

# YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION? WRITING THAT MATTERS RIGHT NOW!

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*“I taught it, but they just didn’t do it in the test!”*

*“I’m spending so long on the drafts because they need me to tell them that what to do next.”*

*“They’re stuck at a HIGH achievement. I just can’t get them to move up.”*

*“We just don’t have enough time to teach the writing. I have so much content to cover.”*

Sound familiar to you? It certainly was to us, and prompted thinking about the writing that matters to students in our school.

## The starting point

All students in middle and high school settings engage in writing! Writing is there, front and centre, across the Queensland re-developed senior syllabi and is the partner in the relationship between P- 10 Australian Curriculum: English receptive and productive modes. So it is not news for teachers to hear that writing matters. But as we orientate this article, we invite you to just stop and think for a moment on the writing demands you ask of the students in your class. Be specific about the learners you have in your mind because these are the young people that your writing opportunities needs to matter for right now. *What are some writing demands required of your students in class? In their assessment? How is that writing experienced, organised and planned? What are some of the problems you see in your students’ writing?* All students produce writing, but questions about the quality and whether or not it is meeting the needs of secondary school contexts are perhaps on your mind as you reflected. They were certainly on ours when we started to look into this in our own classrooms.

We saw some writing patterns that surprised and concerned us. Sometimes students were writing,

but it wasn’t the writing we were expecting to see, nor was it meeting the rigor required as students moved across the high school years. Sometimes students filled pages, but they were notes shaped by the teacher, or it was writing that failed to actually address the cognitions of the task. In other classes, we encountered students who just didn’t seem to know where to start, or procrastinated, or would give up altogether after getting a draft back. Heads on table. Pens down. And commonly, we noticed that it was the teachers who did the majority of the writing work in production and cognition. The teacher wrote the paragraph exemplar and the students deconstructed it. Whether it was the creation of the notes, or the direction of the writing and editing, or even the changes to the writing produced by students as a draft, teachers were working hard. But were we working hard on the wrong things? These observations started us on journey to really reflect on our practices and to ask: WRITING WHAT? And for what goals and purposes?

In this article, we share with you our evolution towards designing a system that would allow students to regularly practise the thinking and doing processes of writing independently and purposefully. So while our Writing

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Consolidation is teacher guided, ultimately the writing is student produced.

Still interested? Then grab yourself another cup of coffee (“*Or hot chocolate!*”, shouts Cathy. *Sure. Whatever you fancy*) and read on.

To help us address the issues we were seeing in our adolescent writers’ texts, we started to work on a *framework* that would draw on the elements of good writing against criteria. This is what we settled on: clear teacher action that gave agency to students as the writers; production of quality writing, not just a quantity of words produced; use of authentic contexts where students would always write for clearly identified purposes; writing embedded as part of the teaching and learning of the content and skills; sustained and repeated writing experiences.

### Writing Consolidation

So what do we mean exactly when we say a “Writing Consolidation”? We all use the term *consolidation* generally in teaching to describe practices which strengthen or solidify student knowledge or learning. In our Far North Queensland region, it described a specific practice of reciting, recalling and applying; knowledge and skills are practised and revised to embed student mastery in long term memory, that is, to *automaticity*. We do it through reviews, accessing prior knowledge, practice tests, or targeted revision. When you have consolidated, the cognitive load is no longer on the act of having to retrieve that information, or think consciously about what the next step could be. It is there, ready to go! As with all consolidation, after teaching a skill, process or field knowledge students have the opportunity to *practise* and *perfect* their learning in different contexts, with the teacher checking for understanding and clarifying issues. You need to practise serving a tennis ball until you too hit like Serena Williams. Your coach is there to help you consolidate best practice. This goes for writing skills too.

Consolidation describes a stand-alone student practice episode, usually at the beginning or end of the lesson. But here was the problem: When we looked at the criteria across various subjects

we realised that rote learning of knowledge and concepts through reciting and recalling was not what students had to automatize to achieve success. Not in the writing. Not in the cognitions. Not on an A to E range of standards descriptors. In Modern History, “Communicates some recalled or selected definitions, concepts, terms, events, people” is only one of 18 descriptors and sub-descriptors on the criteria sheet. For senior English, the IA1 describes the knowledge and understanding in objectives 3,4, and 5 as “analyse perspectives and representations of concepts, identities, times and places in two texts”, “analyse the ways cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs underpin different texts and invite audiences to take up positions”, and “analyse the effects of aesthetic features and stylistic devices in the two texts”. Again, the recall of facts, concepts, and definitions that had been recited in class is not going to get you too far into addressing the objectives. Identification of them will get you perhaps a score between 1 and 2.

What we started to look for was a consolidation practice that encompassed the cognitions and the processes involved in writing. Students needed to practise and master communicating their knowledge and understanding in writing and to do this they needed to practise their thinking and decision-making at the same time. And so our journey towards a Writing Consolidation had begun.

Here is the sell now – Remember those students you had in your mind at the start of this article? Go back to them now. Writing Consolidations move away from reciting and recall information and focus more firmly on the demands of the applying – applying knowledge, applying cognition, applying planning, applying decision making, applying problem solving. We know that writing is the most common method of students communicating their knowledge, understanding and cognitive skills in high school contexts. Writing Consolidations support students’ mastery of writing in a number of ways. First and foremost, Writing Consolidations align students’ writing experiences with both the cognitive demand

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they need to fulfil and the content that they are expected to learn. This means that students are practising and perfecting both the thinking and the writing processes they need to master in order to communicate effectively, and doing these things at the same time in the same writing. It also gives real time feedback that immediately lets you check that your student has understood the big idea. Just like in your goal to be serving like Serena Williams, you don't want to spend all your time practising for the big match, only to discover you had been getting it wrong the whole time. Next, students need to be apprenticed into the activity of writing in high school. They need to build to the 400, or 650 words assessment, and eventually the 1000 words of on-demand writing at the end of Unit 4 in English. They need to know they can do it and have the growth mindset to keep pushing through the challenges. Finally, we need to remember who has to do the work here – it is the student writers. Not you. Your student needs to know what you know as the expert writer when you sit down to tackle an exemplar. They need to know what an expert does when they face a task that requires them to analyse and explain the relationships between elements. A critical friend told us, “Whoever is doing the work in the classroom is doing the learning”. If you are doing all the thinking, writing, editing and developing of written texts in your classroom, you are going to get very, very good at the writing of high school.

### Putting it into action

Our model for Writing Consolidation uses **scheduled writing blocks** that involve a cycle of

1. Pre-writing and planning,
2. Non-negotiable sustained writing for a set time,
3. Deliberate reflection against a criteria and
4. Application.

In these consolidations, students **produce SHORT writing samples** – often it would be a paragraph, but it could be for some a series of sentences. It is NEVER longer than two paragraphs. Students (and you, possibly) aren't

going to try something different with writing when the stakes are high – like an assessment. Low stakes and low risks allow students to repeatedly practice the planning through, the decision-making process, and the writing away from the “you only get one shot at this!” pressure sometimes attached to exams or assessment experiences. Eduardo Briceño gives a great Ted Talk on this idea called “How to get better at the thing you care about” if you want to think more in this space.

Finally, it HAS TO be **situated in the current content**, and always related to a *targeted, purposeful learned strategy or skill*. If you think of deliberate writing as being a process that can be recursive, and remember that not all Writing Consolidations lead to assessment items, you as the teacher can make decisions about where to focus the writing and plan deliberately around consolidating that element. The amazing *Writing Revolution* by Judith C. Hochman and Natalie Wexler further explores this and is well worth getting a copy. In describing writing stages here, they suggest you can stop after making the plan, but never end the experience after students produce writing that then needs to be refined. We echo this sage advice. We also add that, over time, all students need to have multiple opportunities in the teaching and learning to be exposed to, and experience all of the steps.

So remember this part as we go forward: Writing Consolidation describes both the *process* and the *product*.

### Get Your Writing Revolution Going – NOW!

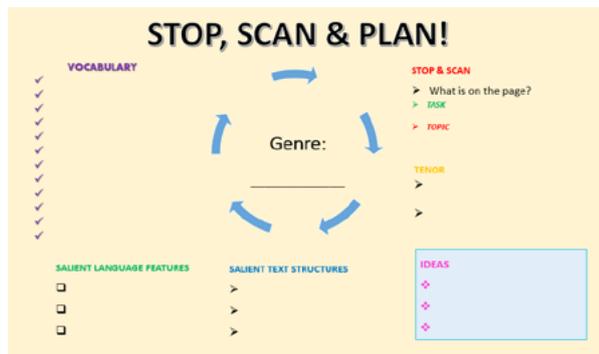
Not all writing in our classes was about Writing Consolidation. And not all lessons had a Writing Consolidation component. We learnt to flex to the needs of our learners, and respond with an intervention to the writing we saw produced. But we started out with this plan, and even in our evolution we have stayed true to this foundation structure shared with students:

- **First five – PREWRITING** – self-talk, modelling, planning. Use STOP, SCAN and PLAN or TAP OUT techniques to help prompt thinking.

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2. **Five WRITING** – student writing time, drafting
3. **Five REVIEWING** – focus on reviewing language choices, literacy applications, editing and proofreading
4. **Final FEEDBACK** – share with your neighbour and the class why you would make the changes you identified. *What did you want to achieve with this change?*

Originally, the framework was to anchor the pedagogy and activity, and each component was given five minutes. It was as much for teachers as it was for students to remind us of what was driving out the thinking and the writing. As we continued, we became less attached to the strict time frame and more committed to the purpose of the process and stages being visible to students.



Here are some ways that it formed in different contexts and classrooms. So for the first part, the focus is on a strategy for planning that was quick, repeatable and flexible. Students responded to a prompt like a question, image, quote or sometimes a model like their assessment genre. The examples below is from a humanities class and a Year 8 English class. If no one shows struggling students that effective writers plan, they remain locked out. If complacent writers never have to think about *what next? what else?* they perhaps will plateau out. In our school, students are told to TAP OUT. (Belinda interjects in a fourth wall manner: *I thought it was hilarious to have a sneaky UFC reference in our classroom posters, and it was supposed to tell students to dominate*

*their writing by making it submit to their skills. No student has ever picked up on that link, but the TAP OUT remains.)*

## TAP it out:

### • Task and Topic

*“What is the cognition or thinking I have to do?”  
What is the task, action or doing factor?*

*“What is the thing I have to write about?” What is the topic, element or focus?*

### • Audience

*“Who is this text for?” “What do I know about the audience?” “How do I show this in my choices?”*

### • Purpose

*“What do I need to achieve with this writing?  
What am I being directed to do?”*

*“What kind of purpose does this writing achieve as its goal? “Is it informative? Narrative? Procedural? Judging and critiquing? Analysing?”*

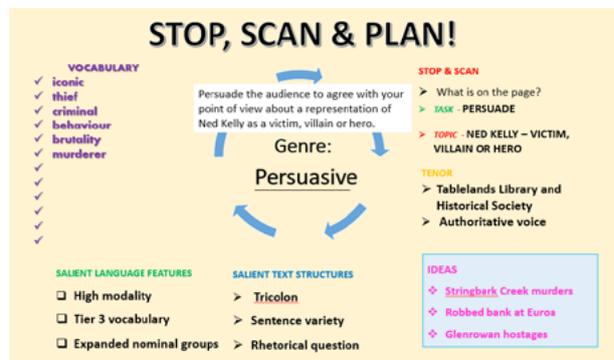


Figure 2: Example of planning from year 8 English - Joint planning

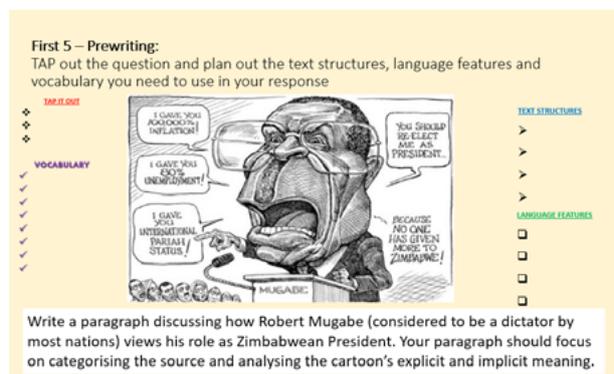


Figure 3: Example of planning to a stimulus from Humanities

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**Third 5 – Reviewing: Step 1**  
Rate your paragraph against the following criteria

	A	B	C	D	E
C2 Forming historical knowledge through critical inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses a diversity of primary and secondary sources to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehend and apply explicit and implicit meanings in relation to the selected question</li> <li>analyse to identify implicit and explicit patterns of information and categorise evidence in relation to the selected question</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses primary and secondary sources to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehend explicit and implicit meanings in relation to the selected question.</li> <li>analyse to identify explicit patterns and allocate information to categories in relation to the selected question</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally uses primary and secondary sources to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>comprehend explicit meanings in relation to the selected question.</li> <li>identify simple and familiar concepts, values, and motives that are explicit in relation to the selected question</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally when dealing with historical sources:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identifies basic explicit facts in relation to the selected question</li> <li>comprehends some of the explicit meaning in relation to the selected question</li> <li>groups information according to identified classifications in relation to the selected question</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Includes some information relevant to the inquiry in relation to the selected question</li> <li>Comprehends some factual detail in a basic historical source in relation to the selected question</li> <li>Recognises information with some common characteristics in a basic historical source</li> </ul>

Figure 4: Example of a criteria for reviewing Writing Consolidation against

In the review stage, students are deliberately attending to a known criteria (and it can be the assessment frame, or a focus you decide on as part of your informed teaching). The important thing is that students build the resources to identify what the issue is that is impeding their success, and then apply have opportunities to implement the changes. This took place in the FEEDBACK stage. Ask kids to tell a peer WHY they are making that change. It might surprise you to hear how students can articulate their own metacognition when given the space. Some of the prompts we ask were:

1. Turn to the person next to you and tell them what you rated your writing on the criteria and why.
2. Explain the sections of your writing you felt happy with, and then areas where you were less satisfied.
3. Describe the changes you made to improve these.
4. Finally, share your views on how you went with this process.

How is this is stage different to drafting and feedback, you may ask. Well, when you think about a draft in a school context, you probably have in mind the working copy that is nearly good enough for submission to an assessment item. This is TOO LATE to be rehearsing how to write. You have moved into the high stakes zone! When a student is working on a draft for assessment, the writing becomes about the demonstration of what they know and can do.

## Final words

Writing Consolidation requires three inter-related elements – teacher capability, teacher preparation, and student agency.

In many high school contexts, writing is HOW students show what they know and can do, and it becomes more demanding as they move from concrete to more abstracted thinking and writing. Different learning areas have different writing demands and cognitions and since the Writing Consolidation is embedded within the content being taught, it is the classroom teaching team who need to work together to decide what needs to be the focus of action. When we ask teachers to look at their writing data, it helps to keep in mind that we use this data to help us make a decision about an action. “Is my current writing practice helping students to achieve?” “What evidence is there to show that our Year 8s can meet the assessment demands of high school?” To achieve these actions, teachers need to critically reflect on the literacy and subject demands, genres and cognitions of the curriculum area. Then, they need to share a common language to describe the writing processes and features with each other, as well as with all the students who move across and between their classes.

Then there is the preparation for the actual Writing Consolidation experience. Remember, it is planned, deliberate and purposeful. Before you walk in the classroom, plan the parameters for the Writing Consolidation and established the success criteria

- ✓ Decide on the purpose of the writing and what you intend to consolidate.
- ✓ What content (field and grammatical choices) are students able to access at this point?
- ✓ What are the salient features that you will draw deliberate attention to for this writing?
- ✓ What will success look like for the students?
- ✓ Plan for it! Design the stimulus or writing stem

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And finally, there is the work for the student role. Good writers have strategies and resources to help them achieve their goals. Good writers understand there are stages to writing. They know good writing involves re-writing with a purpose. And during Writing Consolidations, everyone writes. There's no opting out! This requires students to: plan for writing using their frame, create the working draft, revise the draft text against known success criteria and return to the writing with deliberate intention to improve the quality of the text through application of their own knowledge and resources.

### References

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