

What's Riding on Writing?

Why is writing such a stringent test of output capacity during the school years? I suspect its because there's no other requirement that demands the coordination and integration of so many different neurodevelopmental functions and academic subskills. Just think about it: writing requires you to generate good ideas, organize your thoughts, encode your ideas into clear language, remember many things at once (such as spelling, rules of punctuation, facts and instructions), coordinate your fingers so they can keyboard or form letters, plan and monitor the quality of your work, and marshal the materials you need (pencils, reference books, or computer equipment) and your time. Writing also requires a great deal of concentration and mental effort. It takes energy and fortitude to complete a term paper. Intense focus is called for in answering an essay question well. All of those simultaneous demands must then be smoothly integrated and synchronized to achieve writing success.

Writing is the largest orchestra a kid's mind has to conduct. So it shouldn't surprise us that if one or more of the instruments are lacking, their absence will seriously undermine that student's papers. For the most part, kids with output failure hate to write, but in truth, they are fearful of writing.

Since writing plays such a trivial role in most careers, why should we fret over it during youth? Perhaps some kids simply should be granted writing waivers! No, I don't really believe that, although it's not an absurd notion. I think that the very fact that writing is so complex justifies its leading role in a curriculum. By writing, a kid learns how to mesh multiple brain functions, and ultimately that's something you need to do well whatever you do to earn a living. In a sense, the act of writing helps build and maintain the brain pathways that connect diverse functions, such as language, memory, and motor control. In other words, writing is a great way for a kid to practice getting his act together.

Writing also serves as a platform for systemic thinking and a means of problem solving, two more abilities needed in any career. There's an old adage: "How can I know what I think until I read what I write?" Writing forces a student to think out loud and to communicate that thinking in a way others can grasp.

Although I'm certain it is the largest, writing is by no means the only big orchestra a kid gets to conduct. Playing soccer, participating in a marching band, and building a model rocket ship also require getting numerous brain functions to work together. Yet students whose teachers demand minimal writing, as well as those whose written output is a trickle at best, are educationally deprived. They may be less prepared to produce as adults.