



## Writing to Learn

*Robert J. Marzano*

**Writing to learn focuses on deepening understanding and improving retention of content.**

The concept of writing across the curriculum is commonly credited to James Britton (1970, 1972). The logic behind the assumption that writing should be integral to instruction in all subject areas is that writing is fundamentally a constructive process of encoding new information. The act of translating experience into a personalized account aids and extends learning.

One manifestation of this approach is writing to learn (see Applebee, 1984; Beutler, 1988; Beyer, 1980; Murray, 1984). Writing to learn focuses on deepening understanding and improving retention of content. The writing activities, which typically are short and informal, resemble an advanced form of note taking.

### Five Phases for Understanding

As a result of observing teachers employing writing-to-learn activities, I've identified five phases that can improve students' understanding and retention of content.

#### Phase 1: Record

Here, students record their understanding of the content. For example, immediately after showing students a video clip on heredity, a middle school teacher would ask the students to record what they've learned in their notebooks (or using an electronic device, if students take their notes that way). This phase is geared toward summarization. Although students are asked to write in complete sentences, there's no emphasis on punctuation, spelling, or grammar. Students produce a rough first draft.

Teachers can enhance the recording phase by encouraging students to include graphic representations or sketches. This is particularly beneficial for English language learners, who might struggle with expressing their ideas in writing, and for students in the primary grades.

#### Phase 2: Compare

In this phase, students share what they've recorded with a partner, noting what's similar and different between their two recordings. Similar content indicates that both students have identified the same information. Different content indicates either that one student noticed important content that the other did not or that one or both students were confused about some aspects of the content.

During this phase, the teacher walks around the classroom answering questions from student pairs and clearing up confusion and misconceptions. If the teacher notices that a number of students are confused about specific topics, he or she addresses the issue with the whole class before passing on to the next phase.

#### Phase 3: Revise

This phase occurs right after the comparison phase, although a teacher might assign it as homework instead. Here, students create a more complete and polished version of what they wrote during the recording phase. This version is more complete because students have had the benefit of conferring with a partner and having the teacher clear up confusion and misconceptions. This version is also more polished because as students revise their initial draft, they are asked to pay more attention to punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

The record-compare-revise (R-C-R) cycle can occur several times during a unit or related set of lessons. For example, a teacher might have students engage in the R-C-R cycle after watching a short video on the first day of the unit. A few days later, the teacher might present new content on the same topic in a brief lecture and demonstration and ask the students to go through the cycle again to process this new information. The following week, the teacher might have students gather information from sources on the Internet on the topic and then engage once more in the R-C-R cycle. After several cycles, students are ready for the next phase.

#### Phase 4: Combine

Here, students combine the products of the R–C–R cycles they've completed and then generate and defend one or more generalizations. Students must support their generalizations using specific evidence. For example, as a result of examining what she wrote in various R–C–R cycles, a student in a health education class might generate the following generalization about diet: "Proper diet is a balancing act between the amount of energy you expend in a day and the amount of calories you take in." The student would support this generalization using specific facts from her notes. This part of the process could work as a class presentation or be part of a class discussion.

### Phase 5: Review

This last phase always occurs before an assessment, although a teacher could request it at any time. Here, students read over the generalizations they produced in the combine phase and the summaries they wrote during the R–C–R cycles. Students can do this independently or in groups. Although students might generate new questions that the teacher could address in a whole-class or small-group environment, the primary focus is on providing students with a comprehensive and targeted review of all the content that will be on the assessment.

### A Formula That Works

This five-phase strategy for writing to learn can be quite helpful to teachers. Although formulaic, it does ensure that students adequately encode, revise, aggregate, and review important information that has been the focus of instruction.

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