

If students cannot read and write for learning, they will struggle with — and potentially fail — the courses needed to graduate from high school and enter postsecondary education and careers. Many schools in the *High Schools That Work (HSTW)* network have implemented wall-to-wall literacy programs to strengthen reading and writing for learning in every academic and career/technical (CT) classroom. Other schools have designed programs to target the reading and/or writing weaknesses of particular groups of students. These schools know that literacy for learning is every teacher’s responsibility in preparing students for success in a knowledge-based economy.

Literacy Initiative Pays Off in Higher Achievement

The Literacy Across the Curriculum initiative launched four years ago at **Springdale High School (SHS)** in Springdale, Arkansas, has succeeded in getting all academic and CT teachers to use instructional strategies to improve students’ skills in reading and writing for learning. The initiative not only has spread to every corner of the school but is also assisting teachers from other schools and districts by allowing them to observe the embedding of reading standards and strategies in five demonstration classrooms.

This high-performing and very diverse school enrolls nearly 1,700 students in grades 10 through 12 from rural, suburban and urban neighborhoods. Forty-five percent of students are Hispanic, 45 percent are white, 7 percent are Asian (most of them from the Marshall Islands), 2 percent are African American and 1 percent are Native American.

Springdale High School ranks among the top 100 schools making the most progress in implementing the Goals and Key Practices of the *HSTW* school improvement initiative. The school also received honorable mention for meeting *HSTW* Pacesetter School criteria, including implementing the *HSTW* design and raising student achievement through integration of academic and CT studies.

Raising Literacy Scores

In 2007-2008, the school experienced an increase of more than 10 percent in the percentage of Hispanic students passing the state literacy test, which includes constructed responses in reading. The passing rate increased 9 percent among the school’s economically disadvantaged students.

School leaders and department chairs who met to design the schoolwide literacy campaign had two basic beliefs: Literacy is an essential skill for every student, and literacy is everyone’s job — not just the responsibility of English/ language arts teachers. The school used the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) publication, *Literacy Across the Curriculum*, to guide its efforts.

Professional development is a key element in improving literacy skills at SHS. Teachers gave up two planning periods a month to attend training on how to incorporate literacy strategies into the curriculum. “Our aim in each session is to give teachers instructional tools that they can begin using in their classrooms the very next day,” said SHS literacy coach **Jean Davis**.

“I attribute much of our success to the fact that our administrators have taken part in the initiative from the beginning and have continued to participate,” Davis said. “Our teachers see the principal and the assistant principals as literacy leaders who attend every professional development session and support teachers’ efforts to improve reading and writing throughout the school.”

According to Principal **David Kellogg**, the literacy initiative builds on the “social” inclinations of students to communicate. “We make it possible for students to learn by taking notes, reading the course materials, summarizing the concepts in their own words and discussing new ideas with each other,” he said.



Demonstration Classrooms

Two years ago, SHS saw the need for teachers to share what was working in their classrooms with others who might need additional ideas for incorporating literacy for learning into the curriculum. The result was the establishment of demonstration classrooms for geometry, biology, American history and English/language arts, led by teachers who volunteered to allow

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— Jean Davis
*Literacy Coach
Springdale High School*

their colleagues from the school and other schools to watch effective literacy techniques in action.

SHS is adding two more demonstration classroom teachers in 2008-2009, including an agriculture teacher who will show visitors how to promote reading standards and literacy for learning in a CT course.

The demonstration classrooms focus on literacy, student engagement in learning, and lesson design and delivery. These approaches are designed to help students read complex text across all disciplines, to incorporate writing-to-learn strategies in all courses and to motivate students and keep them engaged in learning.

District curriculum specialists, the district professional development coordinator and the SHS literacy coach met to determine the logistics of the demonstration classroom project. “We started our project with five willing and passionate teachers,” Davis said. “Having the right teachers is critical to the success of the project.”

Three days were set aside to train demonstration teachers and plan lessons. The literacy coach and the curriculum specialists used the peer coaching model to work one-on-one with demonstration teachers during an entire semester of year one (spring 2006).

In fall 2007, the demonstration classroom teachers were ready to open their doors to other SHS teachers, district personnel and educators from outside the district. The Arkansas Department of Education brought 100 educators from throughout the state to watch students use literacy skills in various classrooms in

ways that increase achievement in reading standards and subject areas. The total number of visitors exceeded 250 in the 2007-2008 school year.

Each demonstration teacher has developed a handout for observers. The handout explains and gives examples of the strategies the teacher uses most frequently and with the most success. Here are examples from **Cindy Robinson’s** geometry demonstration classroom:

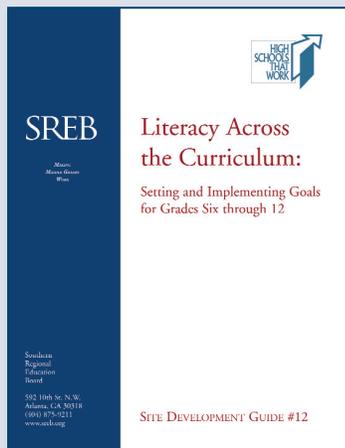
- **Three-column note taking:** This strategy helps mathematics students organize and learn key concepts and vocabulary from the text. Students list vocabulary words in the left column, write a student-generated definition in the middle column and draw a picture of the word in the right column.
- **Foldables:** Students use flip charts, pocket books, vocabulary books and bound books to organize information, see relationships and develop concrete images of complex and abstract ideas.
- **Preview the text:** This strategy gives students an advance look at what they are going to learn and encourages independent learning. It is used most often when a new unit or concept is being introduced. The teacher guides students through the preview several times to help them understand what is expected.
- **Rotating review:** Students are given questions and move around the room in groups to work and/or correct problems in a timed situation. Students use this strategy to practice applications of mathematics concepts.

Demonstration classrooms are available to visitors each Thursday or on other school days by appointment. To schedule a demonstration, contact Jean Davis at (479) 750-8883, fax (479) 750-8897 or e-mail at jdavis2@sdale.org.

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Focusing on Fun in a Schoolwide Literacy Campaign



“The SREB literacy guide contains everything a school needs to know to develop a literacy plan across the curriculum.”

— Martha Jordan
Librarian
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In one project, students were asked to share a story about a teacher, a principal, a counselor or another educator who had impacted their lives. The best of the “Most Influential Educator” pieces were placed in a school scrapbook for everyone to read.

Before the schoolwide literacy initiative began, 90 percent of teachers in a school survey agreed on the need for such a program. Less than half said they were using a variety of strategies to improve students’ reading and writing skills. Teachers from every department volunteered to serve on a literacy committee to plan the initiative.

One outcome of the literacy campaign was a learning summit involving school leaders and teachers focusing on how to turn reading and writing for enjoyment into an emphasis on literacy in each discipline to support state standards.

In 2008-2009, the school is broadening interdepartmental participation, expanding the book study to the 11th grade, developing accountability measures for the literacy project, increasing the use of literacy strategies in classrooms and developing a sequential series of cross-curricular writing assignments.

South Grand Prairie High School (SGPHS) in Grand Prairie, Texas, embarked on a schoolwide literacy campaign in 2007-2008 that had students and teachers reading more and enjoying it like never before. Writing and Reading Across Disciplines (WRAD) is aligned with a district-wide initiative called Read Across the Prairie that emphasizes “reading for fun every day.”

School leaders and teachers used the SREB guide, *Literacy Across the Curriculum*, and attended literacy sessions at the *HSTW* Staff Development Conference to develop a roadmap for success. “The SREB literacy guide is like ‘Literacy for Dummies,’ ” said school librarian **Martha Jordan**. “It contains everything a school needs to know to develop a literacy plan across the curriculum.”

The literacy campaign at SGPHS began with setting aside 15 minutes each school day for students to read for enjoyment. Each of the school’s career academies created a reading list of books that students would find interesting in terms of their career aspirations. The school provided funding for the books.

Sophomores and their teachers dived into the literacy program by reading the book *Claw* by Will Weaver. Students in the video productions class created a “commercial” to encourage 10th-graders to read the book, and more than 80 percent of sophomores checked the book out of the library. Students were even more excited when the author actually visited the school. For that event, the culinary arts class prepared a meal and the graphic arts class designed bookmarks.

A student survey showed a high level of interest in reading among sophomores as a result of the reading event. The activities were so popular that the program is being expanded to grade 11 in the 2008-2009 school year.

Writing for enjoyment was another focus in the first year of WRAD. Students were encouraged to participate in voluntary writing, such as writing letters to the editor of the school newspaper and sending holiday cards to U.S. troops overseas.

Training Helps Career/Technical Instructors Promote Literacy

More professional development is needed to strengthen the skills and self-confidence of career/technical (CT) teachers in using content-area reading strategies, according to a university-level educator who conducts research on how to improve reading achievement and mastery of technical content and skills.

Travis Park, assistant professor of agricultural science education at **Cornell University** in Ithaca, New York, said CT instructors agree that literacy is important but are less certain of their role in teaching reading in their content areas. Many CT teachers are baffled by needing to decide how much time to devote to engaging students in reading in their courses.

Career/technical instructors need training in the use of strategies to help students in all three stages of reading — prior (predicting based on existing knowledge), during (addressing the context of the information) and after (confirming or altering predictions about the text). “This training should be included in pre-service courses and in ongoing professional development,” Park said.

Given the wide variety of textbooks available today, Park believes that CT teachers also need help in selecting books for their classes to ensure that the content challenges students and improves their literacy levels.

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Urban School Takes Action to Promote Literacy

After analyzing state test data, administrators and teachers at **Akron Kenmore High School** in Akron, Ohio, determined that the school needed to improve instruction in the areas of reading process and application. As a result, they developed a plan to conduct general research, establish and implement some common strategies and evaluate the results.

The initial part of the plan called for reviewing two books — *When Kids Can't Read: What Teachers Can Do* by Kylene Beers and *Do I Really Have to Teach Reading?* by Cris Tovani. The next step was to implement three strategies: reading strategy bookmarks with reading prompts to use before, during and after reading; literacy-based instruction; and reading process strategies gathered from textbook materials and other sources.

School staff conducted an in-service event to prepare fellow teachers to use literacy-based techniques in their classes. As part of the professional development, members of the English/language arts department explained how to use silent sustained reading and reading prompts from previous Ohio Graduation Tests.

Students completed several literacy-based projects. One project was to create theme papers and movie posters based on William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Another project was to make a book report by decorating the outside of a paper bag with a scene from *Julius Caesar*. Students filled their bags with objects that reminded them of events from the play. They gave a “public performance” by sharing the bags with classmates and students from a lower grade. Participation was 100 percent.

At the end of the year, 83 percent of ninth-graders and 89 percent of 10th-graders passed the state reading assessment.



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All Teachers Take Responsibility for Increasing Literacy

A strong belief that all teachers are responsible for teaching reading and writing for learning is guiding the schoolwide literacy plan at the **Academy for the Arts, Science, and Technology** in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. The faculty is committed to implementing the plan and is united in making it a success for students.

The school was named a *HSTW* Pacesetter School for 2007-2010. It was the only high school in South Carolina to receive a Gold Achievement Award from *HSTW* in 2008.

The academy's literacy plan has three goals: Have students read 25 books or the equivalent each year; increase the Lexile score by 40 points on the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reading test; and improve students' performance by at least one level from the pre-test to the post-test on the SAT writing rubric.

One of the academy's favorite strategies for engaging students in reading involves schoolwide book club meetings. Each year at least one book is chosen for all students to read. Students group themselves into book clubs of four to six members and meet to share and discuss what they learned from reading the book. They fill out a response form in advance of the meeting to direct the discussion. All teachers participate in the book club meetings.

The academy is open to any 11th- or 12th-grader in the district interested in the career majors that are offered. Students take courses for their majors and college-preparatory academic classes, even though the academy enrolls students from a variety of achievement levels, including below grade level. Teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Every student completes the following literacy-building activities:

- A community service project that requires research and writing in the 11th grade
- A senior exhibition of mastery project that emphasizes research and is required for graduation
- Schoolwide reading and book club participation
- Summer reading, including a book related to the student's career major and at least one book for English/language arts class
- Reading and writing to learn in every classroom
- Maintaining logs with entries of reading done in every class as well as personal reading

The grades that students make on these schoolwide projects count in all of their classes. Leaders and teachers credit the literacy initiative with helping 75 percent of students to receive the prestigious *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement in 2008. In addition, 83 percent of all students made acceptable scores (4, 5 or 6) on the end-of-year writing test using the SAT grading rubric. Eighty-five percent of the nearly 200 students who turned in reading logs in 2007-2008 each read an average of 30 books or their equivalents.

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International Project Builds Literacy at Suburban School

A service-learning project with international implications helped strengthen the reading and writing skills of students at **Ridge View High School** in suburban Columbia, South Carolina. The school enrolls 1,800 students, including about two-thirds minority and more than one-third from economically disadvantaged families.

Lisa Ellis, student activities director and teacher of a semester-long class on leadership, partnered with literacy coach **Nicole Walker** to involve students in a project that would make them feel a part of the larger world community.

The teachers decided that the project would meet the national service learning standards developed by the National Youth Leadership Council. (Go to www.nylc.org.) The standards include curriculum integration, youth voice, diversity, duration and intensity, cognitively challenging reflection, progress monitoring and reciprocal partnerships.

The project focused on the war-torn African country of Uganda. Students participated in a number of literacy activities during a two-week period. They answered focus questions about the war; conducted Internet research to develop a collection of photos, quotes and information; completed a two-column reflection activity; and discussed what they had learned. They also took part in a Socratic seminar and wrote an essay on their goals for the project.

Students chose to support the nonprofit organization Invisible Children and raise funds to build a school to serve Ugandan children living in displaced persons camps. The cost to build one school is approximately \$57,000. Ridge View students raised \$5,400 through a variety of activities in one semester.

Many of the activities were literacy-based. Students developed video presentations and wrote letters to legislators, President Bush and a United Nations ambassador. They also established a school Web site where viewers could get information and make donations.

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Some of the activities were strictly fundraising events, including a dodgeball tournament and a five-mile walk to raise awareness of the distance that some Ugandan children walk each night to reach a safer area, returning to their village in the morning. Other schools in the district are joining Ridge View in 2008-2009 to raise additional money for a new school in Uganda.



Teachers Increase Reading and Writing in All Classrooms

After examining data from several sources and discussing their teaching practices, the faculty at **Sierra Grande High School (SGHS)** in rural Blanca, Colorado, agreed that students were not reading and writing enough in their classes. The result was a schoolwide literacy campaign that involved every staff member from the very beginning.

One of the big ideas of a literacy campaign is that reading and writing are universal skills needed in all content areas.

SREB school improvement consultant **Karen Fraley** facilitated sessions during which the faculty adopted the five *HSTW* literacy goals:

- Read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum.
- Write weekly in all classes.
- Use reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes.
- Write research papers in all classes.
- Complete a rigorous language arts curriculum taught like a college-preparatory honors English course.

Fraley suggests selecting one or two of the goals as priorities rather than trying to address all five at once.

Fraley introduced research-based instructional practices for improving reading and writing and helped a team of teachers to develop a literacy action plan.

One of the big ideas of a literacy campaign is that reading and writing are universal skills needed in all content areas. The role of a content teacher is to help students learn the material more deeply by showing them how to read and understand what they are expected to learn. Teachers should require students to write about their subjects frequently, using the vocabulary of the particular discipline.

Literacy coach **Jenifer Huffman** worked with teachers one-on-one and attended meetings of a literacy focus team that met regularly through the year. She was one of a number of teachers who completed the SREB online Reading and Writing for Learning course. By the end of the year, the teachers were sharing what they learned with their colleagues.

“One of the first teachers to study an online module and complete the lessons was a mathematics teacher,” Huffman said. “In the 2008-2009 school year, all staff members will complete at least one of the Reading and Writing for Learning modules.”

School leaders who conduct classroom walk-throughs report an increased focus on reading and writing in all classrooms. Almost half of SGHS seniors in 2008 completed a college freshman composition course and received college credit.

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Learning to Read Like Professionals in Career Fields

Teachers who help students prepare for careers in business, marketing, finance or government know how important it is for students to read like professionals in these fields. The reading typically is filled with technical vocabulary, complex organizational structures and many details.

Students getting ready to enter the workplace need extensive practice to master six essential reading skills — the same skills that are assessed by college placement and readiness tests such as COMPASS, ACT and WorkKeys. The skills are:

- **Summarize** — Capture the main ideas in a few words.
- **Paraphrase** — Put another person's ideas in your own words.
- **Categorize** — Classify items based on similarities and differences.
- **Infer** — Read between the lines to connect ideas, pick out themes or analyze implied meaning.
- **Predict** — Use current evidence to make inferences about future events.
- **Understand academic and technical vocabulary** — Use context clues or word structures to determine meanings.

To plan effective lessons, teachers need to identify what they want students to learn from reading, choose a reading skill to help students learn the content, pick a reading strategy to help students develop the reading skill in the context of real-world materials, and ask students to report on what they have learned.

“Graduates whose professional lives will be in the fields of business, marketing, finance and government will be expected to read technical manuals, journal articles, abstracts and even Supreme Court decisions,” said **Renee Murray**, literacy consultant for SREB. “Helping students build their reading skills will help ensure that they are more successful in their careers.”

The SREB publication, *Getting Students Ready for College and Careers: Transitional Senior English*, contains examples of classroom assignments to address the essential reading skills. Career/technical and academic teachers will find classroom strategies for raising students' reading levels in the SREB publication, *Literacy Across the Curriculum*.

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Computer Students Gain Confidence Through Inspirational Reading

An avid reader himself, CT instructor **Tom Omerza** of **Middle Bucks Institute of Technology** (MBIT) in Jamison, Pennsylvania, found that his students “just didn't like reading and struggled with reading from the text.” He figured that if he could get his students to read something other than a required text, it would improve their reading skills and build their confidence in reading to learn.

Omerza teaches students in grades 10 through 12 enrolled in Networking and Operating Systems Security in MBIT's computer and information science career cluster pathway. The three-year sequence prepares students to use computer programs; understand the fundamentals of computer networks; install, configure and administer support for operating systems; maintain program security; and manage many other computer industry tasks.

Successful students can earn Microsoft, Cisco and CompTIA industry certifications. Students may also earn college credits through articulation agreements with Bucks County Community College and the Pennsylvania College of Technology.

It is no surprise that computer students need to be able to read technical materials to master the intricacies of the complex and constantly expanding computer field, not only while they are in school, but also in technical careers in the future. Omerza decided that it was time to implement a reading project that would engage students in reading for fun as well as enlightenment.

The project begins with a book list containing the following titles: *Tuesdays With Morrie*, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, and *For One More Day*, all written by best-selling author Mitch Albom; *The Traveler's Gift: Seven Decisions That Determine Personal Success* and *The Young Traveler's Gift: Seven Decisions That Determine Personal Success*, both by Andy Andrews; and *As A Man Thinketh* by James Allen.

“I chose inspirational and self-help book topics so that students would open their minds to a larger world and realize that they are important and have a role to play,” Omerza said.

The process includes books that have meaning in students' lives, book reports that ask students to give their own opinions of what they have read, and a grading system that emphasizes students' reflections and non-judgmental discussions. This approach contrasts with traditional book reports in which students give the author's point of view and are graded on grammar and punctuation more than on their analyses of the book.

Omerza developed book report specifications, a learning guide and a grading rubric, all of which are available online at www.hstwreadproject.wikispaces.com. Students and their parents signed a contract stipulating that students would read a book and complete a report each semester for three consecutive semesters.

Students are required to write a five-paragraph essay that serves as the book report. The essay must follow the Modern Language Association (MLA) format and other guidelines and must contain a summary of the book in the student's own words. The last paragraph tells how the book affected the student. Students participate in roundtable discussions as part of their grade.

The point breakdown on the reading project rubric includes 50 points for MLA format, 50 points for two full pages and a title page, 30 points for class discussion and 20 points for reflection for a total of 150 points. Fifty points are deducted for essays less than two full pages and/or turned in late. After one day late, the essay is not accepted and the student's grade is zero.

Omerza has seen an increase in reading for pleasure as a result of the project. He has also observed more confidence when students read aloud. Students often are heard using phrases and ideas from the books in their daily conversations.

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Focused Writing: Moving Beyond Spell Checker

Writing teacher **Dawn Burnette** of **Grace High School** in Blairsville, Georgia, uses focused writing to get students to take ownership of the planning, writing, self-assessment and final revision of writing assignments. Three basic truths are at the heart of this nontraditional writing approach:

- To become better writers, students must learn to think like writers.
- Every writing assignment should be a learning experience.
- Students cannot and should not attempt to learn everything about writing in a single assignment.

Focused writing makes the writing process more manageable for students and the teacher. "I pick three or four skills that students will target in a particular piece of writing," Burnette said. "They become the three or four skills that will be graded when the writing is handed in." While some common focus skills are included for all students in each assignment, other skills vary from student to student for individualized instruction.

The six steps of focused writing are:

STEP 1. Create a meaningful writing assignment. One example is a persuasive letter that Burnette asks her students to write. The letter describes a school-related, community-related or national issue that the student wants the principal, a school board member, a newspaper editor or a policy-maker to address. Burnette provides the author and audience, the format, the focus skills and the procedure.

STEP 2. Select focus skills. The categories of skills are content, organization, style, conventions, format and challenge. Students keep these skills in mind in writing, assessing and revising the pieces they have written. "Because students truly understand the skills, they continue to use them automatically even after moving on to new skills," Burnette said.

STEP 3. Write! The teacher reviews the assignment and the focus skills, teaching a lesson on one or more skills. She gives students time to pre-write and write rough drafts. Then she revisits the writing lesson. Finally, she gives students time to create their final drafts.

STEP 4. Annotate, self-assess and reflect. Students annotate their final drafts to demonstrate their understanding of each focus skill. They actually mark up their drafts with underlines and notes that show if they have grasped each focus skill. "I can see immediately what a student does and does not understand," Burnette said. Students become accountable for their own learning and progress. One student said, "I love annotating essays. Once I start, I can see where I might need to go back and fix something. I make sure I don't turn in a paper that I am not truly proud of in every way." Students use the left side of the assignment rubric to self-assess. They score themselves on the focus skills only. Then they reflect to describe their process and progress related to each skill.

STEP 5. Grade the assignment. The teacher uses the right side of the rubric to assess the student. It takes less time to grade the papers — and the feedback to students is quicker and more meaningful — because the teacher responds to and assesses only the focus skills. "It means that I can write more positive comments on students' papers," Burnette said.

STEP 6. Track student progress and plan the next assignment. Burnette updates each student's focus skills progress chart after each assignment and uses the results to determine which skills to emphasize next time. "It's better to be a master of a few skills than a novice in all of them," she said.

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Students Select Favorite Formats for Reports

English teacher **Angela Niccum** allows students in her 11th-grade English class at **Fort Mill High School** in Fort Mill, South Carolina, to choose the narrative format for their research reports. The format can be a journal with 10 entries, a short story with a book jacket, or a four-page newspaper with eight articles and political cartoons.

The research project begins when students select a two-year period between 1900 and their birth years. An initial investigation helps students narrow their focus to a person, a place or an event from that period that has impacted their lives.

Students embrace this type of project because it allows them the freedom to research something that truly interests them — from music, fashion and entertainment to politics and lifestyles in general. One student profiled a musician from the punk rock era; another described the odyssey of a music groupie from one concert to another until arriving at the Woodstock music festival in 1969.

“The goal of the project is to have students do authentic research,” Niccum said. “I do not want them doing surface-level research, where they read from the Internet or an encyclopedia, paraphrase and cite the source. I want students to take what they learn, make inferences, see how America was affected throughout history, and put that into their own work while still citing sources.”

Niccum said after grading more than 160 projects in the last two years, she has had only two students who failed to do the work.

Students are required to complete seven components, all of which are graded according to criteria and rubrics provided by the teacher. The seven components are:

- **Proposal** — Students write a formal proposal describing their planned research, project choice and plan of action. (Quiz grade)
- **Business letter** — Students write a letter to a newspaper editor, a legislator or an embassy official to obtain information about their research topic. (Two quiz grades)
- **Note cards** — Students turn in documented note cards with correct Modern Language Association (MLA) citations and paraphrased notes as proof of research. (Test grade) They also have a note card check midway through the research. (Quiz grade)
- **Mid-project conference** — Students meet with the teacher one-on-one to ask questions and check progress toward completing the report. (Quiz grade)
- **Rough draft page** — Students submit one page of their final project to the teacher for review to ensure proper documentation and formatting. (Quiz grade)
- **Narrative research project with works cited page** — Students use at least six sources (Internet and hard copy), including personal interviews, newspapers, journals, plays, short stories, prose, film or poetry to create their project. (Two test grades)
- **Presentation** — Students present their research narratives to their classmates in five- to eight-minute oral presentations. (Test grade)

“Students do most of their research outside of class,” Niccum said. “We have only two days of class time for library research.”

Niccum presents mini-lessons as students encounter problems or move to a new stage of the project. An example of a mini-lesson is when Niccum uses nursery rhymes and technical writing to teach paraphrasing. “If students can read a nursery rhyme and tell someone what the rhyme is all about, they can paraphrase anything,” Niccum said. “The same goes for technical writing.” She and her students talk about the difference between paraphrasing and quoting a source and how to handle each.

The narrative research reports benefit students in a number of ways. “The choice of projects motivates students to be creative and to go beyond what is required,” she said. “It also reduces plagiarism, since creative writing is difficult to copy. The writing is better, so it takes less time to grade.”

“The goal of the project is to have students do authentic research. The choice of projects motivates students to be creative and to go beyond what is required.”

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Writing Program Raises Achievement on Graduation Test

All students seeking a Georgia high school diploma must pass the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHS GT) in four content areas as well as the Georgia High School Writing Assessment. Several other states also have a writing test requirement for graduation.

In 2005, the ACT added an optional writing test as part of the college entrance exam. The SAT begins with an essay in which students are asked to present and support a point of view on a specific issue.

Teachers **Angela Ritchie** and **Barbara Westbrook** of **Coosa High School** in Rome, Georgia, felt so strongly that students needed to improve their writing skills and pass the writing tests that they developed a program known as EssayMaker: The Easy Writing Program. The program provides one-on-one and small-group tutoring with daily writing assignments.

“The program is designed for students who struggle with writing and for teachers who struggle to teach writing,” Westbrook said. “Our program gives students the secrets that good writers already know.”

In the first year the writing program was implemented, Coosa High School juniors and seniors who previously had failed the state writing test achieved a 100 percent pass rate on the test. The percentage in the second year was 97 percent. In the past, students had repeatedly failed the test while the state continued to make it more rigorous.

The Floyd County Board of Education has adopted EssayMaker for use in all middle grades and high schools. The middle grades schools that used EssayMaker gained an average of 10 points on their state writing tests in the first year.

EssayMaker requires students to write one paragraph per day. Students begin by establishing the audience and the topic for the writing. They take into consideration

the four domains of organization (20 percent), ideas (40 percent), style (20 percent) and conventions (20 percent). Prior to EssayMaker, test preparation at the school focused mostly on conventions.

“The program helps students tap into their own experiences to develop ideas and a personal style of writing — something that is missing in most writing manuals,” Ritchie said. Students organize their ideas into sections, including topic, opinions about the topic, three supporting reasons, and how to develop the reasons through examples, facts, anecdotes and definitions.



“The program helps students tap into their own experiences to develop ideas and a personal style of writing — something that is missing in most writing manuals.”

— **Angela Ritchie**
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EssayMaker provides a “detailed” model that includes who, what, why, when and where; a “style fixer” to help students with stylistic problems and give the essay a “personality”; and a “paragraph checker” checklist to help students catch problems before submitting the final draft. The “style fixer” lesson includes devices such as figures of speech, prepositional phrases, adjectives and adverbs, idioms and repetition for effect.

Students spend a few minutes of each day in grammar practice. Teachers monitor the students as they complete the assignment.

Teachers use Paul Diederich’s analytical grading scales to assess students’ writing samples. The scales were developed originally to score SAT essays.

Students receive a checklist rubric to evaluate their own work and to make sure they have followed all of the steps in writing. They have

opportunities for peer editing and are allowed to submit the better of two essays for final grading.

More information on EssayMaker is available at www.easywriterprogram.com.

Portfolios Encourage Students to Upgrade Skills and Activities



“The portfolio process helps students focus on their career goals and what they need to do to achieve them.”

— Barb Baltrinic
*English Teacher
Ellet High School*

All students at **Ellet High School** in Akron, Ohio, are required to complete a career passport portfolio before they graduate. Each portfolio contains school-created documents, student-created documents, reference letters, award certificates and work samples that students compile over their four years of high school.

Portfolios help students analyze their employability traits, develop college and scholarship application packages, prepare job applications, and create working drafts of lifelong documents. The process helps students improve their academic and career/technical skills and participate more actively in extracurricular and service learning activities.

“This collection of writings and support documents is one of the most powerful tools the school has ever created,” said **Barb Baltrinic**, an English teacher who developed many of the resources to help students with the portfolio project. Students work on their portfolios in English classes, where they receive support in producing the many written documents in the collection.

Certain tasks are completed each year of high school. Ninth-graders write an autobiographical essay and a goals essay to identify short- and long-term goals. In the 10th grade, students prepare structured career narratives that explore career aspirations. They also write a résumé and collect the first of three reference letters.

Juniors write personal essays from a list of popular topics that they often use as college or scholarship essays. They revise documents from earlier years and obtain a second reference letter. Seniors develop a curriculum vitae, write cover letters and SCANS (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) essays, and collect a third reference letter. In the SCANS essay, students discuss two strengths and one weakness across the five SCANS areas (interpersonal, resources, technical, systems and intrapersonal).

Students include samples of their best work from all classes, as well as awards and volunteer service records. The contents may be in either a printed or an electronic format. Many students include digital photos of projects they have completed.

The school provides a copy of the student’s transcript, a school profile and a letter from the principal guaranteeing that the student has completed the required course work for graduation.

Portfolios are kept in the school’s learning resource center until they are completed in the spring of students’ senior year. Students may check out their folders to work on them, and teachers may submit examples of outstanding work at any time. The school provides a leather binder to hold the final product.

“The portfolio process helps students focus on their career goals and what they need to do to achieve them,” Baltrinic said. “The essays and writing assignments allow them to analyze themselves and what they need to do to reach their goals. Being more knowledgeable about themselves and their skills prepares them to be more interactive when interviewing for college or a job.”

While working on their portfolios, students have access to many resources in the form of PowerPoint presentations and PDF files of support materials posted on the school Web site at www.apscareers.com. Go to the “For Teachers” link and click on “Forms & Online Training.” Then scroll down to the “Career Passport” section. The Web site is free and is being used by schools throughout Ohio to give teachers and students information on writing narratives, essays and sketches for career portfolios.

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Preparing Teachers to Build Students' Reading, Writing and Learning Skills

Project CRISS (CReating Independence through Student-owned Strategies) is a staff development program designed to help high school teachers incorporate reading, writing and learning strategies into their courses. Teachers who complete the program gain a better understanding of theory and practice about how students become proficient learners of challenging content. The goal is for students to assume an increasing amount of responsibility for learning by using the techniques that work most effectively for them.

The project began as a collaborative effort in a local school district in Kalispell, Montana, when English, mathematics, science and social studies teachers worked together to develop practical approaches to help students learn. Currently, the project is being used by thousands of teachers in the United States and abroad.

To begin the staff development in a school, CRISS trainers work with a team of administrators and teacher leaders to develop a needs assessment and a plan for implementation and follow-up. Once the plan is in place, CRISS staff members conduct an initial two- or three-day workshop for school leaders and teachers. The training is tailored to the school's curriculum. During the workshop, participants apply theory and strategies to their own content areas.

The trainers make subsequent visits to the school to meet with the planning team and to conduct follow-up activities, including small- and large-group sessions, classroom demonstrations, establishment and support of teacher learning communities, parent workshops and support for administrative walk-throughs.

The goal of Project CRISS is to help students become confident readers, writers and learners. Teachers help students absorb a philosophy of learning based on principles of cognitive and social psychology.

"Students learn specific strategies, such as how to organize information into a variety of formats, write scientific papers, write essay examinations and study for tests," said program founder **Carol Santa**. "They also learn to be responsible for self-checking how their learning is progressing and how to use learning strategies to go back and repair their own misunderstandings."

Successful learners make connections, ask questions, reread passages and organize information, Santa pointed out. "We help content teachers integrate these approaches into their day-to-day teaching."

A social studies teacher who had received CRISS training involved his students in a number of activities leading up to and following a mock presidential debate. He began the lesson by asking students to brainstorm what they felt were the major issues of the 2008 presidential campaign: education, environment, Iraq war or human rights. After students discussed the topic and asked questions, the teacher gave a brief lecture on political parties. Students learned how to use two-column notes (with key points on the left and details on the right) and other techniques before meeting in groups to record information they obtained from various sources. The teacher randomly assigned students to be Republicans or Democrats

and asked them to prepare argumentative notes to support their points of view. Students worked in pairs to prepare for the debate. After the debate, the teacher showed the class how to state a thesis and develop an argument into a cohesive essay. Each student wrote a persuasive essay on a personal point of view about politics. (The essay served as the assessment for the unit of study.) Afterwards, the teacher asked students to reflect on the entire process. What aspects of the lesson led to your success? What organizing strategies were most helpful? How did writing help you understand the material? "Concluding a lesson with a learning process conference helps students reach a deeper understanding of what it means to be a strategic learner," Santa said.

"Students learn specific strategies, such as how to organize information into a variety of formats, write scientific papers, write essay examinations and study for tests."

— Carol Santa
Program Founder
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The CRISS project helps teachers understand that their mission is not only to help students learn the content of their classes, but also to help them become successful lifelong learners. For more information, visit www.projectcriss.com.

School Increases Reading Skills for Job Success

Research has shown that the fastest-growing careers require increasingly higher levels of literacy. Adults who read and write with greater proficiency often earn more money than those who lack literacy skills.

When **Lincoln High School** in Lincoln, Arkansas, decided to do something to help its students be more successful in school and after graduation, it launched a schoolwide literacy campaign that is classroom based, teacher driven and fun for everyone. A literacy committee enlisted the help of all faculty members.

Approximately 62 percent of students who participated in the literacy campaign either raised their scores at least a grade level or remained at a level higher than required on Arkansas's end-of-course literacy exam.

Lincoln High School was identified as one of the top 100 most-improved schools in the *HSTW* network based on students' scores on the 2004 and 2006 *HSTW* Assessments of reading, mathematics and science. About 400 students are enrolled in grades nine through 12.

The school conducted teacher and student surveys, gave book talks, made book displays and trained teachers to encourage reading for learning in all classrooms. It also set up libraries in the classroom to increase students' access to books. The books were collected from community organizations and local book drives.

Other classroom strategies included short book talks, reading aloud and silently, and partners reading and sharing content. Teachers used reading log sheets and reading tests to assess the impact of the program.

Teachers **Heather Bottoms** and **Audra Savage** said students are now asking for independent reading time in class, asking for more time to read, talking about books with each other and getting excited about the books they are reading. All English classes requested more reading days.

"When we developed the literacy campaign, we knew we had obstacles to overcome," Bottoms said. "Many students come from families that can't afford to buy reading materials. Students' interest in reading varied a great deal. We also discovered that the reading scores of male students were lower than those of female students."

Following a successful literacy campaign, the school reports that the percentage of male students testing proficient and above on the Arkansas end-of-course literacy exam grew from 20 percent in 2006-2007 to 35 percent in 2007-2008.

Another positive result showed up in examining students' reading levels before the literacy campaign and after implementing classroom libraries and other reading strategies. A control group of students revealed that about 50 percent of students will raise their reading levels on their own during a semester.

Students who participated in the literacy campaign showed better results: Approximately 62 percent of students either raised their scores at least a grade level or remained at a level higher than required on Arkansas's end-of-course literacy exam. "Students' reading scores rose between 15 percent and 18 percent on Lincoln's literacy monitoring test," Bottoms said.

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