
The National Study of Writing Instruction

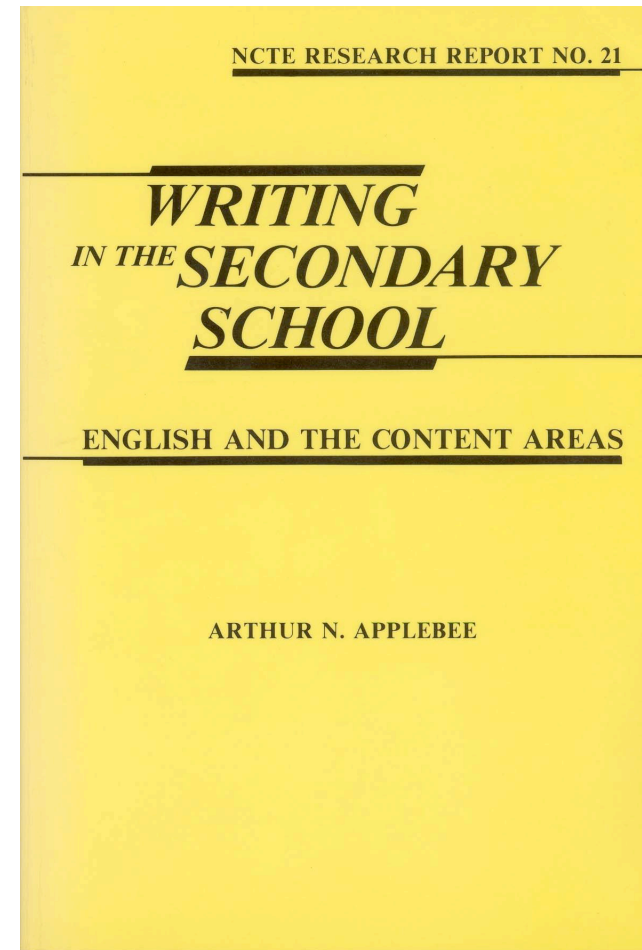
Center on English Learning
& Achievement

National Writing Project

With additional support from The College Board and The Spencer Foundation

The Original Study

- 1979-80 academic year
- Year-long observations in 2 schools
- National survey



Writing Instruction in 1979-80

- 44% of lesson time involved pencil on paper
 - 3% involved paragraph length writing
 - Focused on informational writing
 - Teacher as examiner
 - A page or less begun in class and finished for homework
 - Little or no instruction
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So What Has Happened in 25+ Years?

- High-stakes testing and accountability
 - Birth of an information society
 - Widespread computer use
 - Internet
 - Press for “evidence-based practice”
 - Emphasis on increasing capacity through professional development
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Study Design: Phase One

- 6 middle and high schools in 3 districts
 - Grades 6, 8, 10, 12
 - English, Math, Science, Social Studies
 - A full year of written work from 4 focal students per school per grade (7197 papers)
 - Interviews and classroom observations
 - Extensive case study analyses of each site
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Cross-Case Findings

Importance of School Context: Three very different districts

- ❑ Small city, economically disadvantaged,
 - Focused on high stakes tests
 - ❑ Affluent suburban, high community expectations
 - Professional, independent teachers
 - ❑ Rural, economically disadvantaged,
 - Two conflicting traditions:
 - ❑ Writing to learn across subject areas
 - ❑ Highly structured informative writing instruction
 - “articulated thesis statement”
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In the district under pressure to raise of high stakes test scores--

- Teachers explicitly emphasize test genres
 - “Critical lens” in English
 - “Document-based questions” in Social Studies
 - “Explain your procedures” in math
 - Sharply different experiences by achievement levels “Mansions versus stick huts”
 - Content areas resent emphasis on literacy
 - Reading takes precedence over writing
 - Math word problems
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In the achievement-oriented advantaged district--

- Test genres integrated into curriculum
 - Emphases vary greatly by teacher and team
 - Advanced Placement shaping content area writing
 - “AP science style is not what is learned in English”
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In the district with a tradition of writing in the content areas--

- Legacy of writing to learn across the curriculum
 - Skills curriculum integrated subject by subject
 - Principal “waited until old timers had retired”
 - Heavy focus on test genres but little overt awareness of it
 - Clear continuity across subject areas
 - “articulated thesis statement”
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Twenty five years of change

- Much more attention to test genres
 - Determines types of writing
 - Leads to instruction in how to respond
 - Highly structured assignments
 - Prevalence of rubrics across subjects
 - Continuing gap between English and other subjects—
 - Definitions of good writing
 - Generic versus subject-specific knowledge
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Twenty five years of change, continued

- More emphasis on drafting and revision
 - Widely varying instructional practices
 - Technology not fully assimilated
 - Start by hand, finish up on computer
 - Conflicting emphasis on the internet as resource
 - Limited use of many tools (graphics, video)
 - Powerpoint has become a major new genre
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A typical assignment: 1979-80

- Western Europe on the eve of the Reformation was a civilization going through great changes. In a well-written essay describe the political, economic, social, and cultural changes Europe was going through at the time of the Reformation. (25 points)– (ninth grade social studies)
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Parallel assignment: 2006-07

DBQ 10: Causes of the French Revolution

Historical Context:

The French Revolution of 1789 had many long-range causes. Political, social, and economic conditions in France contributed to the discontent felt by many French people—especially those of the third estate. The ideas of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment brought new views of government and society. The American Revolution also influenced the coming of the French Revolution.

◆ **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents in Part A. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author's point of view. Be sure to:

1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.
3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

Question: *What were the most important causes of the French Revolution? (Discuss three.)*

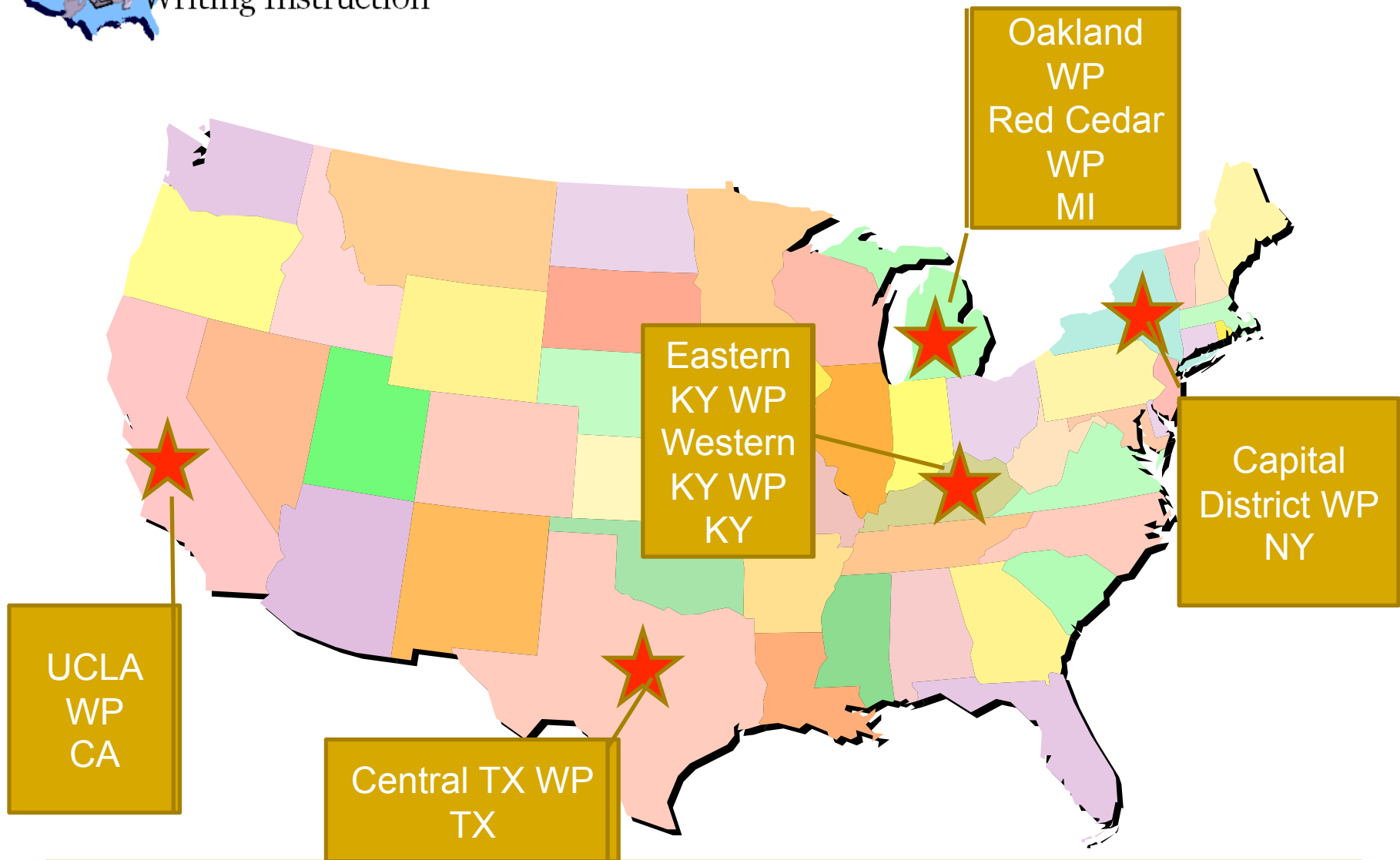
Coming Next: Case studies of 20 schools in 5 states

- Studies will examine how writing is implemented in the academic disciplines
 - how this differs from subject to subject
 - what students experience as they move from class to class across the school day
 - how writing changes across the middle and high school years

All in the context of local and state policy



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Student Selection

- 3 focal students at each of the target grade levels
(6, 8, 10, 12).
 - One higher achieving by school norms
 - One lower achieving by school norms
 - One English Language Learner (average achieving by school norms)
 - Selected by the grade-level English teachers
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Use of approaches from *Writing Next*

- Strategy instruction
 - Summarization
 - Careful setting of goals for writing assignments
 - Sentence combining
 - Inquiry based activity
 - Process-oriented activity (prewriting, drafting, revising, peer editing, teacher editing, publishing/sharing of work)
 - Study of models
 - Grammar instruction
 - Use of rubrics for evaluation or self-evaluation of writing
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Followed by--

- National survey of writing instruction
 - Questions based on the features we learned in year 1 that have the strongest effect on writing instruction and student learning
 - Stratified national sample of public school teachers, grades 6-12
 - Analyses will tease apart what gets taught, how it gets taught and to whom - across the nation
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