



The Writing Proficiency Project - Spring 2008

What is a thesis?

"There is no glue holding these ideas together!"

"This paper is one long ramble."

"I can't discern the author's point or purpose."

These are frequent laments uttered by English Language Arts teachers about Oakland students' essay writing. Teachers often sum up the pervasive problem as a lack of a controlling idea or thesis in student writing. But what is a thesis and how does one teach it?

The thesis is the primary claim or organizing idea in an essay. The nature of the thesis statement varies based on the genre of writing. In expository and analytical essays, including response to literature interpretive essays, the thesis reflects a writer's

efforts to understand a topic more deeply, to explain what a feature or some features of a subject *mean*. Similarly, the thesis in an argumentative or persuasive essay articulates the author's position on the subject. Narrative compositions do not have thesis statements, but instead establish a plot line or relate the significance of a sequence of events.

If you consult the California State ELA Standards in an attempt to understand the nuances and complexities of thesis statement writing, you'll be disappointed. In fact, you may be further confused by the inconsistency in the language about "controlling ideas" throughout the grades. In fourth grade, students are expected to "select a focus." In fifth Writ-

ing Strategies standards, students are told to "establish a controlling idea or topic"; however, 5th grade Writing Applications Standard on expository composition tell students to "State the thesis or purpose." In 7th grade, there is no mention of "thesis." In 8th grade, the standards say, "Create compositions that establish a controlling impression, have a coherent thesis"; however, in 9th grade the standards say, "Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing." In sum, the language in the standards uses the following array of phrases somewhat interchangeably: "thesis," "main idea," "focus,"

Summer Writing Institute

Teachers of 6th through 9th grade English language arts are invited to attend an intensive week-long institute to learn the fundamental aspects of teaching writing and setting up a writing-focused classroom. The institute lays the foundation for a yearlong monthly professional development series to follow that will focus on addressing issues of language and conven-

tions in student writing. The Summer Writing Institute will be held at Far West School located in North Oakland from June 23rd through 27th, 8:30am to 3:30pm.

During the Summer Writing Institute, you will take a piece of writing through the entire writing process from brainstorming to publishing. (See Joao Solomon's essay in

this newsletter!) Additionally, you will collaborate with grade level colleagues to create a writing assignment to use in your classroom next year.

Please sign up before June 2nd using On Track or Registration Form 1, found in your OUSD Secondary Professional Development Summer Catalog.

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Special points of interest:

- Summer Writing Institute for teachers of English language arts 6-9 June 23-27
- NAEP results show growth in writing
- We have our own website, oaklandwrites.org now with loads of resources and information

“To Teach in Oakland” by Joao Solomon

Teachers in last year's Summer Writing Institute wrote about teaching in Oakland. This writing activity was designed to help immerse participants in the priority-genre of the grade level they teach. Below is an excerpt from João Solomon's expository essay "To Teach in Oakland" reprinted with his permission. João teaches 6th grade humanities at Roosevelt Middle School.

In describing what it is to be a teacher in Oakland, I would use the words of the Rap Artist Talib Kweli and call it "The Beautiful Struggle." It is beautiful to see the realization of boundless potential in students who continue to thrive even while navigating the pitfalls of the inner city. Also beautiful to see are the wonderfully diverse types of people who are attracted to teach in Oakland and who share a purpose, a passion, a common soul. I have never met as many dynamic, uplifting and energetic personalities in one place as I have in Oakland's schools. However, as rewarding as those positives may be, it can be equally frustrating for us as teachers in Oakland when continually confronted with the myriad of stumbling blocks all too common in the urban public schools of today's America.

To teach in Oakland is no easy thing. The district has mismanaged itself into a multi-million dollar deficit and a takeover by the state. The upward progress of CST scores and API's too often falls short of the standards of No Child Left Behind leading to an uncomfortable sense of urgency and a rigidity that other schools in other districts are not forced to take up. Budget games played by faceless administrators in Washington and Sacramento have led to a frustrating dance of mass recruitment and hiring, juxtaposed with a wave of March 15th letters warning of impending unemployment. Teachers everywhere are asked to put in far more time than they are paid for, but in Oakland that is especially true. As with any urban district, Oakland schools must deal with the poverty, crime and sometimes hopelessness that plague many of its neighborhoods. There is no hazard pay for teachers who must compete with the drugs,

gangs, violence and apathy towards education that the students must travel through on the way to and from school each day. The underlying anger which permeates many of Oakland's communities is reflected too often in the violence which haunts the city. The students feel this anger with being poor, anger with lack of choices and anger with the abandonment of promises made but not kept. Students witness first hand the effect of this anger on their parents, their families and their neighborhoods. In this anger, too many resign themselves to it as an inevitable future. The ugliness of this anger rears its head on campus in the form of fights, verbal abuse and classroom defiance. Too often, the thrill of connecting with and empowering a student with the self confidence and skills to follow their dreams is tempered by the disappearance of one or two others who emotionally or physically divorce themselves from school.

"Also beautiful to see are the wonderfully diverse types of people who are attracted to teach in Oakland and who share a purpose, a passion, a common soul. "

More Ideas about thesis writing

"controlling impression," and "controlling idea." This panoply of terms makes teaching this concept a bit like introducing word problems to math students.

So what is an English teacher to do? The answer depends, in part, on the developmental level of the writer. How we teach the "thesis" and thesis statement writing in middle and high school is often quite different than the expectations at the college level. Rosenwasser and Stephen, the writers of *Writing Analytically*, make a distinction between a *static* thesis and an *evolving* thesis. The former, as the word "static" implies, tends to be rigid and fixed, and doesn't allow for much freedom of movement or adjustment as a writer progresses through an essay. This is often the way we teach thesis to students

at the middle and high school levels and it often leads to a somewhat formulaic approach, or 5-paragraph essay.

An evolving thesis, on the other hand, prompts a writer's thinking and creates opportunity for exploring, deepening, and complicating that thinking, initiating organizational changes along the way. In other words, an evolving thesis focuses a writer's inquiry, and provides direction for the inquiry to proceed. The evolving thesis functions as an invitation to a reader to come along on the journey, as opposed to signaling the entire content of the essay or answering all questions about the essay in one sentence.

If writing is about thinking then how do we teach inquiry and interpretation,

but also teach organization? As teachers we understand the challenge of moving children with young, developing minds that are just beginning to move on from the concrete, operational stage of thinking into abstract thought and ideas. Perhaps our goal should be to graduate students with some facility at writing 'evolving theses' and to work towards this notion.

Working Definition of Thesis

The thesis is an idea that one formulates and reformulates about the subject. The thesis should offer a theory about the meaning of evidence that would not have been immediately obvious to readers.*

*From The Writing Program at Syracuse University

“To Teach in Oakland” continued....

With all that being said about these potential pitfalls, the reason that I and others choose to teach in Oakland and continue to do so is because the teaching experience here has the potential to be more rewarding than any other. Many of the struggles mentioned that our students must fight through are the reasons we are here. These children deserve a chance to realize their potential and as their teachers, we have the unique opportunity to help them see another path; open another door. As a teacher in Oakland, you not only teach but also become a mentor, a role model and a source of stability in a community that desperately needs more such positives. Ideally my classroom becomes a place of emotional and physical safety for the students, a community in which they are valued contributors. My hope is that if I can give students that experience of self-confidence and connection to a community then perhaps it will give them an alterna-



tive mindset to what is happening in the streets. I find myself continually volunteering to take on projects outside the classroom, basketball coach, homework tutor, oratorical fest coach, etc., because I want to help establish more positive alternatives for my students to choose instead of hanging out in the park until after dark.

By no means am I alone in my dedication to my students. All over Oakland, teachers are writing and rewriting curriculum, starting after school programs, planting community gardens, organizing fundraisers, sponsoring drama clubs, establishing leadership classes, holding poetry contests, and coaching sports teams. Wonderful people who are full of energy and ideas are pouring themselves into improving our schools and communities. This energy is what makes teaching in Oakland so rewarding. More than any reform effort, this energy is what will ultimately carry the most weight in the future success of our students.

Seeing this energy, passion and dedication to improving the lives of students inspires me to step up my own efforts.

All of the emotional effort that goes into teaching in Oakland comes with an important caveat and that is that teacher burnout is high. In investing so much of yourself, there is vulnerability which allows the disappointments to take physical and emotional toll. In three plus years here, I have seen many teachers leave the district or the profession entirely because they are no longer willing or able to deal with the entire package teaching in Oakland entails. Despite all of this, so many people do choose to teach in Oakland. They, like I see the value in putting yourself into something worthwhile. The belief that Oakland, its schools, and its students are a worthwhile endeavor is beautiful. Nurturing and sustaining that belief outside of Oakland can be a struggle. Nurturing and sustaining those teachers who embody that belief is too often overlooked or taken for granted.

NAEP Results Show Improvement in Writing

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is a congressionally authorized project that assesses the performance of students on a variety of academic subjects, including writing. In addition to the assessment, background questions are included to find out what kinds of writing experiences and instruction are being offered across the country.

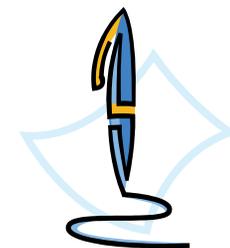
In 2007 the NAEP writing assessment was given to more than 165,000 eighth and twelfth graders. Each student responded to two out of 17 possible writing tasks designed to assess their skill in narrative, persuasive, and informative writing. According to results, the writing skills of eighth and twelfth graders improved in 2007. Additionally, the achievement gap between eighth and twelfth grade students of color and white students narrowed. Despite these gains, unfortunately only a third of eighth graders and less than a quarter of all high school seniors

tested at or above the proficient level.

The NAEP data revealed other trends in student writing. Breaking down results by gender, female students continued to score higher than male students by margins similar to those in previous assessments. Results also showed a correlation between writing scores and socioeconomic level as measured by eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, with students not eligible for free and reduced lunch scoring higher. Urban districts made noticeable gains in this year's writing assessment. As a whole, schools in large central cities (cities with a population of 250,000 or more) increased their scores. This narrowed the difference in performance between urban schools and the rest of the country.

Scholars have examined trends indicated by NAEP data and have found that less time is being spent now on writing than in the past. Increasingly, that time is

spent preparing students for standardized tests. A few organizations, such as the National Writing Project, are trying to bring writing back into focus. "The National Writing Project is one of the reasons we are seeing better writing among urban students on the NAEP," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. "We're now closer to the national averages in writing than we are in reading or math, although we are steadily closing the gaps in all three subjects."



Essential Ideas about Writing

In addition to a sequence of writing types and features, the Writing Proficiency Project promotes these essential ideas about writing:

- Writing is a complex activity; more than just a skill or talent, it is a means of inquiry and expression for learning in all grades and disciplines. Writing is the most visible expression of what students know and how well they have learned it. Students write to learn.
- Writing helps to develop higher order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting.
- Writing is inquiry, problem solving, and discovery. Writing can deepen learning.

- Writing is a powerful tool to communicate one's ideas, experiences, and personal struggles.

The Writing Proficiency Project promotes these ideas about writing instruction:

- In the classroom, there should be a balance of on-demand and student-generated writing and there is a balance between direct and process-based instruction.
- Students need support through all stages of the writing process. Teachers ought to plan using the gradual release of responsibility model.
- Second language learners and struggling writers receive differentiated instruction and frequent, consistent feedback.



- Writing instruction happens on a daily basis.
- Students analyze and talk about their own and other students' writing.
- Teachers need support to develop themselves as writers and learn the craft of writing.

Please send us comments, feedback, and articles you would like to see in the next newsletter! We really want to hear from you! Amy, Sarah, Steph, and Mary



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We're on the web!
www.oaklandwrites.org

Timeline

2007-2008

THIS YEAR

- PWA administration grades 6-9 with collaborative scoring and teacher inquiry around writing instruction
- Field test of grades 4 and 5, selection of anchor papers
- Design of grades K-3 writing assessments

2008-2009

NEXT YEAR

- PWA administration grades 6-9 with collaborative scoring and teacher inquiry around writing instruction
- PWA administration in 20 elementary schools, grades 4 & 5
- Pilot of grades K-3 PWA in select elementary schools
- Continued professional development

