachers’ perceptions of how school administrators could and do support them to develop their writing instructional practice?

Teachers Assume That Students Know How to Write

Teachers assume that students have the skills and ability to write when they enter secondary school. This belief that Grade 9 and 10 students already know how to write, or are learning about writing in their English classes, is convenient thinking for teachers’ instructional practice where knowledge of course content takes precedence over development
of thinking and communication. Some participants believe that there is not enough time to cover the course curriculum expectations, so to provide time for writing instruction and writing in class is difficult. Their expectations of how and when students should be able to complete writing tasks quite often do not match where students are in their development of writing skills. These assumptions lead to limited instruction around writing and facilitation of the writing process, as well as few opportunities for feedback and peer assessment throughout the process of writing.

Several sub-themes became apparent from the theme of teachers’ assumptions on students’ writing abilities: knowledge of instructional models; purpose of in-class writing; balancing facilitation of the writing process with time constraints; perceptions on feedback and on students’ responses to feedback; and incorporating peer assessment into classroom practice.

Knowledge of Instructional Models to Support Student Writing

When participants were asked to reflect on their instructional practice, several of them stated that they make assumptions about students’ abilities to write and quite often assign tasks for students to complete independently providing little support preparing students to write and during the process of writing. Mary said that when she teaches math or geography, she assumes that students already know how to write using the form that she asks. It is becoming clearer to her now that this is not the case. Melanie also said that there are times, even with her background as an English teacher, when she assumes students have mastered a skill in writing before they come to her class. She soon finds that that may not be the case and she has to provide a lesson to address the writing weakness. Patrick shared that he does not teach about writing in his religion classes because he assumes that they have
already learned about writing in English and so they can write independently. Alex also thinks “everyone assumes that they know how to write. You just can’t assume that students can write.” Rita admitted that outside of the English classes that she teaches, she does not directly teach writing because she believes that students know how to write.

The topic of instructional phases where teachers move from modeling through to independent practice was discussed in most focus groups as they shared some of their instructional practices. Many teachers talked about how they use modeling when first introducing a writing task. The one-on-one interviews allowed me to probe to find out what modeling looks like because when asked about their familiarity with the gradual release of responsibility instructional framework (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), or the Strategy Implementation Continuum (Literacy GAINS, n.d.), teachers said that they are not familiar with these terms. It became clear that when teachers use modeling, they are referring to showing examples of the writing task, or student exemplars. In very few instances do teachers model their thinking processes as proficient writers while they show students how they would write in response to an assigned task. Mary was the only teacher who hinted at using the think aloud strategy. She uses an “internal dialogue out loud” quite often when she is problem solving in her math classes and sometimes when she is modeling writing for students. Leeanne said that on occasions she models for students in her English classes how she would respond in writing, but she said it is challenging to write live in front of students.

Several participants said that once they show exemplars and outline the requirements of a writing task, students then move to writing independently. This form of instruction appeared to be the extent of instruction on subject-specific forms of writing and thinking. Holly believes that when she shares exemplars, it helps to promote better quality writing
from students. She said that she does not spend much time on the mechanics of writing, but will go through the elements of the form of the assigned writing. She used the “point-proof-comment” structure as an example. Peter explained his teaching process with lab reports. For the first lab, they practise together and after that “they are off on their own.” In Gord’s civics classes he shows students a variety of exemplars, from the “good to the not-so good.” He also provides students with many guiding questions to help them write their opinion piece.

**Purpose of In-class Writing**

Opportunities for writing in class are provided as a way to ensure teachers receive assignments from their students, so they can then move on to the next topic of study. Several participants agreed that students in the applied-level do not complete assignments unless their teachers provide time for the writing in class. Though they recognize that it might not be their best piece in terms of depth of thinking and use of writing mechanics, teachers have students write in class so at least the task is completed. Most of the writing for applied-level courses is completed in class for science, history and geography, while students who study at the academic-level are expected to complete their writing assignments outside of class. A couple of science teachers explained that they stand by the door, so students in their applied-level classes place their labs in teachers’ hands on the way out otherwise some of these assignments may never come back.

**Balancing Facilitation of the Writing Process with Time Constraints**

In some groups, there was discussion on how teachers facilitate the writing process, while in other focus groups, participants shared that they do not really use this approach because of time constraints to cover course content. Sean described his religion classes as
being pretty quiet when they are writing, but he shared, “I don’t know if I spend enough time or do a particularly good job of teaching the process.” In Grade 9 open-level courses, he might spend more time walking through what an assignment should look like, but not with the older classes. Jeff contends that students in his history classes do not put the time into doing process work. When they have in-class workdays and he asks to see their rough work, it is not completed. He says that he finds this frustrating because he has laid out all the details step-by-step for the students (Appendix H). He does not know whether it is the fact that the instructions are too long, or if students just do not want to do the work. When students run into difficulty he will ask them if they have looked at the writing guide that he has provided only to find that many of them have not used it as a reference. Jeff acknowledged that he is not good at tracking the process: “I think my weakness in this area is I need to establish better timelines for when these things should be done.” He also shared that he does not necessarily assess and evaluate the process work, “so why would students take it seriously?”

Through emphasis on use of the writing process and regular student conferences, several English teachers find that it helps to make students accountable for completing steps in the process. However, in some applied-classes, they said that there are times all they receive from students is the process work done in class. It is hard to get students to complete the final product outside of class. Giovanni uses the writing process with major assignments. Minor assignments might never be produced in final draft form because the discussion around the merits of the paper in process is all that is necessary.

Alison explained that when she prepares writing assignments for her students in Grades 9 and 10, that all of her effort is spent helping to organize students’ time. They need
support developing time management skills, so they can complete tasks. Alison added that the teachers have to “lead students every step of the way.” Luke explained that the process is the most important aspect of writing in English classes. He stated that, “there’s a starting point, there’s revision, there’s editing; steps that you take to say what it is that you really want to say.” For these reasons, he insists on an outline, so he can provide feedback on the content before students start drafting.

For teachers who are not already using the writing process and the opportunities that it provides for feedback, they said if they could find a way to incorporate it into their classes without taking time away from their curriculum, or adding to their workload, then they would. Max explained that he does not have time to work in opportunities for feedback in class because of the curriculum that he must cover in science. However, he said that he does encourage students to give him their work in advance and “when I have time, I can give them feedback. The problem is to do this every time for every single student is just not possible.”

On the issue of how often writing is assessed in the Grades 9 and 10 science courses, participants feel that collecting weekly labs is too demanding for both students and teachers. Sandra stated that there just is not enough time to mark all the papers, so she might just collect a section of the lab, such as the sources of error. Max feels that if rough drafts become mandatory, then they become too onerous: “I’ll offer it up, but I don’t know whether I would be willing to commit to collecting everybody’s report. Even five minutes going through verbally with everyone. I can’t sacrifice 45 minutes of my period to do that.”

**Feedback is Provided at the End of Writing**

Different approaches to providing feedback are used according to the subject and course level. Teachers in content areas other than English and French said that most of
writing in the academic-level classes is completed outside of class, so there is not much feedback offered to students during the process of writing. However, for one science assignment, the “Optics Summative” task, students might receive feedback on content and have to make revisions before they can continue. Sandra and Mark explained that this science assignment is the one task when they walk students through the writing process step-by-step. After that students are expected to know how to approach the lab report.

Max described that when, and if, students write in his science classes it might be independently or in pairs. He will circulate, but there is very little time to work one-on-one with students, so there is not a lot of feedback until they receive an assignment back. When he has identified that there is a lack of understanding, or a problem, he said, “There is more of an impetus to meet with them individually, but not while they are working through the process.” If he finds that there are too many errors, or the students require help with their writing, he might try to pull them aside, or send them to the Study Hall to get someone to work with them. This, however, is done after the assignment is evaluated.

Gord described the challenge of teaching the career studies and civics courses that are half credits, so he has only nine weeks with the students. In the civics course there are weekly opinion pieces that students write. He responds to these tasks immediately, so students can apply the feedback to the next week’s writing piece. He recognizes that this is a lot of work and that it takes time, but it makes a difference in improving students’ writing. Gord shared that other teachers of this course do not necessarily use the same approach, so they do not see an improvement in student writing. Tony explained that in career studies, as in other open-level courses, there is time to practise writing all along the way. Sometimes those pieces are handed in, and anecdotal comments and suggestions are offered, such as,
“Why don’t you talk about this?” or “Could you use more adjectives here for better description?” Sean described the final summative task in Grades 9 and 10 religion courses as a step-by-step process, so students get feedback along the way. He said that the feedback in a religion class is different than in other courses. It is less about the mechanics, and more on their thinking about the topic and point of view. Similarly, Ian said that he writes personal comments rather than mechanical ones, such as: “It sounds like our grandmothers were very similar.” He insists that it is important to build some kind of a connection with students, so they know that someone has paid attention to them as writers has heard their stories. Alex explained how in his French classes students receive a lot of feedback. By using conferences, he is able to provide feedback in “real time” which lightens his load of assessing writing. Alison also emphasized the importance of making comments throughout the process in her English classes. She feels that this feedback is more important than the mark. In fact, she now does not give them marks for process work.

Several participants use a similar approach to address common weaknesses in writing with the whole class. These weaknesses usually have to do with spelling mistakes, such as “there, their, and they’re.” The participants said that they list the mistakes on the board and provide the correct form, but even after going over these weaknesses, students still continue to make them. Patrick shared that he feels “a certain kind of hopelessness when I do this because I don’t think it makes a difference.”

Participants shared their frustration with students who do not take the opportunity to hand things in and receive feedback. They believe that many students do not value the writing process and opportunities for feedback because they do not receive marks for these stages. Tony said that students have “already learned by Grade 10 that deadlines don’t
matter, so they don’t heed the feedback” to make improvements on their writing. In the interview discussions, teachers reflected on and recognized their responsibility for organizing and strategically requiring these process pieces during the process rather than at the end. Otherwise, as Rita explains, “If a teacher asks students for their rough work, they say that they back track and come up with it after the fact.” For academic-level classes in science, students quite often complete the writing at home and teachers feel that students do not complete rough drafts. Sandra said, “I think that they do one draft and they don’t proofread it and they submit it. It’s always a working copy.”

Jeff explained that he tries to conference with each student, but believes that he is not “forceful” enough in these meetings. When he asks students how their research and writing is going, they say that it is fine, but when the due date is approaching, he finds that research, outlines, and drafts are poorly done. With students’ short opinion pieces that they write, he tries to give them “reasonable feedback, but rarely do they take it to heart.” Like Jeff, several participants explained that they are not certain what feedback to give to students. When they provide comments, they might write “awk” in the margin to indicate that a sentence is awkwardly written, but as Jeff shared, “I don’t know how to explain the problem to the student.” Similar to Jeff, Rita does a lot of commenting on student work in her English and business classes, but is uncertain how much of her feedback is read by her students. She felt that because this feedback is provided at the end of the task, there is less purpose and motivation to apply suggestions for improvement. For students in the mid-range and lower, when MJ offers feedback, many respond with “Yeah, whatever.” She feels that in these open-level classes that some students are quite happy with their marks as long as they just pass.
Mixed Views on Incorporating Peer Assessment into Classroom Practice

The topic of peer assessment drew mixed reactions from the participants. It is apparent that teachers in the language subject areas have established routines for peer assessment and see benefits in this form of feedback, while teachers in other subject areas are more hesitant to incorporate peer assessment into their classes.

Luke commented that he is “always surprised at how closely students read each other’s work. If I ask them to point out a strength or some things that they would like to suggest for improvement, I find for some reason that they take it seriously and they fill out the feedback forms with comments like: ‘I thought that this character was really well developed’ or ‘You might want to work on this point.’” Alex explained that structures are in place for his students to be on task—usually revising one another’s papers. He prefers to have students work in groups of four, so if one student is not a strong writer, there are still two others in the group who can offer feedback as they pass their papers around to all group members. Inevitably, someone benefits more and someone does not get as much out of the process, but they get a chance to have their papers read by several different people.

Similarly, Melanie explained that students must feel comfortable and know their peers before the teachers attempt to use peer editing in their classes. She tries to teach them types of comments to provide because the goal is to make the paper better. Melanie also commented that when students write drafts keeping the audience in mind, including their peers, this helps them be more willing to participate in peer editing.

Several other participants have reservations about using peer assessment in all of their classes. Patrick noted that an issue with doing peer editing in an open-level class is that the students working at a lower level are sometimes embarrassed about their writing and do not
want others to see it. Tony feels that, “from a social standpoint, there is reluctance to offer suggestions to be the least bit critical.” According to participants, students are hesitant to offer feedback because if they make comments for improvement, then they think that their peer is going to get back at them. Max feels that students do not “give much credence to what peers have written.” And he finds that students are too nice to their peers: “There’s not a whole lot of feedback on the writing or even the content. It is very complimentary.”

Jeff was very open and honest in describing his experience with peer evaluation as not very effective:

I don’t think that I do a good job. I offer them the opportunity to do it and maybe it’s because I don’t provide them with any real guide or framework to do it. I’m not an English teacher and I know that we are all supposed to be teachers of literacy. With peer evaluation, it’s more along the lines of me saying, “Have you had a chance to read your friend’s paper. Don’t necessarily be their friend and ask yourself if they are making sense.”

Holly also has some concerns with peer editing on the social level. She said that “it is too overwhelming for many students, or there are people who are editing their friend’s work, and they think that it is a feel-good task, and they’ll put a smiley face on the paper.” She tries to address this issue by taking the class through peer editing together where they look at one aspect as she directs them and then another.

**Knowledge, Beliefs, and Practices About Writing and Thinking**

Teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and practices about writing and thinking in their subject area emerged in the interviews and through examination of the sample writing tasks.
Though teachers acknowledge thinking as an important skill that students need to develop, not all teachers have knowledge of effective practices, or consistently employ such methods to support students’ development of higher order thinking skills. It is important to note the interaction between these concepts because teacher knowledge influences their beliefs and vice versa. Their knowledge and beliefs about writing and thinking in their content area are thus reflected in their instructional practice. Analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in sub-categories of the theme on the relationship between writing and thinking: talking to learn and to write; the learning environment; thinking tools to support writing; structured writing; making connections to develop thinking; and use of metacognition to develop thinking and learning.

The Role of Talking in Learning and Writing

Teachers in most subject areas indicated that they use a variety of approaches to support their students’ development of thinking. Several spoke about using talk (whole group or small group) at different times to help students think about the topic of writing. Teachers indicated that they might use classroom conversations as the first phase in thinking about a topic, or they might provide students with some time to think independently before sharing with a small group or the whole class. In other situations, teachers ask students to write before talking with peers so that they have some time for independent thinking before expressing their ideas to others.

According to participating teachers who facilitate learning conversations, talking before writing benefits all students by providing a starting point for activating prior knowledge and experiences. Melanie spoke about the importance of talking and brainstorming ideas with the whole class before students write independently:
The ones [students] who don’t need this are fine because they like looking good in front of others by answering the questions. While the ones who need it, get it. Otherwise, you have students, by the time class is done, they haven’t written anything at all.

Alex, a French teacher, stated “I realize the importance of talk to help them wrap their heads around ideas before they start writing.” Similarly, Luke said that sometimes students in his English classes have trouble getting what is in their head down on paper. Gord also shared that in his civics classes when students write opinion responses to articles that “they have a hard time coming up with ideas because they have difficulty making connections to the issues. They don’t know a lot about the issues, such as proroguing parliament, so they need me to go around and lead them.” Rita, a business and literacy teacher, described her experience in providing students with opportunities to think:

It is important to have a lot of talk about the writing task or topic. And then the silence… the waiting for inspiration to happen. But the talk is important for that inspiration to happen. For my students, there is a level of unsureness [sic] about what they should write. And that takes time for them to figure it out, so it does require that I circulate and help.

The subject-specific focus group with science teachers was the only group interview where talking to think about ideas for writing did not emerge in the conversation. While in the subject-specific focus group of religion teachers, there was limited reference to talking to think and learn as a way to develop ideas.
The Learning Environment

The discussion on classroom conversation led to the topic of creating a learning environment for when, and if, writing occurs in class. When teachers in many focus groups recalled occasions of students working on a writing task, the topic of the classroom environment and issues around collaboration surfaced. Many participants believe that it is not possible to establish groups for collaboration in all of their classes. A few other participants disagreed with their colleagues as they described their classrooms.

Giovanni spoke about setting up the classroom environment that will encourage students to respond to whatever the topics are: “I’m setting up the atmosphere that will help the creative experience. Also they need to know that others will read what they write.” Alex described how on occasions his students might work individually to brainstorm ideas using graphic organizers, before pairing up with another student or squaring with another pair. These routines are practices that allow his students to help one another while he makes his way around the room. Geo described his experience teaching geography in a provincial demonstration school with five to six students as much easier to facilitate one-on-one conferencing and to get around to all the students. In a regular school, like Grange Heights, where he might have up to 30 Grade 9 students, he said that there are just too many students to meet with individually all the time. He usually provides instruction and feedback on writing to the whole class where he might use the whiteboard or SMART Board. Because geography is a “heavy knowledge-based course,” there is not much time to set up groups for sharing writing, so they usually do not work with partners or in small groups in class. Several of the science teachers shared the same concern about the amount of time that group work takes away from covering the curriculum expectations. Ian also expressed concern
over supervision of group work. If he is working with individual students or small groups, he said he could not be certain that others are on task.

Several teachers spoke about the challenge of addressing the needs of all students particularly in open-level courses like career studies, civics, and religion. With such a range in student ability, they struggle to keep students on task. Janet shared some of her frustrations with getting students to write in an open-level class. Many of her students come to class without pens, pencils, or binders. By the time she tends to these needs, students who had all the necessary materials to begin with are already finished the writing task: “It’s a circus!” Janet said. “Just managing that in terms of written work is difficult.” Patrick described similar experiences. Sean shared that much of his time is spent managing the class and in trying to make students accountable for themselves.

**Teachers Use Thinking Tools to Support Writing**

Some participants spoke about the various thinking tools that they introduce to students, including free writing, graphic organizers, and concept mapping, to support students’ thinking and writing; however, most participants do not provide such scaffolding. English and French tended to be the content areas where students generate ideas by using a graphic organizer of some sort.

Alex acknowledged, “Not every student likes to use a graphic organizer, which is fine, but those who do, end up with a much better organized response.” He also shared that quite often he develops new thinking tools for his French classes to suit the writing purpose and felt that “students need to learn about lots of different ways to develop and organize their thinking. When I make up new ones, they see how they can adapt some to suit [their needs]” (Appendix I). Leeanne explained that students’ reading journals in English classes are also
used to develop their ability to use writing to learn because they reflect on what they have read and try to make connections to what they already know. She sees a correlation between reading and writing and uses the double-entry journal structure for these reading responses.

Tony described watching a colleague use “rapid writing” in a class, so he tried this activity in his career studies class and found it to be a “tremendously useful tool because writing is not always linear.” He felt that students get caught up in a “systematic approach” to doing everything and that this is not always the most effective way to write to develop thinking. Alison noted that in order to get students in her English classes to develop thinking skills, they need to be more creative in their writing and worry less about structure in the early stages of writing. Alison referred to Think Literacy, a MOE resource (2003) that she uses regularly to help students discover inspirations for writing topics:

I use Think Literacy all the time because I’m always looking for ways to move them through the process. I used to say, “Let’s start with brainstorming,” but now they don’t do that anymore. They need T-charts, they need those graphic organizers, those tools to organize themselves, so I’m always looking for a way to do that.

For most teachers, the explicit use of such thinking tools is not a part of their regular instructional practice. However, there are some teachers who provide students with more “detailed handouts” which could be considered thinking tools. These teachers are unaware of the impact of the tool and so they are not explicit in teaching about its use. When she hears other teachers talk about approaches to writing instruction, Sandra admitted, “I need to see the strategies in action. I want to see examples of learning and hands-on activities that work in science classes.”
Teachers Value Structured Writing over Exploratory Writing

In analysing the interview transcripts, two opposing views on the theme of thinking emerged around the topic of structured writing: the value of structured writing and the power of unstructured writing. Structured writing is valued most in the social sciences and science content areas. These two departments provided me with copies of writing guides that they have prepared for their students (Appendices H and J).

Geo described that he is most pleased with student writing when he reads papers that are well structured. He contends that because he devotes a lot of time to the essay structure that student papers are well written. However, the downside of spending time on writing instruction so they can “put this literacy in,” is that it is at the expense of the curriculum. Jeff explained that he too has spent a lot of time “laying out” the specifics for some history assignments, so that he does not miss anything and that students have all the information that they require to complete the task. In academic history classes, students write five-paragraph argumentative essays. He has prepared a “wonderful, step-by-step process to go through and it has the flowcharts, blank copies of things where they put their ideas and their process of writing” (Appendix H). Unlike Geo, Jeff lamented that he finds the students rarely use this guide. Mary wondered if “we have swung too far in giving students so much structure and support that we are preventing students from taking risks? Added to this is the pressure of marks. The stakes are so high that students are afraid if they don’t follow the structure, then they will lose marks.”

Contrary to the emphasis on structure, Luke explained that in English classes, particularly at the senior level, teachers spend a lot of effort trying to break students out of the structure of five paragraphs. Leeanne and Alison agreed, adding that though there is
merit to the structure, it inhibits creativity and the natural flow of ideas. Tony believes that structured writing is not always the best approach to supporting student thinking. He feels that sometimes it stifles creativity and thinking outside of the box. Teachers wonder if the structure does more damage than good in supporting students’ ability to think. The teachers of English acknowledge that students in the applied- and college prep-level courses “cling to this structure because it is safe for them.” Alison described the thinking of some students around using formulaic writing in these courses as “I got my three points, my three proofs, therefore I get 92%.” Similar to the discussions on students and risk-taking, she talked about the challenge in explaining to students the importance of thinking creatively and not just “plugging information into a formula.”

Despite the fact that Alison spends a lot of time helping students organize themselves for writing tasks, she feels that this impedes the creative process and that it is difficult to find a balance between structure and creativity. For example, if one day the lesson is devoted to brainstorming or generating ideas, she acknowledges that her students will arrive at different stages in their thinking processes at the end of the class. She wants students to have exposure to different approaches, but knows that they do not all work for everyone; however, because this approach is part of the structure to her lessons in drama and English courses, she is able to “get every part of the process from her students – always.”

Teachers of religion spoke about less importance on structure in their writing their subject area. Sean said that structured writing is not as important as reflective responses and making connections to the life experiences of students. Ian liked the idea that with a lot of student writing: “There is no correct answer, so there is a freer structure.”
In spite of the emphasis placed on structured writing, several of the participants spoke about the importance of students being able to make connections in order to develop deeper thinking. Science teachers debated the value of a program—Smarter Science (Youth Science Canada, 2011)—a student-directed inquiry approach that some of them have started to use. Kate made reference to “students’ inability to think creatively, outside the box. When students are not familiar posing their wonderings and making decisions about exploration.” Peter shared that writing in science is forcing students to think about what is going on and connect this understanding with what they already know. He feels that students are struggling to make such connections. Holly, who teaches both religion and English, and MJ, a teacher of career studies and civics, discussed the challenges that students have in thinking abstractly. Similar to the participating science teachers, they find that students require concrete examples to make connections, either to personal experiences or to prior knowledge, in order to move to more abstract thinking.

Teachers of English and religion, in particular, spoke about the role of reflective writing as a way for students to explore and discover their thinking on topics, issues, or concepts. Gabe, a religion teacher, sees the value of writing in solidifying thinking. Giovanni, an English teacher, believes that writing is not only a strategy for discovery, but it can also be taken to the level of experimentation where there is different learning occurring through the play of ideas on paper. Alison described how she uses writing to learn in both her English and drama classes where students write in character. She finds this form of writing helpful in allowing students to discover aspects about their character, or topic, through their writing. She finds that their reflective journals also help to develop their thinking processes because there are fewer structures with which students need to concern
themselves when they write about their thinking. Similarly, religion teachers referred to the many times that students are asked to think through writing. In Sean’s classes, students keep a reflective writing book and respond to questions relating to whatever they are talking about in class. He usually has the students focus on expressing an opinion or making a connection to their own experience. He commented that this type of writing is a good gauge to determine who is struggling. Ian maintains that students develop thinking skills when engaged in exploratory writing tasks that require them to make connections between course content and their life experiences:

I think that some stuff just emerges when they write what they hadn’t really thought about. It’s in there, but they never had really asked it to come out. There are connections that they can make that they never would have if they weren’t writing and then reading it. It’s a self-regulatory thing.

Melanie agreed that this type of writing produces very insightful responses in both her religion and English. Ian is most pleased with writing when students can make connections between topics that they have talked about in religion class and something that students have experienced. He described this phenomenon as “working with ideas and knitting them together.”

As an approach to support students’ reflective skills and awareness of their learning, a few participants referred to the skill of metacognition and how writing supports the development of this skill. Sandra uses what she calls “I Wonder” journals in her science classes where every Friday students have to write for 20 minutes reflecting on what they learned that week and to state what wonderings that they still have. Alison also talked about regular opportunities in her English and drama classes that students have to develop
metacognitive habits. She has students write in their journals weekly about topics that they have learned and how they have learned them. She said that students are always amazed with the amount of learning that occurred: “They may not have known what they were learning while we were learning it.” Alison also believes that this writing not only solidifies students’ thinking about concepts learned, but also their understanding about how they learned. She insists that knowing how to learn is more important than covering the content because “when a student knows how to learn and how they learn, they can always figure things out.”

While in the Guidance department where Bernie and Mary work with all students, Mary said that she uses writing-to-learn strategies for students who might be in crisis or dealing with sensitive issues. It is a strategy that helps students reduce their anxiety and she sees how for some students, reflecting on what happened through writing brings clarity and understanding about the incident.

**Teachers Believe that School Administrators Should Have a Greater Influence on Instruction than They Currently Do**

In most focus group interviews, the topic of school administrators as instructional leaders arose. First, it should be noted that two of the three administrators are former teachers from Grange Heights S.S. Several teachers expressed that they feel their school administrators do not have enough “experience or credibility” to lead professional learning around instructional practice. In the interviews, participants stated that they want to receive professional development that is delivered by people who have knowledge and expertise on
the topics, and who are able to offer sustained support as teachers transfer their learning on how to teach writing in their content area to their practice.

On the topic of assessment and feedback practices, a couple of teachers hold the opinion that the school administrators do not understand the new assessment and evaluation policy as outlined in Growing Success (MOE, 2010a). Alison recounted a time that she had to meet with the principal about a month into the semester. She explained how she was questioned for not having any marks for her English students because she was providing comment-only feedback on their weekly writing assignment. “I was always in trouble in the office because they weren’t getting marks. I had their assignments back to them by Monday with suggestions for improvement for the next writing assignment. This approach works, but parents and administration didn’t like it.” The principal told her that she had to have marks.

Participants in several focus groups expressed their disapproval of the school administration’s decision to assign teachers to subject-specific workrooms several years ago. They believe that this change has limited their ability to easily converse with and learn from others outside their content area. Peter said that “I have to talk with science department teachers whether we are in the same room or not.” Geo, a history and geography teacher, also stated that “I used to get ideas from teachers in other areas, but now we don’t really see each other.” They believe that opportunities for cross-curricular spontaneous conversations have since been lost.

Most participating teachers feel that school administrators have a significant influence in determining school-based professional learning and should not permit teachers to opt out of professional learning opportunities. When this occurs they believe that it limits how effectively teachers can work through changes in practice in their content areas and it affects
students’ learning. Most participants stated that they would like more opportunities to attend professional learning sessions outside of what the school and school district offer. They feel that school and district administrators do not offer these opportunities to all teachers. Kate explained, “We’re not allowed to attend our subject association’s conference. There are always literacy breakout sessions at the conference.” In addition, some participants feel that their teacher federation places some limitations on when they can participate in professional learning. Rita said that because she does not like missing classes and that she “would rather attend PD sessions that I’m interested in after school or on a Saturday.” Though appreciative of the work the teacher federation does, she and others said that they feel pressured by colleagues who have stronger affiliations with the federation not to participate in outside-of-school PD opportunities. Several teachers lamented that a good rapport between school administrators and the federation has not existed for years. With a recent change in the administrative team, they are hopeful that this relationship improves so there are greater opportunities for both student and teacher learning.

**Limited Functions, Audiences, and Forms in Assigned Writing Tasks**

Teachers’ assigned writing tasks and assessment tools helped to provide insight into the teachers’ beliefs and values about the role of writing and writing instruction in their content area. Analysis of these sample documents suggests that limited functions, audiences, and forms are provided to students across the Grade 9 and 10 content areas.

**Functions of Writing**
In examining the writing tasks and analysing the functions according to expressive, poetic or transactional function, my research showed that of the 66 writing tasks that were collected, 47, or 71%, of the tasks fell under the transactional function (see Table 1).

Of the sample writing tasks, 11, or 17%, represented the expressive function of writing. Writing assignments from content areas of English, French, and religion were the only tasks to fall under expressive function of writing. Poetic functions of writing were evident in all but one of the content areas that participated in the study. A total of eight, or 12%, of the 66 writing tasks were coded as poetic. There was no example of writing in the poetic function from career studies and civics. This might be explained by the fact that these subjects are half-credit courses of nine-weeks of study. With limited time as teachers shared in the interviews, teachers focus on getting through the course curriculum. There was one sample of the poetic function of writing from a Grade 9 science teacher, where students were asked to write about their “Super Hero Element” in the chemistry unit. This example of creative writing was unique to the teacher and seemed to be in contrast to the heavy emphasis of writing transactional writing in the other samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 1 Functions of Writing Tasks</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Area</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Studies and Civics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Audiences for Written Assignments

In considering audience of the writing tasks, many of these samples, particularly in career studies, civics, English and French courses, fell under both audiences of *student-to-instructor* and *student-to-evaluator* (see Table 2). This was the case in writing assignments that explicitly facilitated the use of the writing process and required that students take part in conferences with teachers and peers as they worked through the process, and then moved toward the final product. With the exception of the religion sample, the audiences for many of the English and French writing tasks included self, teacher and occasionally peers. These tasks were first written for the student-to-instructor audience, and then revised and written for the student-to-evaluator audience. There were three examples of tasks from the English content area and two from the French content area, which were written only for the student-to-instructor audience. These examples illustrate the opportunity of writing to learn where students freely explore ideas without the pressure of writing to be graded. Writing tasks from the content areas of geography, history, science and religion represented most of the tasks written for the audience of teacher-as-evaluator.

Two writing tasks from history, and one from religion, indicated that the writing process was a clear expectation where students would receive feedback on their writing. There were no examples of the writing process being facilitated in the science examples, though through the interviews teachers said that students were welcome to meet with them to
receive feedback. These findings are not surprising in that use of the writing process is stated as an expectation in the English and French curricula.

Writing for *self* as the audience was evident in career studies, civics, English, French and religion sample tasks. There was no evidence of *self as the audience* in the other participating content area samples.

### Table 2 Audiences of Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area</th>
<th>Instructor (Writing to Learn)</th>
<th>Evaluator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Studies and Civics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Forms and Length of Writing Tasks

Results of the form and length of writing tasks are listed in Tables 3-5. For the sake of this study, length of writing is determined in these ways: short writing tasks are four lines
or fewer; medium writing tasks are approximately half a page; and long writing tasks are one page or more. From the samples gathered for this study, 27 of the tasks were considered long, while 22 of the samples were coded as medium length and 17 tasks were coded short in length.

As shown in Table 3, students were required to write lengthier pieces of more than one page in all content areas. Writing a series of paragraphs was the form of writing demanded most often. From the sample tasks, students were asked to write a series of paragraphs expressing an opinion nine times, or 14% of the time.

Table 3 Long Writing Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Form/Type</th>
<th># of Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>essay</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report – lab</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report – news</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report – research</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>script</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>series of paragraphs expressing an opinion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>short story</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speech</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summary and analysis</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Short answer responses, considered medium length writing task as shown in Table 4, were the second most common form of writing demanded in 11, or 17%, of the tasks.
Table 4 Medium Writing Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Form/Type</th>
<th># of Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>journal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>short answer</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summary</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visual aids</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>web page</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the frequency of writing tasks was not clearly indicated in the data collection, the length of writing tasks listed in the tables suggested that there was not a significant amount of writing occurring across the content areas. As illustrated in Table 5, short paragraph writing tasks were each demanded six times. In looking at the forms of writing in the tables, one can see that many of these forms might also fall under writing a series of paragraphs for a variety of functions. In considering a focus of this study to develop students’ ability to think, express and reflect, questioning as a form of writing was asked of students three times. In the sample tasks, there was no indication that opportunities to seek answers to the questions were facilitated.

Table 5 Short Writing Tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Form/Type</th>
<th># of Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fill-in-the-blank</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>list</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paragraph</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>point-form notes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>questions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tools Used to Assess Student Writing

A limited number of assessment tools were provided with the sample writing tasks. What I did receive included checklists for the assignment, rubrics, and writing guides from the content areas of science and the social sciences. These samples provided a glimpse of some of the participants’ assessment practices for writing. My intention in analysing assessment tools was to help answer my research on how writing tasks inform instruction to further develop students’ writing skills. Through analysis of these assessment documents, it appeared that sustained writing instruction does not occur.

Science participants provided the most detailed writing tasks and assessment tools, which might suggest that these were most reflective of the practices of all teachers who teach Grade 9 and 10 science courses. In the focus group interviews, they also discussed that at this level they collaborate much more often than they do in the senior classes where there tends to be fewer teachers teaching the specialized courses of biology, chemistry, and physics.

Rubrics. The Ontario Curriculum provides a standard province-wide guide to be used by teachers to evaluate achievement of curriculum expectations (MOE, 2010a). The achievement chart, as it is known, has four categories that represent four broad areas of knowledge and skills within which expectations for each subject can be organized. The four categories of Knowledge and Understanding, Thinking, Communication, and Application are
interrelated. As teachers assess and evaluate student demonstration of course expectations, they are to ensure that the four categories are balanced (MOE, 2010).

In my analysis of rubrics, I concentrated on science because this content area was one of the subject-specific focus groups and I received more rubrics from science than any other subject area. The number of rubrics may be explained by the importance of structured writing in science, as participants discussed in the interviews. None of the sample rubrics provided by science teachers included the category of Knowledge and Understanding on the achievement chart to assess student writing. Yet in the interviews when teachers were asked about what they deem most important in their subject area, they all agreed that because science is a content-based course, Knowledge and Understanding is most important and that they weight it for 40-45% of the student’s final mark in Grades 9 and 10.

In rubrics from the science content area, it appeared that the students must refer to earlier lessons, notes, and/or handouts on elements of writing such as expression and organization, how to describe, and how to format writing in science (Appendix J). Though the writing guideline addressed the inquiry and research process, as well as revising a rough draft, on the rubric there were no references to writing to learn, writing process, or use of feedback in the final product. This would suggest that opportunities to discover thinking through writing, and to revise and edit were not facilitated in this written report. This finding corresponded with the information shared in the interviews.

In lengthier assignments, rubrics from religion courses balanced all four categories of the achievement chart, whereas, shorter writing tasks, focused on fewer categories depending on the purpose of the writing task. The “Celebrating Me” sample task (Appendix G) illustrated the emphasis on reflection and making connections to life experiences.
Communication category suggested the importance of writing that is free of spelling and grammar weakness that distract from communication. The rubric, like the task, did not refer to the writing process or opportunities for feedback.

In other rubrics collected from the participating content areas, all four categories were equally balanced for the writing assignments. These sample rubrics were used to assess summative tasks. With the exception of English and French sample assessment tools, the writing process was not assessed in any of the rubrics that were gathered.

Checklists. Careful considerations to aspects of the writing task were included in all the summative tasks that I gathered. In the focus group interviews, teachers talked about the extensive amount of time they spent preparing these handouts, so that students would write a good response to the assignment and follow the content area conventions for the writing task. Again, with the exception of English and French tasks, after teachers explained the details of a writing assignment to the class, they expected that students would work independently or in small groups to complete it. In these participating teachers’ classrooms, there did not appear to be any mini-lessons, either whole group or small group, on the writing task once students began the writing task. There was reference that rough notes would be checked, but this suggested that these were being checked for completion and rough drafts would only be peer edited (Appendix H).

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the data analysis from both sets of interviews and the sample writing documents provided by participants. Overall, the findings revealed that teachers’ assumptions about students’ writing abilities in the content areas when they
enter secondary school are at a higher level than they actually are. These assumptions shape teachers’ instructional practice, facilitation of the process approach to writing, and their assessment and feedback practices. Participants’ knowledge and understanding about writing and thinking in their discipline also determine how they support students’ development of writing and thinking skills. Teachers’ perceptions about the role of school administrators have in supporting them may suggest that principals have a greater influence in leading instruction than previously conceived. The findings from the sample writing tasks helped to corroborate the findings from the interviews and show that students in Grades 9 and 10 are offered limited functions, audiences and purposes for writing. In Chapter Five, the findings in this chapter are examined and related to the review of the literature that was presented in Chapter Two.
Chapter Five – Discussion

Introduction

The final chapter discusses and summarizes the results of my study that assesses the needs of teachers with writing instruction across the disciplines in a secondary school in Southwestern Ontario. I begin by discussing my findings in response to my research questions and make links to existing research. Then I offer recommendations for professional learning and discuss implications for future research and instructional practice. I conclude with a reflection on my research process and findings.

Teachers’ Knowledge and Beliefs About Writing in Their Subject Area

The interviews revealed that teachers in all content areas make assumptions about students’ abilities to think and to write. Most participants assume that students have the necessary writing and thinking skills to complete the writing tasks that they assign in their Grade 9 and 10 subject areas. With this expectation, teachers outside of the English and French subject areas, do not directly or explicitly teach writing in their classes. When they introduce a writing assignment, they might review characteristics that are important to the genre of writing in the discipline, but do not teach skills or processes such as grammar, sentence combining, summarization or text structure that are essential qualities of writing instruction (Graham & Perin, 2007). Analysis of the sample writing tasks provided by participants offers additional evidence of participating teachers’ apparent assumptions that students have the necessary skills and knowledge to think and write in the particular content area. Though participants teaching history and science talked about the need for students to write from an historical perspective or using an inquiry approach in these content areas, it is
not clear how and when this type of thinking and writing is taught to students. This assumption that students are aware of discipline thinking and writing contradicts the literature that emphasizes direct and explicit instruction about subject-specific literacy (Englert et al., 2008; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Furthermore, participants who teach English also referred to assumptions that they make about students’ ability to write using various forms. However, their observations of students’ writing showed these assumptions to be false, as they discovered that their students really had not mastered the form or genre of writing in their content area. They came to realize, as Moje (2008) explains, that learning in the various subject areas means using the discipline discourses and “coming to understand the norms of practice for producing knowledge in the disciplines” (p. 100).

Teachers participating in this study provided many examples of the difficulties of balancing obligatory curriculum expectations with writing instruction because of the heavy content objectives in some subject areas. Participating teachers believe that using the writing process on a regular basis is onerous for teachers and students in content areas. Similar to these participants, teachers in other studies often stated that teaching reading and writing strategies are time-consuming, particularly when they feel pressured to cover their course content (Moje, 2008). Teachers shared that there is limited time to teach writing once they have introduced a writing task and guidelines, and have shown examples of the task. Unlike research literature that emphasizes starting with the needs of the learner (Hattie, 2012; Hume, 2008), for most participants, their focus is on having all students complete writing tasks that have been designed for the entire class. Several participants stated that students are expected to refer to these handouts and the checklists as guidance for subsequent writing tasks because of time constraints and they can only offer limited further instruction. Participating teachers
agreed with researchers (e.g., Graham & Perin, 2007), that the use of models is an example of good writing instructional practice. However, though they can provide examples, teachers said that they are unable to articulate for students what good writing is. Despite the fact that there are benefits to explicit teaching of writing and use of the writing process approach, most participants are in agreement with Moje (2008) who reports that teachers outside of English courses believe that such literacy instruction is not possible at the same time as meeting the curriculum demands of their subject areas.

In subject areas other than English and French, most participating teachers believe that feedback is generated through written comments that are prepared outside of class time. Teacher perceptions of the need to correct every error and the corresponding heavy load on teachers’ time (Peterson, 2008) appear to have influenced the amount of writing that teachers require students to do. Though teachers do provide some verbal feedback, it is not clear if they see the value of and efficiency in this type of instruction and assessment as Graham and Perin (2007) recommend through their research.

Students’ roles and responsibilities for their learning are a concern for teachers. Some teachers believe that students do not take writing in the subject area that they teach seriously and so they feel that students put a minimal effort into getting the grade that they need. This teacher belief was replicated in other research where students’ narrow ideas about what counts as learning in a subject area restricted teachers’ attempts to teach writing in content areas (Moje, 2008). Participants feel that students might put more effort into writing in an English class than for a content area class.

Participants compared and contrasted structured writing with more creative writing in the mixed-subject groups. Participants who place less emphasis on structure wondered if
there was a correlation between students’ ability to take risks and the importance of following structures and steps when writing. Several teachers felt that students have changed in recent years and that they are more hesitant to take risks with their writing and thinking. As did teachers in previous research (Irvin et al., 2009; Joseph, 2006; Litman & Greenleaf, 2008), some participants felt that metacognition helps to develop student confidence and might assist teachers to foster greater risk-taking in learning. Teachers who feel the pressure of covering the curriculum expectations in their content area demand more structure to writing forms and are more specific in outlining the steps at the outset of the assignment that the students must take to complete writing tasks. Participating teachers’ widespread use of writing guidelines in these content areas underscores the importance that they place on structured writing. Their comments in both interviews suggest that they still see literacy instruction, particularly writing instruction, as an add-on to their content instruction. Such a belief contradicts the view advocated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2003a) that “[l]iteracy instruction must be embedded across the curriculum. All teachers of all subjects are teachers of literacy” (p. 10).

**Participating Teachers’ Instructional Practices**

Teachers indicated that they spend a lot of time planning and preparing major writing assignments, checklists, rubrics and writing guides as a means to evaluate students’ learning of curriculum expectations. The details for some of these writing assignments are evident in the sample tasks that were provided. Teachers consider the detailed instructions for the writing task as containing all the necessary information for students to complete the task. However, evident in these samples are differences between tasks for applied- and academic-
levels in some content areas. More scaffolding is provided through prompts and space provided for responses as one of the many ways to support students’ development of writing (Chapman, 2006; Troia, 2011) and as an example of an adaptation for weaker writers (Kiuhara et al., 2009). However, in content areas other than English and French, these writing tasks do not provide time, nor support for the process writing approach as Peterson et al. (2010) found in a study at the elementary school level. Through analysis of the interview transcripts and sample writing tasks, it is clear that the role assumed by teachers is more to present and lecture in order for students to follow relatively clear and specific steps to meet the objectives of the writing task rather than involving students as teachers explicitly and systematically teaching skills, processes, or knowledge about aspects of writing (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Teacher responses about process-oriented writing instruction suggest that English teachers are more likely than other subject-area teachers to incorporate the writing process approach and spend more time directly teaching students aspects of writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Rough drafts are referred to in some of the writing tasks provided by the various subject areas, but the assessment tools do not include these stages of writing. In several tasks and in the interviews, teachers require that rough work be submitted with the final draft. Students are encouraged to submit rough work for feedback prior to the due date; however, because this is optional, most teachers find that the students who write well are the ones seeking feedback in advance of completing the final draft. Teachers also expressed that they do not strongly promote this practice because they are not grading the rough drafts. Participants’ practice is contrary to the literature on adolescents that states that students must see meaning for them to engage in effective reading and writing strategies (Irvin et al., 2009).
If students are to invest in the writing process, then the purpose and benefits must be clearly articulated to students, so they know what they need to do to succeed as O’Brien and Dillon (2008) explain in their research on motivation and adolescents. In addition, among participating teachers’ descriptions of their teaching practice, there is little evidence of adaptations suggested in the research from Kiuhara et al (2009), such as re-teaching writing skills or strategies previously taught or conferencing with a student about his/her writing.

Teachers spoke about modeling and providing exemplars when they introduce a writing task. Modeling was understood as telling and showing what the writing task should look like, rather than demonstrating the thinking and writing processes that the teacher himself or herself would use (Fisher & Frey, 2008). A couple of teachers stated that they have used the think-aloud strategy on occasions, but find it challenging to expose their thinking and writing in front of students. They agreed with researchers that they would benefit from opportunities to rehearse their thinking aloud and become more comfortable with this practice as suggested by Daniels and Steineke (2011) and Wilhelm (2001). Learning more about instructional models, such as the gradual release of responsibility, was identified as a way to help participating teachers understand the power of modeling in developing student awareness of thinking and writing processes.

An aspect of using the gradual release of responsibility instructional approach is the formation of small groups for collaborative learning during guided and shared writing. While research proves the benefits of cooperative and collaborative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), teachers indicated that they find that group work is not always effective because not all students have an equal role or accept their responsibility for the group. Because they lack a clear understanding of collaborative structures, teachers are not
providing small group instruction as Englert et al (2008) recommend as a way to help students improve the depth of subject matter through writing.

Teachers of open-level and of applied-level classes in which many students may have an Individual Education Program (IEP), find it very challenging to meet the needs of the diversity of learners. They did not talk about using assistive technology, suggesting that teachers are not using such an instructional adaptation that Troia (2011) identifies as an approach for teachers to consider with classes with a diversity of learner needs. In subject areas where there is heavy content to be covered, applied-level classes tend to complete writing tasks in class using pen and paper, while academic classes will complete writing outside of class. However, teachers said that most assignments that are completed at home are done using a computer. Some participants referred to using the computer labs for writing tasks that required research, but not necessarily for drafting or composing. In some focus groups and interviews, discussions about handwriting pointed to different perspectives that teachers have about cursive writing. There are some participants who believe that handwriting promotes deeper thinking (Donohoo & Moss, 2013), and others who assign mostly fill-in-the-blank writing because they find that students’ handwriting is illegible. Unlike the research findings that have shown the positive impact on students’ writing experience, there was no indication that computers in the classroom were being used as an alternative mode of composing for these student writers (Graham & Perin, 2007; Peterson et al., 2011).

Though teachers with experience in teaching English and French reported using more evidence-based writing instruction practices (Graham & Perin, 2007; Kiuhara et al., 2009) and set aside class time for mini-lessons on writing and to support students through the
writing process, they, like teachers in the other content areas, would still like to learn how to provide more effective writing instruction. These findings suggest that the many changes in curriculum and assessment policies, along with the development of numerous teaching and learning resources over the last several decades have influenced teachers’ awareness of writing instruction. However, in spite of the research that points to recommendations for effective writing instruction across the content areas, teachers’ needs that have emerged in this study, like the findings of Applebee and Langer (2011), indicate that there is little evidence of wide-spread use of such effective instruction in classroom practice.

**Teachers’ Provision of Writing to Learn Opportunities**

Participants expressed that thinking—critical, creative, and problem solving—was one of the most important abilities that their students need to develop while they are in secondary school. Yet, many participants do not provide many opportunities that support the development of thinking skills. Most participating teachers were not aware of the term “writing to learn” before participating in this study. Although many teachers are using forms of writing that are considered writing-to-learn activities (e.g., “I Wonder” journals, reflective writing, reader response journals), they are not explicit in their reasons for having students use the particular form of writing that Emig (1977) suggests is a unique way of learning. Participants who have experience teaching English and French are better able to articulate when and why they use writing-to-learn activities. They tend to be pleased with students’ written responses when students use some type of exploratory or discovery writing for deeper meaning making through the process of writing (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). Whereas participating teachers in content areas outside of the languages, tend to shy away from
incorporating writing into all of their classes as a way for students to develop thinking about subject matter and writing in the discipline for a couple of reasons. Unlike some of the researchers on writing to learn who promote this form of writing as a “rehearsal” (Calkins, 1994) and a recursive process (Elbow, 1998) as student writers grapple with ideas, these participating teachers believe that students only complete writing tasks if they are being marked. These participants also feel that all writing tasks must be produced as polished copies, as a result, both they and their students feel overwhelmed with writing tasks that must be graded.

Pre-writing activities that Graham and Perin (2007) recommend as an effective practice to engage students in thinking about a topic are not consistently applied in all participants’ classrooms. Teachers who regularly use some thinking tools, such as graphic organizers and concepts maps are able to assess students’ thinking before drafting responses in prose. These teacher practices are in agreement with research from Langer and Applebee (1987) who state that subject-area writing can be used effectively to help students develop relevant knowledge and experience as they prepare for new learning activities, to review and consolidate what has been learned, and to extend their thinking and learning. For most participants however, there is very limited use of graphic organizers as a way to promote deeper thinking and learning. Several teachers referred to the power of talking to learn, either as a whole class or in a small group, as a way to help students focus and develop their thinking (Fisher, Frey & Rothenberg, 2008; Peterson et al., 2011; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). They observed that students initially prefer quiet time for thinking and inspiration for writing before they start talking with one another. Though several participants spoke about opportunities that they provide for students to think and talk about topics before writing, it is
not clear how explicit they are in explaining to students the purpose of these thinking and pre-writing activities (Kiuhara et al., 2009). It is also not clear how intentional they are in teaching students to make connections to activate prior knowledge and experience in order to build background knowledge before writing (Fisher & Frey, 2009; Langer & Applebee, 1987; Marzano, 2004). Interestingly, discussions about the role of talk only surfaced in the mixed-subject focus groups in which language teachers participated. Perhaps the various perspectives from the different subject areas allowed for dialogue that examined conversations as a way to prime students for writing.

**Assessment Practices and Teachers’ Use of Assessment to Inform Writing Instruction**

Teachers are not using assessment of students’ writing to inform their writing instructional practice. Most participating teachers do not consistently employ, nor seem knowledgeable about providing students with opportunities for feedback on their writing throughout the writing process, a practice that teachers in Moss and Brookhart’s (2009) state as being essential in directing further learning. Instead, they provide feedback on the final product.

Participants said that after they assess and evaluate a writing task, they identify the common weaknesses in the writing by teaching the whole class. On the board, they usually list spelling or grammar mistakes (e.g., the uses of “to” and “there”), or content gaps (e.g., “support?”). They also remind students to refer to the handouts that they have already gone over which outline how to write responses to the task. Participants said that they repeat this procedure after assessment of most tasks. With the exception of some religion teachers, discussions in both sets of interviews are in agreement with Hillocks (2008) study that
suggests that errors in writing conventions and mechanics tend to be the most common focus of written comments rather than comments about the ideas and thinking that students were reflecting. It appears that assessments are neither providing effective feedback to students about their writing, nor teachers about their writing instruction (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

When teachers are concerned about the quality of writing of a particular student after they have evaluated the task, they might try to pull a student aside for a conversation about their writing and/or refer the student to the Study Hall where another teacher can support the student with writing. Most teachers in content areas where writing is not a strand in their curriculum are not using assessment to inform their instruction or to explore ways to provide sustained instruction to better develop student writing. These practices suggest that teachers are neither using assessment to inform their instruction nor to adapt writing tasks for weaker writers (Kiuhara et al., 2009; Moss & Brookhart, 2009).

Unlike research literature that refers to scheduling of conferences during the brainstorming and drafting stages of writing to instill confidence in students as writers (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994), in-class student-teacher conferences on student writing are rarely used outside of the English and French content areas to provide students with feedback. Some teachers indicated that they have tried to conference with students, but have not had much success in holding conferences because it is difficult to supervise the rest of class when they are working one-on-one with a student. Others indicated that when they have attempted to hold student-teacher conferences, they are not forceful enough with students in that they have not stated clearly to students what they expect students to have ready for the conference. These discussions led teachers to share that they really are not certain what they are looking for in student-teacher conferences. They do not know what
questions to ask students, or what specific feedback to provide students about the writing and content. Evident in these comments is that teachers are not aware of, or trained on, the various thinking and writing processes (e.g., setting goals, generating ideas, planning, drafting, revising, editing) that researchers suggest be the focus in conferences that are repeated as student writers work toward producing a final product (Peterson et al., 2011).

On the topic of peer feedback, most participants find that peer editing does not work very well for them and they would like to learn how to better facilitate this form of assessment. Though peer feedback has a positive effect size on writing (Graham & Perin, 2007) participants find that their students do not provide meaningful feedback to help the peer writer improve the piece as Gielen et al (2010) suggest. Inevitably, they believe that higher-level student writers do not benefit as much as lower-level writers. This finding is consistent with research literature on early adolescents that associates both higher student achievement and greater positive peer relationships with cooperative goal structures (Roseth et al., 2008). Some teachers feel that there are social issues related to peer editing. In their study, Liu and Carless (2006) noted that student discomfort with sharing writing during peer evaluation is a valid concern. Literature on peer assessment highlights a few approaches to alleviate these feelings and build confidence as writers, such as, using more one-on-one conferences with students and involving students in the construction of success criteria and rubrics (Peterson, 2010). Participants in the study are not using these research-based approaches in their practice. Use of self-assessment and metacognitive strategies after peer assessment can also help all students benefit from peer assessment of writing in all content areas (Joseph, 2006). Several teachers discussed the role of metacognitive habits in prompting deeper thinking through writing as students reflect and become aware of the
strategies they use for planning, drafting, and evaluating their writing during the process of learning (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley & Wilkinson, 2004). However, most teachers are not aware of the powerful effects on learning when they incorporate metacognitive strategies for students into their instructional practice as outlined in much of the literature on assessment as learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Graham & Harris, 1993; Gregory & Chapman, 2007; Peterson & McClay, 2010).

Perceptions of the Role of School Administrators in Supporting Writing Instruction

Analysis of the interview transcripts drew attention to the role of school administrators in writing instruction—a topic that was not initially included in my research questions and is not considered in the surveys on writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; Kiuhara et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2011). Participants’ perceptions about their school administrators suggest that they do not provide the support as instructional leaders that the participants desire. They seek leaders who can establish a learning climate with positive student behaviour and greater academic demands. This finding supports existing empirical work that examines the relationship between school leadership, classroom instruction and student learning (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012). These perceptions also emphasize the literature on school leadership where principals must have the knowledge, skills and competencies to set the conditions to support teachers’ instructional practice and students’ learning (Mascall & Rolheiser, 2006). Participants’ recognition of the role of school principals links with current research on leadership and offers a new consideration for research on writing instruction.
The knowledge, beliefs, and practices of participating teachers on writing instruction connect with needs that have already been identified in other studies over many years (Applebee & Langer, 2011) indicating that not much has been done to mobilize these findings. Participants in this study have helped to reinforce the importance of installing principals who have a vision and can move the school forward as leaders and co-learners to accomplish the mission of improving student learning (Fullan et al, 2006; Donohoo & Moss, 2013). These perceptions from the participants are consistent with findings in other school districts in Ontario where the notion of principals as instructional leaders has been promoted in recent years through research on leadership and the development of the Ontario Leadership Framework (Institute for Education Leadership, 2012).

**Recommendations for Professional Learning**

Results from this needs assessment study suggest that teachers must accept that writing instruction does take time away from delivery of content. However, with a systematic approach, the impact on student writing and learning will provide students with a better understanding of course content. The results of the study indicate that teachers need to advance their understanding of writing to learn. The benefits of this approach to learning will help teachers to value writing-to-learn activities as a way for students to develop their thinking about subject matter. Further professional learning around the various types and purposes of thinking tools would help teachers provide students with scaffolding to think and write more efficiently and effectively. In addition, appreciating unpolished forms of writing is an area of learning for teachers. Teachers would feel less overwhelmed with grading papers and could then focus on providing effective feedback to improve thinking and
expressing. With a significant percentage of students’ final grades coming from tasks that are communicated through writing, the importance of writing to learn and writing instruction must be realized.

More professional learning on writing in the content areas is also needed. Though a more comprehensive picture of writing in the content areas is slowly developing in Ontario through research projects and the creation of teaching and learning resources by the MOE, all classroom teachers are not aware of the unique aspects and complexities of content area literacies, in particular, thinking and expressing understanding in their discipline. Departments in secondary schools should collect more information on the functions, audiences, and forms of writing that teachers are using. With such data on writing and through collaboration with other content area teachers, then teachers would better understand aspects that are unique to each discipline’s discourse and the norms of practice for communicating subject-specific knowledge. With an improved understanding of disciplinary literacy, and through cross-curricular collaboration, all content areas could work to focus on targeted needs for a more comprehensive approach to improving student writing and learning.

By participating in collaborative inquiry through professional learning cycles, and by working with instructional coaches, learning partners, or mentors, to learn about best practices, teachers can better learn how to transfer new methods to their classrooms. These best practices include instructional approaches such as modeling, guiding, and sharing writing to facilitate the writing process approach. Assessment practices and the MOE’s *Growing Success* (2010a) must be integrated into this professional learning. To support both these practices, teachers must also participate in training on establishing collaborative and
cooperative structures in the classroom and on developing a trusting learning environment where students are involved in peer assessment.

If, as the research literature suggests, the school learning climate has a significant influence on student achievement, then this implies that principals need to make the school climate a priority of school improvement planning. Principals must also be able to balance this with other priorities to build capacity of all teachers and they must know how to support individual teachers improve instruction. At the secondary level, principals may not have knowledge of all subject matter, but they can support teachers with sound knowledge of evidence-based literacy instruction and they can create a learning environment that supports all students and teachers. School administrators need to have practical experience in order to be perceived as being credible in supporting teachers with their instructional and assessment practice. Teachers seek school leaders who have a clear vision for the school community, yet are collaborators and co-learners as all members of the school improvement team strive to make the vision a reality.

**Implications for Future Research**

My findings point to a number of possibilities for further research on writing instruction and writing to learn in the secondary classroom in Ontario. This research involved teachers from a school at which I used to teach. One limitation of this study is that during the interviews, I was aware of my dual role as facilitator and former colleague. As facilitator, I was aware of my ability to influence responses. As a result, I may not have guided all discussions as effectively as I could have. I allowed participants to talk about issues that came to them before I led the conversation back to the agenda.
Because this study was conducted at one school, a second limitation is that the findings may not be generalizable to other schools in the district or region. Furthermore, I received 66 sample-writing tasks that teachers self-selected. Therefore, this data only provides a snapshot of what some teachers say they do and may not be reflective of all teachers’ practices. However, because these tasks were self-selected, they help to illustrate and answer my research question about teacher beliefs toward writing instruction. Additionally, data collected were based on teachers’ responses rather than actual observations or classroom visits. Participants may have provided responses and data that they perceived were the answers that I wanted and so their responses may very well differ from actual classroom practice. My recommendations for further research address these limitations.

In this study I gathered information about teachers’ beliefs about writing, writing to learn, instruction and assessment practices, yet did not triangulate my findings by visiting teachers’ classrooms to gather data on their actual practices. Future research should examine writing instruction in classroom settings in each content area and could address concerns that were identified by teachers in this study. Some of these concerns include the use of instructional models, the establishment of collaborative structures, and the use of the writing process. Additionally, a case study, or collective case study of teachers, from more than one school and district, using some of the aforementioned recommendations as they go through a collaborative inquiry would contribute to knowledge about writing instruction in content areas.

Another way to triangulate teacher interview data would be to gather data from students through interviews and analysis of their writing tasks. As a study that is based on
the premise of reaching every student by reaching every teacher, listening to student responses about their needs would help teachers to identify their instructional needs. In addition, data collected from students might also help to clarify teacher perceptions about their students. The breadth of teacher responses in the interviews resulted in many findings about their understanding of adolescents. Research is also needed to examine the many different aspects of the adolescent learner and adolescent development.

**Implications for Instructional Practice**

My findings indicate that content area teachers want and need opportunities for cross-curricular professional learning on reading and writing instruction that show how they can make clear connections to content area learning. Further learning about subject-specific resources, such as graphic organizers that support students’ thinking and organizing, would complement their writing instruction. Encouraging all teachers to consider using such practices where perhaps just the graphic organizer or a template is assessed, would place emphasis on thinking and take some of the pressures that both teachers and students feel when completing good copies. With this approach, fewer larger writing tasks are completed, but those that are might prove to be stronger samples of writing in terms of content and structure because of the time afforded to address these aspects. Another area for professional learning for content area teachers is to learn more about instructional models, such as modeled, guided, and shared practice, so teachers can become more comfortable modeling writing and thinking. Teachers of open-level classes all agreed that they would like to learn strategies that would help them teach open-level classes where there is such diversity in students’ needs. Using collaborative and cooperative groups, encouraging greater student
accountability, and learning how to provide feedback to students as assessment for and as learning are additional professional development needs for content area teachers. In particular, participants articulated that they need more learning on how to provide meaningful feedback for revisions to content and style and how to use their time effectively to be able to provide ongoing feedback.

A more systematic, school-based approach will provide teachers with more effective instructional and assessment practices and will have a greater impact on improving students’ thinking and writing abilities. Participants said that it would be beneficial to know how teachers in other content areas teach writing and felt that school administrators could better facilitate cross-curricular professional learning and even participate as co-learners who have meaningful knowledge about instructional practice. School administrators play a crucial role in establishing a culture of professional learning and dialogue by having a clear vision and by providing leadership in instructional practice. In order to achieve this professional culture, training for school administrators on effective literacy instruction is essential.

Final Reflections

As an educator who has taught secondary English for over 21 years and who currently supports boards in Southwestern Ontario with adolescent literacy, I embarked upon this journey to enhance my understanding of the complexities of writing instruction in content areas at the Grades 9 and 10 levels. I began my research with predictions—and I suppose biases—in mind. I was very familiar with approaches to writing instruction, the writing process approach, writing to learn, and assessment practices, and anticipated that my research would demonstrate how closely teachers were following popular approaches that are outlined
in the literature as they relate to content area writing. Instead, my research has provided a complex picture of the perspectives of teachers about writing and writing instruction. Meeting the needs of their students is important to these teachers, however, in heavy content areas, they feel pressure to provide the content rather than providing opportunities for students to work with the content. Many of these teachers do not recognize that though they want to help their students, that they must balance the importance of starting with the needs of the learner with curriculum content.

This study also brought to light the role of school leaders. Heads from all departments, with the exception of math (which was not a content area of focus in this research) participated in my study. As curriculum leaders, they are limited with what they can do without the support of school administration. In the focus group discussions, many teachers noted the importance of school leaders in creating a clear vision and in being knowledgeable about literacy and instructional practice. Effective school leaders underpin any effective improvement planning.

Upon reflecting on my research, I have been prompted to examine my own practice and my work with educators in other school districts. I would like to spend more time reviewing current research on content area literacies and connect this research to practice. It is with this knowledge and understanding that I can provide the practical support that teachers seek. By attending to the needs of teachers, ultimately we can reach every student.

As a final reflection, I see how in preparing to present the literature and my findings in this paper, writing to learn has given me clarity in my thinking and understanding of the complex phenomenon of writing. This personal experience provides me with greater insights
as I support educators in their practice to support students to develop their abilities to think, express, and reflect.
References


Youth Science Canada (2011). *Smarter Science Framework.*

http://smarterscience.youthscience.ca/


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Recruitment

Date

Dear

As partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree at OISE/UT, I am researching writing instructional practices to complete a thesis. I am seeking teachers of Grade 9 and 10 courses to participate in the research and collection of data that will help me explore the instructional practices and teacher needs in order to better support adolescent learners develop their ability to think, express and reflect through writing. Would you be willing to provide me with some of your insights about writing in your subject area?

There are three parts to this study. Your involvement in the study would include, first, participating in a focus group interview that would take approximately one hour. Once these interviews have been transcribed, you would then be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview where I would ask questions to further explore some of the responses from the focus group. This interview would take approximately half an hour. The third request for data from you is for sample writing tasks, assignments, and assessment tools that are used in your subject area. I ask that no reference to you as the teacher or your school be included on these sample artefacts.

I hope that you are interested in participating in this study. If so, please reply to this message and I can provide you with more specific details regarding when and where these interviews would take place. You will also receive a formal letter of information and an informed consent form.

Thank you for considering my request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Aideen Moss
OISE Graduate Student
Appendix B: Promise of Confidentiality

Promise of Confidentiality

This form is intended to protect the confidentiality of what members of this discussion group say during the course of this study, “A Needs Assessment to Support Teachers with Writing Instruction to Develop Students’ Ability to Think, Express and Reflect through Writing.” Please read the following agreement and sign your name, indicating that you agree to comply.

I promise that I will not communicate or talk about information discussed during the course of these focus groups with anyone outside of my fellow focus group members and the facilitator.

Name: __________________________________________________________

Signature: _______________________________________________________

Facilitator Signature: ____________________________________________

Appendix C: Letter of Information

Dear

I am a graduate student at OISE at the University of Toronto. As part of the requirement for fulfillment of a Master of Arts degree, I am researching writing instructional practices for my thesis with a focus on writing to learn and the role of feedback in several subject areas at the Grade 9 and 10 levels. I invite you to participate in this study. With the goal of better understanding how to help students to improve their ability to think, express and reflect through writing, I would be meeting with focus groups, conducting one-on-one interviews and analysing writing tasks and assessment tools. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews would be digitally recorded so they can be transcribed and analysed.

I will first conduct focus group interviews with 4-5 teachers in mixed-subject groups and subject-specific groups. Once these interviews have been transcribed, I will then conduct one-on-one interviews. During these interviews, I will be asking teachers to tell me about a typical class when students are required to write, success stories with student writing, challenges with writing instruction and assessment, and teacher needs with writing instruction. I will also collect a sample of writing tasks and assessment tools from the various subject areas and ask that only the course be identified on them as they will be used as another source of information for my research. Your total time commitment for both interviews would be no more than two hours.

I expect that this research will be a needs assessment that will provide suggestions for further professional learning and support for teachers on writing instruction in several subject areas to improve students’ ability to think, express and reflect through writing. I expect to present these findings in my thesis.

Your consent to participate in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent at any time without explanation while I am working on this research. If you decide to withdraw from this research, I will ask your permission to use the data already collected for partial analysis. If you prefer that no data be used, I will honour that request and destroy the data (shred written documents and erase electronic recordings). There is no consequence for withdrawing.

The information collected during this research will be stored in a locked cabinet in my office for five years after the completion of the study and then destroyed. I will ensure that no one knows that you have taken part in this research by using false names for all people, the school and the school district.

If you choose to consent your participation in this research, please sign and return one copy of the attached consent form, and keep one copy of this letter and the consent form for your records. I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns you may have, if you contact me by e-mail at aideen.moss@mail.utoronto.ca or by telephone at 519-272-2180. You may also contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson at shelleystagg.peterson@utoronto.ca and the University of Toronto ethics review office at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or by telephone at 416-946-5763.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Aideen Moss
OISE Graduate Student
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
A Needs Assessment to Support Teachers with Writing Instruction to Develop Students’ Ability to Think, Express and Reflect through Writing

I agree to participate in Aideen Moss’s study. She has explained in writing the purpose of the study and what I will be asked to do and how much time it will take. I have had the opportunity to get additional information regarding the study. My questions have been answered and I know I can ask more questions about the research later. I understand that I can say no and that I can withdraw from the research study at any time without any negative consequences.

I understand that the researcher will keep the data confidential. She will keep my identity anonymous by using false names for me, my school and my district. I understand that the researcher intends to present findings in her thesis as part of a requirement to fulfill a Master of Arts degree. I understand that the researcher will digitally record focus group and one-on-one interviews of which I will be a part, and will gather sample writing tasks and assessment tools for analysis.

I understand that if I have questions or concerns about participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the researcher. Should I have any questions, I can contact the researcher’s thesis advisor, Dr. Shelley Stagg Peterson at shelleystagg.peterson@utoronto.ca, or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Finally, I say that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily.

Date: ________________________________

My name (please print): _____________________________________________

My signature: _____________________________________________________

I wish to receive results of the research study: ________ yes ________ no

Please provide your email address, if you would like to receive results:
___________________________________________________________________
## Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Availability</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Subject-Specific Group</th>
<th>Mixed-Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>After School</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
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<td>Bernie</td>
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<td>Ian</td>
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<td>Peter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
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<td>Sandra</td>
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<td>Tony</td>
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## Focus Group Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lunch</th>
<th>Monday, January 21</th>
<th>Tuesday, January 22</th>
<th>Wednesday, January 23</th>
<th>Thursday, January 24</th>
<th>Friday, January 25</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>Alison</td>
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<td>Leeanne</td>
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<td>after school</td>
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<td>Rita</td>
<td>Alex</td>
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<tr>
<td>after school</td>
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<td>Tony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lunch</td>
<td>Monday, January 28</td>
<td>Tuesday, January 29</td>
<td>Wednesday, January 30</td>
<td>Thursday, January 31</td>
<td>Friday, February 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giovanni (via</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Sean</td>
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<td>Skype)</td>
<td>Peter</td>
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<td>Gord</td>
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<td>Jane</td>
<td>Sandra</td>
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<td>after school</td>
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<td>after school</td>
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</table>
Appendix F: One-On-One Interview Guide

Note: Below are some possible questions to be used to allow the participant to extend his/her thinking. Specific questions to be posed will be determined after analysis of Focus Group interviews.

Welcome
In this one-on-one interview, I want you to have the opportunity to expand or extend your thinking to the questions that were posed in the focus group interview.

Introductory question
Tell me little bit about your teaching experience – your teaching background, how many years you have been teaching, what subjects and grades you have taught, as well as what you are currently teaching.

Opening up the conversation
- Talk about what three abilities you believe are most important for students to develop?
  How does writing support this development?

- Tell me about opportunities that your students have to write on a typical day?
- Tell me about a course/ class when your students are required to demonstrate their learning through a written task?
  In your response you might want to consider sharing the purposes, forms, and audiences for the task.
  How often in a semester students are required to write and how much in terms of length students typically write?

- Recall an occasion when students were working on a writing task.
  Describe what all students were doing and what you were doing.

- Talk about when and where your students spend their time on writing tasks for your course and perhaps why this is so?

Introducing questions on instructional practice
I would now like to introduce another topic for discussion and that is about teaching writing in your subject area.

- Tell me about your planning as you prepare to introduce a writing task to your students?
  How do you invest your time when planning your writing lessons?
  What are the most important aspects that you attend to when planning this lesson?
  What resources do you consider when you are planning a lesson on writing?
• In your opinion, what do you believe to be the most important aspects of writing in your subject area?  
  Talk about how you would make these aspects known to your students.

• Tell me about students’ use of the writing process. What does this look like? How are they supported during each stage?

• Tell me about times when your students work in collaborative groups to complete assignments and what type of tasks do they complete.

• What portion of your planning time would you estimate is used for issues related to student writing?

**Introducing questions on assessment practice**

Another topic that I would like to discuss is assessing writing in your subject area.

• Tell me about assessing student writing?  
  Describe what this looks like and when do you assess their writing?

• Tell me about your thoughts about providing feedback on student writing.  
  Describe how you provide feedback on student writing.  
  How do you determine what feedback to provide?

• Talk about an occasion when students were involved in assessing their own writing and writing of their peers?  
  Describe what was happening and how they were involved.  
  What steps did you take to insure students were involved in providing feedback to each other?

• Talk about a time when you were very pleased with written responses from students?  
  What do you consider effective writing and what might students consider as effective writing?

**Introducing questions on writing-to-learn**

• Tell me about your understanding of writing-to-learn?

• Reflect on your practice and tell me about occasions when your students have had opportunities for writing-to-learn?

• Talk about how you see engaging students in writing to learn activities as an approach to deepen their thinking.
**Introducing questions on teacher needs**

And finally, I would like to hear about your needs on teaching writing in your subject area.

- Talk about what you think is important to know about teaching writing in your subject area?

- Are there any initiatives that exist for motivating you to integrate more writing to learn opportunities into your classroom learning activities?

- Talk about obstacles or challenges that teachers face in teaching writing in your subject area.

- Tell me about how well you were trained to teach writing in your subject area? What sorts of professional development on writing instruction are available to you?

- Think about and tell me about your needs and what might be helpful for you when teaching writing in your subject area?

- Describe the type of professional development that best helps you learn about and implement new teaching methods? How could your department, school, board, and the ministry more effectively meet your professional learning needs on writing instruction?
Appendix G: Sample Religion Task

Celebrating Me

Your first major project of the year involves the creation of your personal storybook. Celebrating Me goes beyond a simple autobiography and explores some key aspects of the person that you have become. Please share only information that you are comfortable sharing. You are encouraged to be creative.

Your own Personal Storybook
Use your imagination as you decide how to layout your book, but your book should be between four and eight pages in length. This includes any pictures and artistic features that you may choose to add to the project. Choose from the following topics:

These topics must be included:
- Important influences/relationships in my life
- Special moments in your life
- My relationship with God

These topics can be included. Choose at least two:
- Accomplishments
- Positive relationships
- Times of struggle
- Places I’ve been
- Important lessons I’ve learned
- Interests, talents, gifts, hobbies
- My dreams

Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/Understanding</td>
<td>The project provides a very simple outline of very few significant life experiences</td>
<td>A simple outline of key moments in the life journey; very little emphasis on key, defining moments</td>
<td>Defining moments are highlighted in the project</td>
<td>Evidence of a superior grasp of the key defining moments in your life journey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking/Inquiry</td>
<td>No effort to reflect on the personal growth that takes place</td>
<td>Some reference to personal growth is evident; simply stated</td>
<td>Defining moments are presented in light of the personal growth that took place</td>
<td>Evidence of a superior effort to identify opportunities for growth in life experiences and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>many spelling/grammatical errors. The project is difficult to understand</td>
<td>personal experiences are communicated with simple language; a number of errors are presented</td>
<td>personal experiences are effectively communicated</td>
<td>personal experiences are communicated in a creative, fluent fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>the project does not make any connections to personal faith</td>
<td>very simple connections to a personal faith journey</td>
<td>a genuine effort to make connections between personal experiences and a faith journey</td>
<td>evidence of meaningful connections between their personal experiences and their faith journey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H: Social Sciences Writing Guide

Social Sciences Department
Literacy and Writing Manual

Paragraph Writing

In many courses, students are required to write a number of paragraphs in different situations. Whether it is within an essay, for a report or during a test or exam, the following method of paragraph writing can help you create a clear and concise paragraph.

Point, Proof, Comment

- In each paragraph you are required to write, you should include three points, proofs and comments as well as an opening and closing sentence
- We will a template in order to help organize your ideas and thoughts

Step One
- First pick a topic that you would like to write about.
- Some suggestions might include:
  - Is a summer job a good idea for a student?
  - Should uniforms be mandatory at St. Mike’s?
  - Do IPOD’s / MP3 players interfere with school work?
  - Does the cafeteria need to ban the sale of French Fries?
  - Do teacher’s give too much homework?

Step Two
- The topic sentence should state an opinion (yes or no)
- Decide upon 3 points to argue. Keep it clear and don’t be too specific.
- For each point create proof to back up the point. Use a specific example
- Add a personal comment to each point. Why does this make my thesis true
- Add a closing sentence. Restate topic and push one step further (solution?)

Step Three
- Complete template.
- Rewrite template into a single paragraph.
- Hand in.
## Paragraph Writing Template

**Point, Proof, Comment Template for Argumentative Paragraph**  
(adapted from *Think Literacy*)

| Topic Sentence  
(Thesis)  
(topic and opinion) |  
#1 Point  
(what is my first reason) | Transition word:  
#1 Proof  
(what is my example, quote, stat, evidence from research) | Source ( )  
#1 Comment  
(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis) |
<table>
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<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
#2 Point  
(what is my second reason) | Transition word:  
#2 Proof  
(what is my example, quote, stat, evidence from research) | Source ( )  
#2 Comment  
(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis) |
|  
#3 Point  
(what is my third reason) | Transition word:  
#3 Proof  
(what is my example, quote, stat, evidence from research) | Source ( )  
#3 Comment  
(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis) |
|  
Concluding Sentence  
(restate topic/opinion, then offer a solutions or further thought) |
## Paragraph Writing Rubric

Name: ___________________________  Due Date: ______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Level 4 (80 – 100%)</th>
<th>Level 3 (70 – 79%)</th>
<th>Level 2 (60 – 69%)</th>
<th>Level 1 (50 – 59%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge/Understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• understanding of concepts, principles and theories <strong>paragraph points</strong></td>
<td>• demonstrates thorough understanding of concepts, principles, and theories</td>
<td>• demonstrates considerable understanding of concepts, principles and theories</td>
<td>• demonstrates some understanding of concepts, principles and theories</td>
<td>• demonstrates limited understanding of concepts, principles and theories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking/Inquiry</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• critical thinking skills <strong>paragraph proof</strong></td>
<td>• uses critical thinking skills with a high degree of clarity and effectiveness</td>
<td>• uses critical thinking skills with considerable clarity and effectiveness</td>
<td>• uses critical thinking skills with moderate clarity and effectiveness</td>
<td>• uses critical thinking skills with limited clarity and effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• communication of information and ideas <strong>topic and closing sentences transitions</strong></td>
<td>• communicates information and ideas with a high degree of clarity and with confidence</td>
<td>• communicates information and ideas with considerable clarity</td>
<td>• communicates information and ideas with some clarity</td>
<td>• communicates information and ideas with limited clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
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<tr>
<td>• making logical conclusions or generalizations <strong>paragraph comments</strong></td>
<td>• always or almost always makes logical conclusions and generalizations</td>
<td>• usually makes logical conclusions and generalizations</td>
<td>• sometimes makes logical conclusions and generalizations</td>
<td>• infrequently makes logical conclusions and generalizations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Common Transition Words for Paragraph Writing

**Contrast**
- Although
- Instead of
- Likewise
- However
- Despite
- In spite of
  - though
  - By the same token
  - Similarly
  - But
  - Yet

**Supporting Statements** (between two main clauses)
- So
- As a result
- In addition
- Moreover
  - Due to this
  - Thus
  - Furthermore
  - Also

**Summary Clues**
- Accordingly
- In conclusion
- In brief
- After all
  - As a result
  - Consequently
  - Decided
  - In summary
  - Finally
  - By the same token

**Addition Example**
- Also
- Besides
- For instance
- Comparison
- Granted
- Similarly
  - Too
  - Namely
  - Further
  - Concession
  - Likewise
  - Of course

**Place Result**
- Nearby
- At the side
- Adjacent
- In the front
  - Here
  - There
  - Next to
  - In the back
  - Due to this
  - Accordingly
  - So
  - Consequentially
  - As a result
  - Therefore

**Time Order**
- First
- Subsequently
- In the future
- Meanwhile
- At length
- Second
- Immediately
- Currently
- Before
- Finally
  - Third
  - Later
  - Now
  - Soon
  - Eventualy
  - Eventually
  - During
  - Afterward
  - Then
The Expository Essay (Geography)

The expository essay is a genre of essay that requires the student to investigate an idea, evaluate evidence, expound on the idea, and set forth an argument concerning that idea in a clear and concise manner. This can be accomplished through comparison and contrast, definition, example, the analysis of cause and effect, etc.

Structure of an Expository Essay

1. A clear, concise, and defined **thesis statement** that occurs in the first paragraph of the essay.

Thesis Statement - a statement in an essay that you plan to support, discuss or prove.

Example of an expository (explanatory) thesis statement:

*The life of the typical college student is characterized by time spent studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.*

The paper that follows should: explain how students spend their time studying, attending class, and socializing with peers.

It is essential that this thesis statement be appropriately narrowed to follow the guidelines set forth in the assignment. If the student does not master this portion of the essay, it will be quite difficult to compose an effective or persuasive essay.

2. **Body paragraphs** that include evidential support.

Each paragraph should be limited to the exposition of one general idea. This will allow for clarity and direction throughout the essay. It is important to note that each paragraph in the body of the essay must have some logical connection to the thesis statement in the opening paragraph.

3. A **conclusion** that does not simply restate the thesis, but readdresses it in light of the evidence provided.

This is the portion of the essay that will leave the most immediate impression on the mind of the reader. Therefore, it must be effective and logical. Do not introduce any new information into the conclusion; rather, synthesize and come to a conclusion concerning the information presented in the body of the essay.
Format of an Expository Essay

The Five-Paragraph Essay

A common method for writing an expository essay is the five-paragraph approach. This is, however, by no means the only formula for writing such essays. If it sounds straightforward, that is because it is; in fact, the method consists of:

1. an introductory paragraph
2. three evidentiary body paragraphs
3. a conclusion

A Complete Argument

It is helpful to think of an essay in terms of a conversation or debate with a classmate. If discussing the cause(s) of Global Warming and its current effect(s) on the environment, there would be a beginning, middle, and end to the conversation. If the conversation were to end in exposition in the middle of the second point, questions would arise concerning the current effects on the environment from global warming. Therefore, the expository essay must be complete, and logically so, leaving no doubt as to its intent or argument.

Notes on the Expository Essay

Evidential support (whether factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal). Often times, students are required to write expository essays with little or no preparation; therefore, such essays do not typically allow for a great deal of statistical or factual evidence. However, studying and reviewing possible topics ahead of time will help to add more examples to your essay.

A bit of creativity!

Though creativity and artfulness are not always associated with essay writing, it is an art form nonetheless. Try not to get stuck on just the structure of expository writing at the expense of writing something interesting. Remember, though you may not be crafting the next great novel, you are attempting to leave a lasting impression on the people evaluating your essay.

* The expository essay is always written in the third person.
# Expository Essay Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Level One</th>
<th>Level Two</th>
<th>Level Three</th>
<th>Level Four</th>
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<td><strong>THINKING</strong> Use of processing</td>
<td>- uses processing skills with <em>limited</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses processing skills with <em>some</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses processing skills with <em>considerable</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses processing skills with a <em>high degree of</em> effectiveness</td>
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<td>skills to generate an essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>based on learned knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>THINKING</strong> Use of critical/cre</td>
<td>- uses critical/creative thinking processes with <em>limited</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical/creative thinking processes with <em>some</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical/creative thinking processes with <em>considerable</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- uses critical/creative thinking processes with a <em>high degree of</em> effec</td>
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<td>oblem-solving process) in</td>
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<td>analyzing geographic issues</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNICATION</strong> Expression</td>
<td>- expresses and organizes ideas and information with <em>limited</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- expresses and organizes ideas and information with <em>some</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- expresses and organizes ideas and information with <em>considerable</em> effectiveness</td>
<td>- expresses and organizes ideas and information with a <em>high degree of</em> effec</td>
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<td>and organization of ideas and</td>
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<td>tiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>information in written forms</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNICATION</strong> Use of</td>
<td>- uses conventions, vocabulary, and terminology of the discipline with</td>
<td>- uses conventions, vocabulary, and terminology of the discipline with</td>
<td>- uses conventions, vocabulary, and terminology of the discipline with</td>
<td>- uses conventions, vocabulary, and terminology of the discipline with a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conventions, vocabulary, and</td>
<td><em>limited</em> effectiveness</td>
<td><em>some</em> effectiveness</td>
<td><em>considerable</em> effectiveness</td>
<td><em>high degree of</em> effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>terminology of the discipline</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>in oral, written, and visual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>forms</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Argumentative Essay (History)

The argumentative essay is a genre of writing that requires the student to investigate a topic, collect, generate, and evaluate evidence, and establish a position on the topic in a concise manner. Argumentative essay assignments generally call for extensive research of literature or previously published material.

Structure of An Argumentative Essay

1. INTRODUCTION
   
   Background Information (list the background points that you will use to introduce your topic, be sure to include introduce the topic of the essay and provide the historical setting of who, what, where, when)

   Thesis (one clear, concise sentence)

   Main Arguments (listed in order that they will be used in essay)

2. BODY ARGUMENTS
   
   The arguments that support your thesis should be presented in a particular order. The second strongest argument should be first, followed by the weakest, saving the strongest for last.

   Thesis Support #1
   Transition (provide a phrase or sentence that will make the link between the topic of this paragraph and the one above)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1 Point</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my idea)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1 Proof</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my evidence from research that illustrates this point)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#1 Comment</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source ( )

Unity Sentence (in a brief sentence, link this paragraph back to thesis)
**Thesis Support #2**

**Transition** (provide a phrase or sentence that will make the link between the topic of this paragraph and the one above)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#2 Point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my idea)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#2 Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my evidence from research that illustrates this point)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Source ( ) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#2 Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unity Sentence** (in a brief sentence, link this paragraph back to thesis)

**Thesis Support #3**

**Transition** (provide a phrase or sentence that will make the link between the topic of this paragraph and the one above)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#3 Point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my idea)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#3 Proof</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(what is my evidence from research that illustrates this point)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Source ( ) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#3 Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(how, in my brain, does this prove my thesis)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Unity Sentence** (in a brief sentence, link this paragraph back to thesis)

3. **CONCLUSION**

**Thesis** (one sentence, new wording)

- **Main Arguments** (list in order used in essay)

- **Relevance** (list point that you could make to show the importance of your essay to life today)
Essay Organizer Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraph #</th>
<th>Point: the idea and the background needed to understand it</th>
<th>Proof: the quotes, examples, statistics, evidence</th>
<th>Comment: How this makes my thesis true</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Essay Peer Revisions and Editing

Introduction:
• Background information
  o Topic introduced in general
  o Background information on the topic
    ▪ Brief biography if topic is a person
    ▪ How the issue began in the early 1900s if it is an issue
    ▪ The who, what, where, when if it is an event
  o Focus in from the background to bring it around to the thesis.
• Thesis
  o Underline it!
  o Is it in the proper spot? (thesis should be 2nd last sentence)
  o Does state the topic AND which stand will be taken on it?
• Thesis supports listed
  o Number them!

Each Body Paragraph: (point, proof, comment format)
• Transitions sentence opens paragraph
  o Clear link to the paragraph above by using key words from both paragraphs. Sentence is general in introducing the main argument.
• First General Point is clearly made
  o Point is clearly outlined
  o Point is explained enough that you understand it
• First Specific Proof from novel is offered
  o Is a specific example, statistic or piece of research that proves the point is true
  o If it is a quote, is it in quotation marks?
  o Footnote at the end of the proof.
• First Proof is explained in Comment
  o Comment clearly explains how this point and this proof work to prove the thesis overall
  o It does NOT just repeat what the thesis is
• Unity sentences closes paragraph
  o Key words of this paragraph and the thesis used. Sentence is very general.

Be sure to do this section for the other two body paragraphs as well!

Conclusion:
• Thesis restated
  o Highlight the first sentence
  o Check introduction: does this thesis match the thesis from the introduction?
• Supports reviewed
  o Number them
  o Now go back and make sure the same order is used in intro and body paragraphs
• Relevance explored (link to the real world, what can be learned)
  o Link to real world situation or a lesson we could learn
  o Did they pick one and develop that idea.
Did they remember formal writing in this section?

**Conventions:**

- Formal writing rules followed: **mark errors by putting a square around them**
  - No first or second person (us, we, I, you, me, our)
  - No short forms or contractions (U.S.A., can’t, won’t, &)
  - No slang terms (chirped, rattled, wimp, etc)
  - No mechanical writing (in this essay, the next point, in conclusion, this quote proves)
  - No questions (phrase these as statements)
  - Use last or first and last names of authors (Trudeau or Pierre Trudeau but not Pierre or Pete)

- Spelling and grammar: **mark errors by putting in circles**

- Sentence and paragraph structure
  - Are there 5 paragraphs?
  - Are the paragraph breaks in the right place?

- Quotations
  - Short quotations: Winston Churchill said, “An iron curtain has lowered across Europe”.
  - Long quotes (more than three lines in your essay)
    - Introduce in your paragraph and use : rather than , just before quote
    - Skip a line between paragraph and quote
    - Indent both margins
    - Single space quote itself
    - No quotation marks needed
    - Footnote at end as in short quote
    - Skip a line before beginning paragraph again (without indenting as it is not a new paragraph but a continuation of the one before the quote)

- Footnotes: at the bottom of each page OR
- Endnotes: at the end of the essay

- Bibliography
  - On its own page
  - Title of page is Bibliography, centred and bold
  - Single space entries and double space between entries
  - If entry is more than one line, indent 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. lines
  - Do not number entries, put them in alpha order by author’s last name

Example:


Essay Checklist and Rubric

Introduction:
- background information outlines the topic and includes who, what, where, when
- thesis statement is concise and clear
- thesis supports outlined individually and in the order used
- intro catches the reader’s interest

Body Paragraph One:
- transition word or phrase begins paragraph
- point is accurate and well expressed
- point is supported with appropriate proof (quotes, statistics, examples)
- proof is properly cited (foot or endnote)
- comment is developed fully and connects the ideas in this paragraph to thesis
- unity sentence links this paragraph back to thesis

Body Paragraph Two:
- transition word or phrase begins paragraph
- point is accurate and well expressed
- point is supported with appropriate proof (quotes, statistics, examples)
- proof is properly cited (foot or endnote)
- comment is developed fully and connects the ideas in this paragraph to thesis
- unity sentence links this paragraph back to thesis

Body Paragraph Three:
- transition word or phrase begins paragraph
- point is accurate and well expressed
- point is supported with appropriate proof (quotes, statistics, examples)
- proof is properly cited (foot or endnote)
- comment is developed fully and connects the ideas in this paragraph to thesis
- unity sentence links this paragraph back to thesis

Conclusion:
- thesis is restated simply and clearly
- thesis supports are summarized individually, in order used
- Relevance to today is insightful and well explained

Writing Style:
- spelling, grammar, sentence and paragraph structure
- vocabulary is clear, concise, appropriate
- formal language is used
- transition statements begin each body paragraph
- unity statements end each body paragraph

Essay Conventions:
- quotes and sources are introduced within the text
- appropriate use of footnotes or endnotes within body of essay
- bibliography included and properly formatted
- format (typed, double spaced, font, margins, page numbers)
### TABLEAU PLUS / MOINS / INTÉRESSANT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>+</th>
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<th>INTÉRESSANT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voici des aspects positifs…</td>
<td>Voici des aspects négatifs…</td>
<td>Voici ma décision…</td>
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</table>
MA DÉCISION = MON OPINION

ORGANISEUR DE TEXTE

<table>
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<th>Introduction</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premier argument</th>
<th>Deuxième argument</th>
<th>Troisième argument</th>
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Arguments à l’appui
(evidence, exemples, élaboration)

Premier argument
- •
- •
- •

Deuxième argument
- •
- •

Troisième argument
- •
- •
- •

Conclusion
Appendix J: Science Writing Guide

FORMAL WRITING GUIDELINES for SCIENCE

Grange Heights Secondary School Science Department

BASICS:
- Typed
- 12 font
- Double or 1.5-spaced
- Stapled together
- Pages numbered

TITLE PAGE:
- Title of assignment in centre of page
- At bottom (left, centre, or right) – student name, teacher name, course code, date of submission

TABLE OF CONTENTS (optional):
- List sections/headings of report; page numbers included

INTRODUCTION:
- State purpose of assignment ... do NOT write "I will be researching ..."
- State what you are going to prove, explain, or discuss in your report (a brief overview of topic and structure of report)

CONTENT:
- Use headings to divide your topics
- Introduce the topic, then explain it in detail, by placing main ideas into paragraphs
- Make reference to figures, charts, or tables that support what you are saying (ex – refer to Figure 1 for a picture of a Tungsten sample).

FIGURES & TABLES:
- May be included in the text where referred to OR at the end of the report in an appendices section
- Must be labelled (numbered and titled) (ex – Figure 2. Tungsten Bohr Diagram)
- Must be referenced (see reference section below)
- Ensure figures are relevant to the report and support or elaborate on what you have discussed (do not merely use as ‘filler’)

CONCLUSION:
- Summarize the main points of your report – reinforce them
- State your opinion or final thought on the subject (avoid using “I think....”)
BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Place at end of report
- **ALL resources used must be cited**
- List resources in **numerical order** and not alphabetically
- **Number** all resources, in the order they appear in your document
  (This should be the first reference in your document.)

- For websites, write the actual site used, and **NOT** the search engine (ie. **NO** yahoo.ca, google.com, wikipedia.org, etc.)
- Refer to 'How to Write a Bibliography' sheet from the Library, use "easybib.com", "sonofacitationmachine.com" or "bibme.org" to ensure proper formatting. APA or Chicago formatting is suggested for science courses.

REFERENCING:

- Each sentence must be referenced separately rather than the entire paragraph.
- **Reference all ideas that are not your own**. In other words, if it is not common knowledge and has been put in your own words, then it must be referenced.
- If quoting information directly (word for word), put it in quotations (" "), followed by the reference number.
  "Tungsten has the highest melting point and lowest vapour pressure of all metals, and at temperatures over 1650°C has the highest tensile strength." 2
- If using statistics, facts, or specific information, but are not quoting it word for word, do not use quotations, but **DO** follow the statement with the reference number.
  Naturally occurring tungsten consists of 5 isotopes whose half-lives are so long that they can be considered stable. 4 All can decay into isotopes of element 72 (Hafnium) by alpha emission. 4
- The **reference number must match the numbering system used in the Bibliography** (see 'Tungsten' sample). References are numbered in the order they appear in the paper. The same number must be stated each time that the source is used throughout the paper (see sample above). Be consistent throughout your paper.

OVERALL TIPS:

- Prepare an **outline** with headings listed /concept map and gather as much relevant information as possible on each. This will keep you organized and on topic.
- Write in the **THIRD** person (avoid using 'I,' 'we,' "our," "us")
- Put scientific language into your words, but ensure you are still using **proper terminology** (slang or 'MSN lingo' are not appropriate in formal writing)
- Check your **spelling and grammar** – spell-check and/or have someone proof read your work
- **Do not procrastinate** – organize and plan ahead to ensure your best work.
- Record your sources as you research (BIBLIOGRAPHY). Open a word document and type in sources/websites as you go.
- **Reference sentences as you write your report**. It's easier to do it immediately than trying to remember where you got the information from at the end.
- **Reference all resources – plagiarism is unacceptable and will not be tolerated**. Plagiarized reports will be deemed 'incomplete.' It's simple to do, so do it!
How to Write a Proper Bibliography: Examples

**Book, No Author:**

**Book, 2 Authors:**

**Book, Many Authors:**

**Daily Newspaper:**

**Weekly Publication of magazine:**

**Corporate or Government author:**

**Internet Source:**

*Outline:*

Author. "Title of Document." Title of database. Date of electronic publication date: Date of search. Internet address.