

Writing in the Social Studies Classroom

By Peter Pitard, Principal, Bath County High School, Hot Springs, Virginia



*Colonial
Williamsburg*

Department of Education Outreach

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Writing in the Social Studies classroom is often misunderstood. Most students think of writing in a history or social studies class as answering an essay question, writing a research paper, or answering a Document Based Question for the state or AP exam. It is more than that!

Steffens and Dickerson, editors of the book *Writer's Guide to History* (a valuable resource!), state that “the process of writing is as critical to the study of history as reading . . .” Specifically,

- **Writing is a fundamental intellectual activity.** It does not just communicate what one has learned, but it causes one to learn. It promotes discovery, problem solving, and organization.
- **Writing helps you to learn history.** We learn best not as passive recipients of lecture and textbooks, but as active participants, making meaning for ourselves.
- **Writing clarifies your understanding of the subject.** Writing what you know helps you to review, organize, and remember the material. You can write your way to understanding. By putting your questions on paper, by writing about your confusion, you begin to see where the difficulty lies.

When students ask why they have to write in a Social Studies classroom, point to the above three concepts. Post them in the classroom, display them on an overhead, and distribute them to students to post in their class notebooks during the first few weeks of school.

Students must write often if they are going to learn to write well. Length is not always important. Daily writing is very important. Eventually, longer writing will happen with teacher's guidance. Students should be asked at the end of each and every period to summarize what they learned that day. Have the students keep a daily summary section in their social studies notebook. Ask a different class every other week to turn in the summary they like best. These can be “scored” very quickly with a plus or check mark, a comment or two to give the students the sense that these are important. Have students keep track of how many they write. When notebooks are “graded,” students can tell you how many they have done and you can give a grade on the total. Some teachers will give an extra point or a plus or minus to students who have completed all the assignments.

Students can also read their summaries to a partner. At first many students will argue that they did not learn anything that day. But with judicious partnering and continued insistence on the teacher's part, the summaries will improve. Some teachers check the summaries as students enter class the next day. If they find a good summary, they ask the student to phrase a question on an overhead from their summary and this becomes the opening question that students have to answer as the teacher takes roll.

Have students write at the end of other assignments. If you completed a project, have students analyze their part in it and what they have learned. Has the project changed any of their thinking about the subject?

Toby Fulwiler in Steffens and Dickerson also lists ten different kinds of journals history students can keep in their notebooks. “Observation, speculation, questions, awareness, connections, dialogue with historical people or the teacher, information, revision of previous journal entries, problem posing or solving, and synthesis” are some of the ideas suggested. Many of these journal types can be turned into types of questions students can be asked in the end of class summaries. Many teachers use primary documents from ancillary materials provided by textbook publishers and material, reproductions, artifacts, art, photographs gathered from other sources to assist students in writing.

Writing is a Process

It is important to remember that writing is a process and students are definitely works in progress. Most of our English and Language Arts colleagues have the writing process on a chart in their classrooms, and it would be a good idea to obtain a copy. At the beginning of the year, be sure to model an essay, outlining what you would include, the special words we all use, and the opening and transition sentences. The website “About Educators” (<http://7-12educators.about.com>) has an excellent example of [How to Write a Five Paragraph Essay](#). They also provide teachers with an example of how to teach a compare/contrast essay.

Ask for help! Assign sample essay prompts to groups of students and if they are in English class together, and ask the English teacher go through the writing process with them as they refine their essays. The English teacher can grade on a Language Arts rubric and you can grade for historical content. These teachers can also keep you informed as to what Language Arts concepts they are teaching so that you can integrate them into your history curriculum (i.e. if they are teaching poetry, reading some poetry from the era, or having students write their own poems based on historical content).

Another good idea is to have students write their “research papers” on butcher paper (6’ by 4’) instead of turning in a paper that only you, the student and the parent who edited it late at night will read. Post the papers around the room ask students to walkabout and view the papers. Students can work in teams to produce the paper. Have the students hand write or print all the information on the paper, including a bibliography. Students still do the traditional collection of notes, etc., but post all the information and conclusions on the butcher paper. A good way to end the year!

Probably one of the most difficult tasks for the history teacher is to get most students to write a multi-paragraph essay. Some students do not see the difference between an historical essay and a

language arts essay. The historical essay must be directly taught. Below is a series of helpful hints developed in California that can be copied and posted in the classroom to remind students how to write for the history class. Give students their own copy to post in their notebooks.

Helpful Hints for the Historical Writing for Teachers and Students

- Assume your audience knows nothing about the historical topic.
- Historical writing is based on fact.
- Chronology and sequence are important for organizing historical writing.
- Historical facts should support statements or reasons.
- Use the appropriate historical time frame.
- Make historical writing interesting to the audience by:
 - Providing details from the time period
 - Organizing historical information clearly so that it makes an impact on the audience.
 - Using first person, if writing as a historical figure.

It is essential for students to practice historical writing often. Putting examples on the overhead (anonymously), going over the steps in class, and using peer review in small groups is very helpful. Again, consult with your colleagues in the English or Language Arts Department.

Another effective way of using writing with thinking is the use of a reaction journal in their notebooks. Some days, instead of posting a question for the beginning of class, post a quotation from the time era you are studying. Quotations can be gathered from the text, ancillary materials, or from history quotation books found in local bookstores. Ask students to respond or react to these quotations in one of the formats suggested below.

KWL Journal

What do I know?	What do I want to know?	What I did learn?
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Senses Journal (any combination of the following)

I see . . .	I hear . . .	I taste . . .	I feel . . .	I smell . . .	I think . . .
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Quotation Journals

Quotation	Reaction
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Initial Reaction	Quotation	Reaction after finishing book
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My Reaction	Quotation	Class discussion summary
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Have students reexamine their journals at the end of the unit. Have they changed their opinions or conclusions? This activity often helps clarify issues and thinking. The quotations used can often become the basis for short answer essays on tests.

Have students respond to the quotations as if they were a person in that time period. What would they say, knowing the culture, politics and mores of that period?

In this same vein, have students select two persons from this time period and using photographs, paintings, etc. copy the picture of a generic person on an 11" x 3" sheet of construction paper. Attach the two people to a regular 8 1/2" x 11" sheet and on that sheet construct a dialogue between the two. This takes some research, and it is a good way to teach perspective and different viewpoints.

Another idea is to create a news magazine in the style of *Time*, *Newsweek*, etc. In teams, students are responsible for using artifacts, pictures, and drawings to create sections with information about the time, etc. This draws participation from all of the students in a team.

There are many valuable resources on the Web and in book form. Below is a listing of a few that are particularly helpful.

Web Resources

<http://www.iub.edu/~cwp/lib/wachist.shtml>

Indiana University's annotated bibliography of books on cross-curricular writing.

<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/922>

The National Writing Project compiled this list of 30 ideas for teaching writing. Each idea is accompanied by a full article that explains the theory and provides teaching tools.

<http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/history/histg.html>

Another excellent site for resources. Although not a site with writing suggestions per se, it has links to many other sites with suggestions for lesson plans that incorporate good writing.

<http://www.powa.org>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant. A very good site with ideas for different types of writing. Over 174 sites on writing in one section alone!

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2002/4/02.04.07.x.html>

An in-depth lesson unit from the Yale-New Haven Teacher's Institute on improving writing skills in American history classrooms.

Books

Writing for the Social Studies, McDougal Littell, 1998, Evanston, IL. ISBN #0-395-86909-9
An excellent resource for the teacher and student. Combines suggestions, ideas, how-tos and samples to teach report writing, essay writing, and research papers.

Sensenbaugh, Roger. *Writing Across the Social Studies Curriculum*. ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies and Social Science Education. Bloomington, IN. ISBN# 0-927516-05-5
An superb teachers resource of ideas and suggestions for activities and lessons using writing in the classroom. Every teacher should have this book in their collection.

Steffens, Henry & Dickerson, Mary Jane. *Writer's Guide: History*. 1987. DC Heath Co. ISBN # 0-669-12002-2

This book is the standard in many colleges and has been reprinted many times. It is the classic reference writing book on the history teacher's shelf.