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A Description of Fifth Grade Teachers’ Strategies for Teaching Writing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe writing strategies and skills taught by fifth grade teachers at schools that achieved Adequate Yearly Progress and statistically had very similar test scores (at least 90% of fifth grade students scored in Category 2 or Category 3 on the NAWE writing test). This paper describes the methods of teaching writing that are used by the fifth grade teachers in schools demonstrating success in writing achievement and then compares the teachers’ methods of teaching writing to those supported by leading researchers in the field. The goal of this thesis is to identify common themes of writing instruction of fifth grade teachers as well as issues or concerns that should be addressed. My hope is that this will aid other fifth grade teachers in the future by identifying potential issues in writing instruction for fifth grade teachers to confront before they become problematic.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe writing strategies and skills taught by fifth grade teachers in Washoe County elementary schools that achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). These schools also had statistically similar test scores (meaning that ninety percent of fifth grade students at the schools scored in Category 2 or Category 3 on the Nevada Writing Analytic Examination [NAWE] writing test). These categories mean that the student either is approaching the standard (Category 2) or is meeting the standard (Category 3). I describe the methods of teaching writing that are used by the fifth grade teachers in these schools that have demonstrated success in writing achievement. Then I compare the teachers’ pedagogical writing methods to those supported by leading researchers in the field.

Following are broader points that are at the core of my thesis; the questions that I ask of teachers in the interviews were much more specific and are included in Appendix A. The general questions are as follows: What methods and strategies are successful as described by fifth grade teachers experiencing success with writing instruction? Do successful writing teachers use the same methods and strategies as renowned researchers and scholars recommend? What are the critical components of successful writing instruction, according to teachers and researchers in the field?

In my interviews with teachers, on the other hand, I asked much more specific questions. They included but are not limited to: What does writing instruction look like in your classroom? Did you do any research before deciding on a writing instruction? Do you incorporate the five steps of the writing process? How often do you have conferences with students? Are these conferences student-led or teacher-led? Do you ever have students publish their work in any
format? These questions and the teachers’ responses helped me to answer the questions that I posed.

The study followed a predetermined set of steps. First, after approval from the Institutional Review Boards of both the University of Nevada, Reno and the Washoe County School District for this project, I sent out consent forms for teachers to sign so that they could participate in the project. Once those were returned to my mentor, I began interviewing the teachers. Each teacher was asked questions about his or her methods for teaching writing, specific strategies, and any research that he or she did prior to developing a curriculum for teaching writing. These interviews lasted about one hour. After the teacher interviews were completed, I compared the results from the teacher interviews to each other and to the strategies and methods that renowned scholars and researchers in the field of teaching writing support. I also provided the opportunity to re-interview the teachers if the necessity arose.

The subject of strategies and methodology that teachers use to teach writing is one of great interest for me. Writing is a subject that each of the teachers I interviewed feels poorly and inadequately prepared to teach. As a result, they do not feel that they can teach their students to write proficiently. These feelings of inadequacy are commonplace and supported by studies: Gilbert and Graham (2010) noted that two-thirds of the teachers they surveyed “left them ill-prepared to teach writing.” Many teachers do not believe that their writing is strong in the first place; this is, thus, another reason that they do not deem themselves worthy to teach writing. Teachers’ feelings of inadequacy, coupled with inadequate undergraduate preparation and lack of knowledge about the subject of writing itself, have led to poor success in schools and on standardized tests in terms of writing. Many schools do not make Adequate Yearly Progress on
standardized tests, and writing scores are calculated as a portion of meeting state expectations (Rheault, 2005).

As a result, I chose to focus my research on three schools that all met Adequate Yearly Progress but were composed of divergent student populations in regards to minorities and income levels. The schools ranged from populations of low-minority and high-income students to high-minority and low-income students. However, regardless of the student population, teachers at all three schools managed to become successful at teaching writing. Sometimes their strategies differed from teacher to teacher and school to school; for example, one school had created its own writing committee to combat poor test scores and low-quality writing instruction in the lower elementary grades. Other strategies, such as pulling lesson ideas and graphic organizers from websites such as writingfix.com, and researching influential pioneers in the field, such as Lucy Calkins (Calkins, 1994), a Columbia University faculty member who was mentioned by virtually every teacher profiled in the study.

This study provides a cohesive description and analysis of writing strategies and methodology that successful teachers use to teaching writing in their classrooms every day. Their ideas cross all income, minority, and environmental differences and can be used in all types of classrooms. I know that when I become a teacher and finally have a classroom of my own in the next year, I will draw from this rich minefield of ideas, lesson plans, strategies, and methodology for teaching writing in a way that is meaningful and inspiring to students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

A variety of books and articles written by well-known scholars in the field offers different perspectives on the subject of teaching writing. Some look at writing from a neurological standpoint (Berninger & Winn, 2006); others, emotional or socio-cultural (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; Prior, 2006); still others, as a work in progress that requires significant time and effort (Barone & Taylor, 2006; Hughey & Slack, 2001; Tompkins, 2008). However, the literature is categorized by the few aspects of writing that are most important and that are included in several of the books and articles. Those areas include the purpose of writing, the writing process, writing workshop, genres and formats, how to organize one’s teaching, time, reflection, and the writing traits curriculum.

According to Tompkins (2008), capable writers demonstrate specific characteristics when writing. Teachers learn to recognize these skills in their students, as well as work to support novice writers until they have demonstrated these skills. Capable writers understand that the way something is written varies depending on one’s audience and purpose. They use the writing process flexibly, moving from prewriting to editing or revising and back again with ease. Strong writers “focus on developing ideas and communicating effectively” (p. 55), as they understand the importance of expressing their words succinctly and coherently. They ask for feedback from their peers, incorporate a variety of formats and structures into their writing, and monitor how well they are communicating what they want to say. Capable writers implement a variety of writing strategies throughout the process, and they monitor their use of those strategies to determine whether they need to vary the strategies or if a specific strategy would work better for the circumstance in which it is needed. These types of writers also “postpone attention to mechanical correctness” (p. 55) until their work is nearly complete, as they understand the
importance of drafting and realize that good writing will usually require several drafts. Finally, “capable writers assess [their] writing according to how well they communicate with their audience” (p. 55). Whether they are presenting a speech to a classroom full of parents or acting out an interpretation of a poem they have written, capable writers look for clues to determine how well they have portrayed what they wanted to express. They assess audience members’ comments and body language for feedback, determining what worked well and what needs to be improved or enhanced for the next piece of writing. Ultimately, writing is “an interactive, recursive process that involves thinking, feeling, reading, and reflecting to make a message clear” (Crawford, 1993, p. 323). The teacher’s goal is for every student to incorporate these four actions into every moment of writing.

In addition, teachers need to recognize difficulties that many students will face when writing. A common struggle is motivation, as writing is a “psychological” task that must be produced, in contrast with reading, which readers “consume” (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006, p. 145). The difficulty results from the lack of background from which to build: while readers have all of the knowledge written and at their disposal, writers must create an entire storyline or develop an entire concept with little tangible evidence from which to pull. Another critical point is that writing is often a “solitary…activity” (p. 145); without encouragement from peers or others, it can quickly become frustrating or discouraging. However, the incorporation of various tools noted below will aid teachers in developing writing into a hands-on, engaging activity.

The following is a collection of several important methods and strategies that a variety of scholars have encouraged teachers to implement as the result of years of research. These are not the only methods and strategies that scholars discussed; however, the strategies and methods are
supported in many different books and articles and are the ideas that scholars consistently suggest for teachers who are working to teach their students how to write.

**Purpose of Writing**

According to Crawford (1993), teachers must begin their instruction by seeing writing as a “developmental process” that evolves over time (p. 326). Students will demonstrate a wide variety of abilities and flaws in their writing when they first start fifth grade, but teachers must be willing to walk them through the process. Students must be given the opportunity to experiment, and teachers should balance reasonable expectations with time for creativity and “try[ing] out skills” (Reed, 1984, p. 242) when planning their writing instruction.

Barone and Taylor (2006) begin by discussing various challenges that students and teachers face in the classroom regarding writing. As such, the authors begin by noting the purposes for writing—to learn, to understand, for enjoyment—which could be beneficial to discuss in a classroom environment so that writing is not always viewed as mundane by students. The authors also do not shy away from the reality that teachers constantly have to help their students continue writing at every step of the writing process, whether they are just starting, in the middle, or about to finish. Instead, Barone and Taylor provide encouragement to teachers, regardless of which step the teachers are at in the process of teaching writing.

The authors also focus on the myriad purposes for teaching writing. They begin with a basic analysis that people write for two main reasons, to learn and understand. A teacher must incorporate these two reasons for teaching writing when creating his or her curriculum. Barone and Taylor (2006) want teachers to prepare students to develop strong writing skills for their entire lives, not simply in order to pass standardized tests. At this crossroads between writing
skills and standardized tests begins a discussion of the most important reasons for which teachers should teach writing to their students.

Barone and Taylor (2006) encourage teachers to not lose sight of writing as a “craft” (p. xi). Writing is an artistic form that requires much time and effort, which both teachers and students must be willing to put in, before it is effectively molded into a more sophisticated form. In addition, they believe one of the skills that students must develop is an ability to change viewpoints, both from books that other authors have written and from works that they themselves have created. Good writers can express their thoughts from a variety of different angles, and students must develop this skill. Barone and Taylor give the example of Jon Scieszka’s *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1996) as an example of changing viewpoints: the original “Three Little Pigs” story is told from the pigs’ perspective, whereas Scieszka focuses on the wolf’s version of what truly happened. It is also important for students to realize that changing the point of view often requires an overhaul in setting, “details and context” (p. 84) in order to be successful. Students need to be prepared to write with purpose, giving thought to the setting, the audience, and the reason for writing. This preparation requires explicit instruction on the part of the teacher.

Teachers should provide opportunities for students to have real-life audiences. The authors realize that this effort can prove “challenging and time-consuming,” but they believe that “the benefits far outweigh the effort” (p. 77). When students have real-life audiences to write to, they become more motivated to write and feel a sense of urgency whether they are writing letters to the President or speeches they will give before a classroom of parents.

Parr and Limbrick (2009) suggest that teachers who are most effective in teaching writing show that the successful teachers are those who have a “sense of purpose and
meaningfulness” (Unpaged) in their instruction; whose curriculum is coherent and connected; and who are consistent and systematic in their everyday teaching. The authors purport that teachers who are strongest in these areas develop the best student writers. In addition, this study was completed in an area in which the students are as a whole historically underachieving but whose teachers had classrooms of consistently high-performing students.

Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) also propose that it is important for teachers to evaluate their purposes for teaching writing. They use the example of journal writing. For example, if teachers use journal writing in order to communicate with their students on a regular basis, then it can be a positive addition to the classroom, and teachers may choose to keep journal writing as a part of the curriculum. However, they argue that using journal writing in this way will not support students’ development of writing knowledge and skills. Instead, they believe that one purpose for teaching writing is to aid students in becoming more comfortable with the process of writing. The best way to do so is to “forgo the time devoted to journals and instead have students use writer’s notebooks within the writing workshop” (p. 9). This notebook provides an opportunity to “experiment with writing techniques” and the ideal location to store “important thoughts, feelings, seed ideas, and dreams” (p. 9). These are two purposes of writing that the authors argue are extremely important for teachers to recognize.

Tompkins (2008) believes that writing serves three purposes: teaching students how to write, teaching students about written language, and having “children learn through writing” (p. 6). Children learn to write through their experiences, whether by quick-writes or clusters, or by regularly being given the opportunity to write. These are informal activities that focus more on encouraging students to get their thoughts onto paper. For more formal activities, teachers incorporate the writing process. When writing stories, reports, or poems, students need to learn
how to move interchangeably between the various stages of the writing process, brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing when needed. As children move along in the process of learning how to write, they “discover the uniqueness of written language and the ways in which it differs from oral language and drawing” (p. 5). Grammar plays an important role when crafting a strong piece of writing, as students need to understand how and when to utilize punctuation, spelling, and formatting conventions. In addition, Tompkins writes that children will “develop an appreciation for the interrelations of purpose, audience, and form” through a multitude of learning experiences, and they “learn to consider these three elements as they write” (p. 5). Once they have gained that knowledge, the content and strength of their writing will grow exponentially, as they will have gained the ability to think more specifically about their writing and make better decisions about what to incorporate.

**Writing Process**

As with many other pedagogical writing resources, Barone and Taylor (2006) insist that teachers utilize the writing process in their classrooms. It is important to see writing “as a process,” meaning that the teacher provides sufficient time for students to move through and between the various stages (Spandel, 2004, p. 164). In addition, teachers should recognize that “the writing process is supported by a single system—the writer’s internal brain-mind interacting with the external environment” (Berninger & Winn, 2006, p. 108). Teachers must realize that the brain is always interacting with and being influenced by the environment, by smells, sights, memories, opinions; and, as a result, should be open to and encourage creative expression through writing.

The writing process consists of five stages: pre-writing, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing. Students move through these five stages, but the process is cyclical, so they often
return to earlier stages from later ones. Barone and Taylor (2006) encourage teachers to have their students spend about seventy percent of the time in the pre-writing stage, planning out their narrative, getting their ideas on paper, and organizing their thoughts. The authors also encourage teachers to provide students with adequate time to publish, or share, their work. Teachers often put students’ work up on a wall as a form of publishing, but recognition of students’ writing through publishing is much more influential if the students can orally share their work by reading their stories or essays aloud to other classes, their own class, or special guests.

Though some sources (Tompkins, 2008) advocate that students spend “70% or more writing time” (p. 8) in the pre-writing stage, Piazza (2003) actually encourages teachers to allow students to choose the amount of time that they spend in pre-writing. She writes that a child’s personality or learning style can influence the amount of time that they need to brainstorm; some students will benefit from quickly moving on to the drafting stage.

Tompkins (2008) believes that there are five main objectives for the pre-writing stage: choosing a topic, considering the purpose for this particular piece of writing, considering the audience for the work, considering what form should be chosen, and gathering and organizing ideas to prepare for the drafting stage. These five points will vary by assignment—a letter to Abraham Lincoln about his position on slavery during the Civil War, for example, will be much more formal than a simple story about the family’s summer trip to the beach. However, it is important for teachers to explicitly teach each of these five concepts to their students, in addition to modeling them in front of their students. The time spent in pre-writing is critical because it sets the foundation for the rest of the work.

Because pre-writing can be a difficult stage for students—as sometimes the most difficult part about writing is beginning—Piazza (2003) provides suggestions to help students brainstorm
great ideas that they can write into their stories. Her goal is to tap into a student’s repertoire of interests in a variety of ways that can be modified to fit almost any age. First, students can create a storyboard in which they draw out what is going to happen at each part of the story. They can also look back at previous work they have done or memories that they have in an attempt to discover a new topic to expand on. Thirdly, an interest inventory of the student’s favorite books, colors, memories, people, and events can help trigger ideas from which to create a story. Finally, students can role-play different characters, including “the bully, the outside, the jokester, the parent, [and] the grocer” (p. 116), which helps them to get into character and become more invested in the story.

In addition, Piazza (2003) supports the use of graphic organizers while brainstorming to help students map out ideas before putting words to paper. One idea is to use a brainstorming web, an example of which can be found in Appendix B, which has one center circle with the main topic and then various legs or rays that branch out to supporting ideas. Mapping or clustering is another method that “offers conceptual and focused categories to show links between sentences and supporting details, paragraphs and key points, or text elements in story…poetry…or reports” (Piazza, p. 75). An example of a cluster map can be found in Appendix C.

Between the pre-writing and drafting stages, Piazza (2003) encourages teachers to find time for shared writing. Important for teaching students skills and strategies that they will then apply to their own drafts, shared writing helps students practice getting their thoughts onto paper. Students should also practice answering questions about the drafts created in shared writing, such as “What is a good title for the story?” or “Look at these two sentences? How can we combine
them?” (p. 119). The “safe and secure” environment afforded by shared writing also allows the teacher to model strong writing skills that she wants her students to adopt for their own writing.

Torrance and Galbraith (2006) cite a study that supports the inclusion of drafting, the next step in the writing process, because it has been shown to be “beneficial” (p. 76). When students are working on their drafts, especially the earlier ones, Tompkins (2008) provides a series of points that teachers should incorporate into their routine. First, it is important that teachers model and encourage students to not concern themselves with grammar and mechanics at this stage of the writing process. The goal is to get words on to paper, but unfortunately a focus on good spelling and punctuation often comes at the cost of less content and fewer good ideas. Students will focus on those areas during the editing stage instead. Second, children should “label their drafts by writing ‘Rough Draft’ in ink at the top of their papers” (p. 12). This demonstrates that the writing is still in the drafting stage and that grammar and mechanics are not a concern during this phase. Teachers should also encourage students to re-evaluate the decisions they made about voice, audience, form, and purpose during the earlier pre-writing stage. Finally, teachers must work with their students, perhaps through mini-lessons, on developing strong leads. Leads are the opening sentences of each paragraph. They are crucial for drawing in and hooking the reader, not only because they can be creative and colorful, but because organized writing is a key element that defines successful writing. When considering audience, students “will want to grab the attention of the audience” (p. 13), and leads are one of the most effective methods of doing so. A discussion of leads can also lend itself to another conversation about “how to manipulate language and how to vary viewpoint or sequence” (p. 13) in writing, which are equally crucial points. It is important to keep in mind that, during the
writing process, nothing should be considered stagnant, and a willingness to change is a critical step on the path to successful writing.

Students must learn that revision is a natural part of the writing process, and they must become accustomed to revising their work many times before it is ready to be presented to a third party. Revision also encourages students to develop “higher-order thinking skills when students are regularly reading, evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing, rewriting, and reforming their ideas” (p. 83). Spandel (2004) notes as well that it is imperative to leave “writing alone for a long time (two or three weeks more) improves revision 1000 percent” (p. 165). Though students are still emotionally invested in their work, that time will have given them an ability to be constructively critical of their work and to incorporate others’ genuine feedback as well. If teachers only provide a day or two between drafting and revising, students may still be too emotionally invested, or they may be too attached to a certain way of telling the story that they refuse to listen to other, potentially better ideas.

Teachers should also provide direct instruction for revision and editing of their work. It is important to incorporate writing workshop and walk the students through the five steps of the writing process so that they understand how to create the best possible writing. Barone and Taylor (2006) suggest that the teacher and students work on revising and editing a piece of writing by the teacher himself or herself so that students do not feel as awkward analyzing their own writing. Finally, the authors provide strategies for teaching writing to intermediate and advanced writers. These students are generally comfortable and familiar with the writing process, so teachers can have students work independently much of the time and then provide direct and individualized instruction when needed.
Free writes are important to incorporate in the classroom because they are helpful in assessing students’ “proficiency and development” (Bear & Barone, 1998, p. 356). Also, teachers should spend time working with students one-on-one, asking questions about content, structure, and form to guide students and help them become better writers. As the authors note, this requires a certain amount of trust between students and teacher: the students must be comfortable enough with the teacher asking questions that this does not stifle their ability to write. The authors also provide a writers’ checklists for beginning, intermediate, and advanced writers. Teachers’ notes about students’ work and attitudes toward writing may include comments such as, “finds subjects to write about,” “enjoys sharing writing,” and “is open to ideas for revision” (p. 357).

Tompkins (2008) begins her book with a thorough discussion of the writing process, which children and teachers use to assess writing and build up stronger, more detailed writing. She also advocates that children learn that writing is a “recursive cycle” (p. ix; Crawford, 1993, p. 323) that they will repeatedly revisit while working on their writing, regardless of the context or topic. Even though the writing process has five specific steps—pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—Tompkins advises that teachers view the steps as interrelated components that flow easily from one to the other and back again. Instead of following a prescribed order, students’ writing may benefit from moving back a stage or two as they realize flaws in their writing. For example, students may have drafted and revised their work, but then during editing, they realize that they are missing a large chunk of the content of their story. In order to rectify this error, they may need to return to pre-writing in order to brainstorm more ideas or drafting in order to add more information. Once a student leaves the revising stage, for example, it does not mean that he or she cannot return. On the contrary, teachers should
explicitly teach their students that reverting back to previous stages is a healthy part of the writing process, and that their writing will only benefit as a result.

**Writing Workshop**

Writing workshop (Barone & Taylor, 2006) is a process by which teachers work on writing with students using a variety of different strategies. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) provide the ideal composition of an hour’s time spent in writing workshop in the following way: “35-45 minutes for writing, 10-20 minutes [for] share time,” and “5-10 minutes” for a mini-lesson (p. 11). This allows for the greatest amount of time to be spent on writing, while providing for specific instructional needs and a celebration of students’ work.

First, writing workshop is beneficial because students have the opportunity to write every day. Spending time every day to write allows young writers to practice getting their ideas onto the paper and to experiment writing with different forms and voices to determine what style of writing flows best in their minds. This also aids students in what is often the biggest deterrent to writing, which is simply starting to write and moving ideas from the brain to the paper.

Teachers also provide mini-lessons to students on grammatical issues or other writing topics that they feel would be beneficial or that students have been struggling with in the class. The purpose of the mini-lessons is to provide purposed, direct instruction targeted at one specific concern. The mini-lesson ideas that Tompkins (2006) provides are especially beneficial for teachers, as she has written out each component of the lesson in a step-by-step fashion. Each mini-lesson has the same basic parts: To introduce the topic; to share examples; to provide information; to supervise practice; and to assess learning. She encourages teachers to walk through the mini-lessons in that specific order, since students benefit best when the information is presented in an explicit, practical order. Tompkins provides upwards of fifteen mini-lessons
throughout the book so that teachers can choose which ones are most applicable to what they are teaching in their classroom. The topics range from writing workshop and reading logs to vivid verbs and creating a historically accurate setting when writing. Piazza (2003) encourages teachers to develop a variety of topics for mini-lessons according to the genre or format of writing that students are working on. She gives the example of journal writing—teachers can develop one mini-lesson for each type of journal writing, including “dialogue journals, personal journals…simulated journals…[and] writer’s scrapbooks” (p. 68).

A third aspect of writing workshop is student-teacher conferencing. Teachers meet with students individually or in groups to discuss concerns or suggestions regarding writing that either party has. Depending on where students are on the continuum of writing confidence and ability, a teacher could potentially work with a student point-by-point on his or her writing, or a teacher could be present as a sounding board or to provide some advice. Studies have shown the benefits of conferencing as well: McCarthey (2008) notes that, when students are “allowed to conference with teachers and peers,” their writing is “enhanced” and they become “better writers” (p. 469).

Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) encourage fifth grade teachers to focus on five critical points when conferencing on students’ work. First, students need to develop a timeline for their work. When will the first draft be complete? When will drafting finish and revising begin? What is the ideal date for publication of the work? Teachers should have students make a timeline on their own first and then discuss gaps in the timeline afterwards. Making their own timelines helps students learn how to “manipulate time” (p. 55) and view writing in a broad perspective. Second, students must determine the “MIT (most important thing)” (p. 55) about their story. The MIT should be the focal point, and teachers should continually revert back to a discussion during conferencing of whether the story truly focuses on the MIT. Third, teachers
should encourage students to expand on their description of the climax with vivid imagery. It is important to add “details, dialogue, or feelings” (p. 55) to make the reader more invested in the storyline. In addition, it is important to select “authentic details” (p. 56) and share them throughout the written story. Readers respond to honesty and specific information, and teachers should encourage students to add these elements to the story as well. Finally, it is important to continually work on developing character. Instead of focusing on plot, students would benefit from focusing on describing characters’ looks, memories, feelings, and emotions. Teachers can help students with character development by asking probing questions: What did your best friend look like? How did she feel when she had to move away to another country? How did she respond to her parents, siblings, and friends because of those emotions?

Finally, as with the writing process, writing workshop demands public presentation of the student’s work. Students can read to each other or other real-life audiences. An interesting point to note, however, is that the publishing does not have to come at the end of the cycle; sometimes students “share in-process work to gain feedback” (p. 52). Though it may not seem like share time requires as much work as the other components of writing workshop, publishing is just as important as the three other stages of writing workshop because it provides time to celebrate students’ work. The goal of publishing is to “reinforce the idea that writing reaches other people, and as it does, it influences and changes them” (Hughey & Slack, 2001, p. 153). There are many methods of publishing, from posting students’ work on the walls, to having students present their pieces before a classroom of parents, to arranging with other teachers at the school to send in other classes to come in and listen to the writing the students have worked tremendously hard on. The most important part of publishing, however, is ensuring that works are shared, as some students will “lose interest in writing if no one but the teacher sees their work” (p. 153).
The vast majority of time spent in writing workshop should be devoted to “actual writing” (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001, p. 12). During writing time, students are working through the writing process, moving between brainstorming, drafting, and editing, and then returning to the pre-writing stage. Teachers should also use this time to conference with students who need ideas or advice. Students should also be allowed to talk with each other about their work, bounce ideas off of one another, and ask their peers for advice.

Writing workshop is a great method for decreasing the loneliness created by writing being a “solitary…activity” (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006, p. 145). Instead of working alone, writing workshop provides the option for students to discuss their work with their peers or teacher through conferencing; to listen and respond to issues that were discussed in the mini-lesson; and to converse about potential plotlines or character development. Writing no longer has to be a solitary activity; in fact, it should be an activity in which the entire class is actively involved in the work at some point in the process.

**Writing Traits**

Spandel (2004) writes that the writing traits curriculum is an essential component of teaching students writing. Interestingly, however, Spandel does not expect writing traits to replace one’s writing curriculum but, as she puts it, to “enhance” (p. ix) it. “Trait-based writing is based on acquisition of language and understanding how writers work” (p. ix), which means that the writing traits program is an example of targeted instruction for certain components of writing with which students often have difficulties. However, it should be an integral aspect of a strong comprehensive writing curriculum, as opposed to existing as the sole content of a writing curriculum.
The six writing traits are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Ideas are the content of a strong piece of writing, but the concept of ideas is more than simply providing information; students must also focus explain their message with clarity and write a cohesive and meaningful story. Detail, too, is important—vague writing can quickly become uninteresting, and the specifics of a narrative are what make it exciting and fun. Details are the make-it-or-break-it component of successful writing that can keep the reader enticed and coming back for more.

Organization is also vital to ensuring that a story flows fluidly and with ease. It is “the design and structure of a piece of writing” that allows the author “to showcase ideas effectively so that” they are not being tossed randomly throughout the work (p. 8). A strong writer will create a logical progression of events or knowledge; the catchy introduction should be at the beginning, followed by interesting supporting points and summarized with a logical but thought-provoking conclusion. Torrance and Galbraith (2006) also find value in the trait of organization, citing “consistent evidence that outlining does benefit writing” because creating “structured notes” allows for content to be planned without the pressure of producing “well-formed and coherent text” (p. 76).

There are many ways that authors and scholars describe voice: as the “personality of the writer on the page,” as the “quality that keeps us tuned in,” and as “confidence…enthusiasm, curiosity, and…honesty” (p. 9). It is a mix between the “sharing of self” and development of a bond of trust between the author and reader. Critical to strong writing, voice is often the key component to a story being successful, or even being read. When teaching voice, teachers should focus on the following points that voice incorporates: having students put “energy into writing;” getting them to recognize their own voice in a story; encouraging students to select
“personally important topics;” and getting students to connect with their audience (p. 109). If students can successfully achieve all four of these points, then they will be well on their way to demonstrating strong voice in their writing.

Word choice is the fourth writing trait, one that is vital for drawing the reader in. Word choice is “all about using the right word at the right moment” to “evoke feelings, moods, likes, or dislikes” (Spandel, 2004, p. 9). A great method of teaching word choice is to have students write first, then go back through the paper and highlight a certain number (i.e., ten) of words that are too general and need to be more specific. Then, the students can work with a partner or look up ideas for better words in a thesaurus. For example, if the student originally wrote “big,” then he or she can now use a thesaurus to find more descriptive, catchy words such as “humongous,” “gigantic,” and “overwhelming.”

Sentence fluency can be described as “the rhythm and flow of language—the way it plays to the ear” (Spandel, 2004, p. 10). While content and ideas are important, the way in which they are expressed is critical too; the writer has to make the writing flow naturally and easily to the reader. Fluid sentences vary in length and sentence beginning; they also provide great opportunities to insert expression and intonation to give the sentence more depth. Spandel (2004) also writes that word choice and fluency work together to develop voice: the specific words that define the sentence and the easy flow of those words on the tongue create the unique personality of the writing that is voice.

Finally, the conventions writing trait includes mechanics, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, the various subjects that are dealt with in the revising section of the writing process. Teachers can explicitly demonstrate what their expectations are for conventions through a series of mini-lessons and then address new conventions issues as they arise. In addition, Spandel
(2004) notes that “visual conventions” (p. 11)—how the writing is presented on the page, whether it is legible, the size of the writing, and the inclusion of acceptable spacing between words—should be considered a part of this writing trait, and teachers should teach them accordingly.

**Genres and Formats**

Barone and Taylor (2006) share the basic structures of informational and narrative writing. Finding informational writing to be “critical to student achievement in all subject areas” (p. xi), the scholars begin with informational writing. They encourage teachers to incorporate both formal and informal writing into their instruction, as both are important for developing strong writing skills. Barone and Taylor then move to discuss formal and informal narrative writing, which is most often taught in the elementary classroom to prepare students for the standardized test. Both forms of writing are extremely important for students to learn and practice. Truly strong writers can choose any form and write coherently and fluidly. The authors provide rich examples of real-life teachers’ struggles and experiences to guide other teachers as well.

Students must develop a strong understanding of the nuances of each genre and adjust their writing accordingly when they switch genres. Teachers must equip their students with strong non-fiction writing skills so that they can organize an unforgettable travel brochure or write an irresistible persuasive letter to a friend (Barone & Taylor, 2006). There is a variety of formats that students need to practice in order to become strong non-fiction writers, from advertisements to biographical monologues and dramas. The opportunities are endless as to what a teacher can incorporate in a classroom, and the students will reap the benefits by receiving a well-rounded writing education.
Bear and Barone (1998) encourage teachers to provide “signs for the merchandise” and “forms for recording a sale,” (p. 199) in addition to many other items, so that students get used to having literacy items when they are playing. The additional exposure to literacy items while playing helps prepare young students to use literacy items when it is necessary to do so in a classroom setting in the future. Students should also write in journals every day about what they are doing or in response to a prompt that the teacher has created about a book or concept that the students have been learning about in class. Even when students cannot write full sentences or write their letters clearly, writing is still beneficial because they are practicing it. Finally, the authors suggest that students write and draw in response to what they have read aloud themselves or heard read aloud by an adult from books. Students should begin very early to respond to literature so that as they get older they understand the practice and can transition from retelling the story to analyzing literary elements, plot, characters, and the style of writing.

Tompkins (2006) proceeds to identify eight different writing genres that she believes are crucial: journal writing, letter writing, biographical writing, expository writing, narrative writing, descriptive writing, poetry writing, and persuasive writing. Tompkins argues that a strong writing curriculum must be composed of, at the very least, these eight writing forms. Students must be well-versed in the nuances of these forms, as each one requires a different expertise from the next.

Each of the chapters in Tompkins’ (2006) book focuses on a specific genre of writing and provides specific tools for how to teach writing most effectively to students. The author provides specific subsets of each genre (i.e., for letter writing, there are friendly letters, business letters, and simulated letters) and how to teach within each subset. Then, another section demonstrates how to teach writing in the specific genre. Tompkins always introduces how to teach writing
within the specific genre and how to develop assessments for that genre, but among her explanations Tompkins includes tips on how to write, incorporating collaborative and individual reports, teaching various expository text structures, various mini-lessons to teach students about grammar and writing, teaching the writing process, and much more.

In addition to teaching generally about genres, Tompkins (2008) provides an Instructional Overview to teaching each genre. This great resource for teachers differentiates writing instruction according to grade or ability level. There are goals and activities for each grade band and genre. For example, Chapter 6, Letter Writing, outlines three goals for the specific genre: To learn the forms and uses of business letters; to correspond with pen pals; and to correspond with authors and illustrators. Then, under each goal, Tompkins offers ideas of activities. To learn the forms and uses of business letters, she suggests that children write their own business letters as part of the unit. To correspond with pen pals, Tompkins encourages teachers to send email letters to pen pals, to write letters to students at other schools, to write back and forth about a book they are reading, or to make and send postcards to send to relatives and friends. Finally, for the third goal, to correspond with authors and illustrators, students can write letters to favorite authors and illustrators as part of an author study. Writing to real people allows students to connect their writing to the real world and realize that writing is something done not only in a classroom environment, but in various aspects of life as well.

**Modeling**

Spandel (2004) encourages teachers to incorporate modeling into their classrooms as an everyday part of the writing process. She writes, “Nothing, absolutely nothing, you will ever do as a teacher will be more powerful than modeling writing in front of your students” (p. 163). There are several ways to model. Some teachers model by working directly with their students,
asking probing questions of them and then listening to their responses. Others write in front of students or provide drafts of their own work as examples. Conferences, too, are a method of modeling: they provide an opportunity for “dialogues with the child” and extending “the child’s understanding” (Crawford, 1993, p. 186) through scaffolding instruction according to the student’s level of knowledge or ability. Finally, by listening to students—during conferences, when students ask questions, and during publishing—teachers can model “taking part and becoming an audience” (p. 187). Listening attentively allows teachers to ask probing questions; get students to think about their writing from alternative angles; and provide constructive criticism and feedback. Finally, teachers should look at every situation as an opportunity to model strong writing skills and attitudes. If there are students who consistently present a negative opinion about writing, teachers can mold the students’ attitudes by always turning the statement towards the positive: “That’s okay. You can do it.” “Take five and we’ll start again.” “I know you have been working really hard, and you’re almost there. Just keep going; you will be so happy when you finally achieve your goal. Eventually the students will begin “to internalize…the teacher’s ideas” (Staton, 1984, p. 172), and the teacher will witness a change in the student’s behavior, as well as the quality of the student’s work.

Spandel (2004) believes that this modeling is critical, as it provides several much-needed lessons for students to learn from teachers. First, teachers can have a difficult time writing as well. There are days when writing “does not come easily” (p. 164). However, teachers model to students that capable writers move past that difficulty and proceed to create valuable works of literature or other strong writing. Second, by encouraging students to participate while the class writes as a group, teachers offer students the opportunity to educate or coach others themselves, whether that is by creating a catchy title or writing a good lead to the story. For all students, but
especially those who have not always had pleasant educational memories, these experiences help build confidence and encourage students to keep suggesting their creative ideas. Third, modeling helps students visualize what the writing process actually looks like. If students have never had a teacher who required them to work through the writing process in an extensive way, then they may not understand exactly how they can move back and forth between the different stages of the process. It will be most beneficial if teachers explicitly explain their expectations for each step of the process in addition to modeling.

**Time**

Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) advocate for teachers to include regular, intense instruction in writing in their classrooms. They believe that teachers must “schedule a minimum of three days a week for about an hour each day,” (p. 8) encouraging them to incorporate writing every day if possible. While they recognize teachers’ concerns that there is not enough time to instruct students in writing every day, Fletcher and Portalupi believe that most of these fears result from inefficient or unproductive lesson plans. Instead of creating an isolated language arts lesson about writing, teachers should incorporate writing into the other core subject areas. Studies have shown that when students are given ample time to write, their writing improves tremendously, they “write more text,” and they become “better writers” (McCarthey, 2008, p.469).

While teachers plan the general schedule according to subject, they should give students ownership of how to spend that time. Once writing workshop, the writing process, and other key elements have been explained, students should have autonomy within their writing to decide whether to brainstorm more, work on revising, or conference with a teacher. Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) argue that choice is incredibly important because students ultimately “decide what will be learned” (p. 9). If teachers place ownership of writing into students’ hands, it is
more likely that they will develop increased motivation toward writing and, thus, spend more time writing efficiently and coherently.

A benefit of extended time spent in writing is “‘flow,’ when one loses sense of time and track of external environment” (Berninger & Winn, 2006, p. 108). This represents the successful culmination of all goals of writing—to entice students to write, to have them regularly draft, revise, and edit; to build enjoyment in and enthusiasm for writing. Once students have experienced that flow, they will realize the tremendous feeling that resulted from it and want to attempt to achieve it again, which will in turn lead to increased amounts of time spent writing in the future.

Assessment

How teachers assess writing is very important; some modes of assessment can encourage students to improve their writing, while others make writing a boring, un-engaging task. Hughey and Slack (2001) outline several types of assessment, including discrete-point assessment, frequency-count marking, holistic assessment, primary-trait assessment, and analytic assessment. In addition, each category of assessment can include both informal and formal assessments.

Discrete-point assessment is similar to a standardized test: students are often evaluated based on multiple-choice questions and a writing sample. The multiple-choice questions are usually about “surface features of writing” (p. 68), such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. However, Hughey and Slack note that discrete-point assessment measure “editing skills rather than effective communication” (p. 68), and as such are not good tools for teachers who truly want to determine their students’ writing ability.

Frequency-count marking also requires students to provide a writing sample. This method allows teachers to analyze students grammar, punctuation, and spelling as well; “subject-
verb agreements…comma faults or fragments…the number of syllables in a word…and the number of words in a piece of writing” (p. 69) are all identified and analyzed through frequency-count marking. However, this method is similar to discrete-point assessment in that it does not truly determine a student’s ability to communicate a message clearly and effectively.

Holistic assessment is commonly used in classrooms in attempt to grade students fairly on their writing. Teachers use a prescribed rubric to evaluate students on a variety of criteria, including grammar, mechanics, “creativity and sophistication” (p. 69). Unfortunately, while students are graded according to an unbiased scale, the grade or ranking of a student’s work may not demonstrate what their true writing flaws are. Hughey and Slack (2001) give the example of two students who receive an overall score of 3: one student scored high on creativity and sophistication but had poor grammar and mechanics, whereas the other had nearly perfect grammar and mechanics but wrote an unimaginative, boring essay. Each student’s writing has positive and negative characteristics, but the teacher needs to approach each student from a different angle. The arbitrary score of 3 provides little insight into how that score was determined. As a result, Hughey and Slack conclude that holistic assessment is beneficial for scoring an entire class in order to determine where students’ writing capability stands overall, but teachers should incorporate other forms of assessment to accurately identify problem areas.

The primary-trait assessment is the type often used in writing assessments such as the NAWE (Nevada Analytic Writing Examination), on which this study was based. This assessment uses scales similar to the holistic assessment, except that there are different scales available based on type of writing assessed, whether descriptive, informative, narrative, etc. As such, each type of writing uses a scoring guide unique to its type. This assessment can be effective if students are informed of areas to work on and teachers use the scores to focus their
instruction. Unfortunately, students are usually given only the “whole” score (the sum of all of the scores for each aspect of the scoring guide), which shares little specific information.

Analytic assessments synthesize the qualities of the student’s writing across a variety of categories, such as “richness, soundness, clarity, and development of ideas and their relevance to the topic and purpose; usage; sentence structure…organization and analysis; wording and phrasing; and finally style, originality, interest, sincerity, and individuality” (Hughey & Slack, p. 72). Because of the focus on quality of writing style, and the various angles from which the writing is assessed, analytic assessments can be very valuable.

Furthermore, Hughey and Slack (2001) encourage teachers to incorporate a variety of formal and informal assessments in their teaching. Formal assessments are characterized by “a strict time frame” and “a highly regulated, secured, and structured setting” (p. 73). In addition, students see the prompt or task for the first time during that time period and must give their most organized, cohesive response without drafting or revising. Finally, students work individually at their seats without any contact with other students and, usually, the teacher.

On the other hand, informal assessments most closely relate to writing workshop. Students have the opportunity to work together, draft their work, spend time fine-tuning their writing, and conference with their teachers. While this assessment is informal, teachers can use this time to evaluate students on how effective they are at writing, how well they organize their work, what strategies they use for revising, and what tasks the teacher should focus on for future mini-lessons or conferences. Morrow, Gambrell, and Pressley (2003) encourage teachers to use writing conferences during writers’ workshop as a means to informally assess students as well. These conferences can be extremely useful, if the teacher is observant and takes notes; he or she can determine whether the student is progressing well in his or her use of the writing process, the
student’s ability to draft and edit, the student’s organizational and mechanical skills, and the student’s ability to “effectively verbalize opinions, ideas, and feelings” (p. 231). In addition, teachers can use conferences as a way to determine their future course of action. For each student, the teacher can decide what students should learn next, what topics to include for future mini-lessons, whether students can apply realistic strategies to their work, and whether students can use “appropriate terminology” (p. 231). If the teacher finds gaps in the student’s work, he or she can then determine the applicable solution, whether that is one-on-one tutoring, mini-lessons for a group of students, or one lesson for the entire classroom. Finally, during conferences teachers should ask students three types of questions about their work: those “about performance, processes, and perceptions” (Morrow, Gambrell, & Pressley, 2003, p. 231). These three categories cover actual work that the student has completed, literacy strategies the student has used, and how motivated and positive the child feels about writing. With answers to these questions, teachers can compile their observations with students’ perceptions to determine the most beneficial strategy.

Hughey and Slack (2001) advocate that the best method for evaluating and assessing students’ writing is through a portfolio that each student develops with his or her best writing samples. This is an advantageous route because the focus is on evaluating one’s work and the progress that has been made over time, rather than on grading assignments. In fact, “only selected pieces of writing need to be graded, and then with specific criteria known to the writers from the beginning of the assignment” (Hughey & Slack, p. 79). Instead of determining a letter grade for the work, Hughey and Slack encourage teachers to demonstrate that they find value in all students’ work by using portfolios. This does not mean that there cannot be flaws in the student’s work; on the contrary, feedback and indicating areas of improvement are crucial
elements of the portfolio. However, the portfolio allows students to “track progress over time” and “develop independence through self-reflection” (p. 80), which are arguably two very important traits that teachers want to nurture in their students’ work. Ultimately, portfolios place accountability back in students’ hands: the students can provide the works of writing at any future point and discuss the aspects of each particular piece of writing as well as their growth as an author over that period of time.

_Organizing One’s Teaching_

There are many methods by which one can organize his or her teaching, but the consensus is that organized teaching is entirely more effective and productive. The following ideas are proposed by scholars in a variety of books.

For intermediate writers, it is important for teachers to provide guided writing instruction according to the various genres (expository text, poetry, etc.). Bear and Barone (1998) believe that teachers need to provide a lot of modeling before students are able to do their own work. Transitional writers have a large vocabulary to pull from and will slowly begin to feel more comfortable with writing in different genres. It is perfectly acceptable for teachers to do a whole-class poem (perhaps more), for example, before students create their own poems.

Following genres, Tompkins (2006) details five levels of writing instruction that vary based on a student’s ability and confidence when it comes to writing. These five levels proceed along a continuum from teacher-directed to student-directed: modeled writing, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, and independent writing. As the students move forward on the continuum, the teacher models increasingly less, becoming a guide and then an advisor. The teacher’s input is still important; however, the students have become strong enough in their writing to need less supervision.
Balance in Instruction

Tompkins (2006) takes a new spin on the concept of teaching writing: she believes that there is an imbalance in the way that most teachers teach writing. Instead, she argues that teachers must balance process and product. The method by which writing is created must be steadied with an equal dose of quality in its composition. For example, some teachers focus too much on creating a perfect picture: the paper must have the obligatory five paragraphs; all spelling and grammar must be unblemished; and the majority of the writing process is spent in the revising stage. On the other hand, some teachers expressly favor creativity and imagination; those students’ papers are littered with fancy wording, extreme ways of phrasing information, and superfluous information. Teachers instead should attempt instruction somewhere in the middle, where both creativity and mechanics are valued. The writing process is an excellent method of balancing these two extremes that provides the opportunity for both to take center stage.

Prior (2006) also encourages a greater balance in instruction. He favors a tip in the scale toward viewing writing as “chains of short- and long-term production, representation, reception, and distribution” instead of as an act “of inscription” (p. 57). This changes the methodology as well as the theology of teaching; teachers must allow students more creativity and flexibility in their writing, but they must also begin to teach students that writing is “a mode of action, not simply a means of communication” (p. 58). Teachers must demonstrate that students are not simply writing for a grade; students can influence society, too, with what they write. To demonstrate the potential influence that students can impact the world, it would be beneficial to share with students examples of writing that changed society (i.e., Martin Luther’s 95 Theses or Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream speech). In addition, teachers can create tasks that will
demonstrate that the students, in their current location, place and time, can truly share their opinion or make a difference: they can write to the President about a policy change that they want to see occur; to an oil company about drilling that they do not support; or to the owner of a company about a product that they want the manufacturer to create.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Design

This thesis project is a qualitative study using phenomenology, which is the “study of structures of consciousness as experienced from a first-person point of view” (Smith, 2008). My thesis assesses what teachers believe is critical to students’ learning of writing. As a result, I created a study that allowed me to explore the methods teachers use for teaching students how to write.

I chose schools that made AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) and had similar test scores, in addition to varied student compositions in terms of socioeconomic status and minorities. Once schools were identified, I contacted principals from those schools for permission to contact their teachers. Then, teachers from within those schools were recruited by both email and phone. Once they agreed to participate in the project and returned a consent form, I interviewed them over the phone about the writing strategies that they use in their classrooms.

Research Background

I am a student working on her elementary education degree who is interested in the best methods and strategies of writing instruction. Many of the teachers I interviewed consider writing to be a difficult—perhaps the most difficult—subject to teach. They often blame their lack of knowledge on inadequate instruction in their college courses. Regardless, I want to be prepared when I enter the teaching world. In order to prepare myself to teach writing in the future, I chose to complete a senior Honors Thesis project on the topic. I interviewed teachers to determine what their successful strategies for teaching writing were, and then I researched strategies and methods that renowned scholars in the field supported. Finally, I synthesized both
groups’ opinions and compared and contrasted them to determine whether there was any overlap in what both groups encouraged other teachers to implement in their classrooms.

Prior to commencing this thesis, I had completed three literacy classes, in addition to taking the majority of the required courses for my degree. However, I felt that the literacy classes focused more on reading, spelling, and grammar than on writing instruction. This thesis is an excellent avenue by which to expand my knowledge of solid writing curriculum. While reading, grammar, and spelling are integral components to a successful literacy background for students, writing is a crucial element of that as well, and I want to ensure that I am fully equipped to teach writing when I enter my own classroom one day.

Schools

Before I could contact any principals or teachers, I had to submit my thesis proposal to two Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that would confirm that my study would ensure the confidentiality of participants involved. The first IRB I submitted to was the University of Nevada, Reno. Once I received approval from the University of Nevada, Reno, I submitted my proposal to the Washoe County School District (WCSD) IRB. Both IRBs approved my request, which allowed me to continue with the process of contacting and interviewing teachers.

I chose the three schools based on the socioeconomic and racial compositions of the student body. First, I went to the Washoe County School District website to determine the racial make-up of the student body (what percentage of students were White; this gave me a relatively good estimate of how diverse the student population was). I also determined the socioeconomic status of the schools by recording how many students qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL). Then, I recorded the Nevada Writing Analytic Examination (NAWE) test scores of the students at each of the schools within Washoe County. This number showed the percentage of
students who scored in the middle two categories (Category 2 and Category 3) on the test. I chose these two categories because I wanted to represent the average student population, not the high- or low-scoring outliers. Finally, I recorded the percentage of the student population at each school that was male. However, gender quickly became a relatively neutral variable; the statistics ranged from 48.9% male to 55.2% male between all of the schools in the district, which is not a statistically significant enough variable to influence the study.

Then, I further organized all of the schools (with the exception of schools that were missing statistical information on the website; they were excluded at that point from the study) into separate categories to determine which of three categories the schools fell into. The first category was the percentage of White students in the student body population. This category was subdivided into Low White (0-33% White), Middle White (34-67% White), and High White (68-100% White). The second category was the percentage of students at each school who qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL). This category was subdivided into Low FRL (0-33% of students qualifying), Middle FRL (34-67%) and High FRL (68-100%). I determined that the Low White population tended to correlate with a High FRL population. The opposite was true as well: a High White population tended to correlate with a Low FRL population. I also organized the schools’ test scores (the percentage of students at each school who scored within Category 2 or Category 3) into further subdivisions: 70-79% scored within these two categories, 80-89% scored within these two categories, and 90-99% scored within these two categories.

The percentage of students who scored within these two categories ended up being the deciding factor for which schools to choose for this project. Five schools—Newman Elementary School, Cactus Elementary School, Millman Elementary School, Pali Elementary School, and Sierra Elementary School—all had at least 91% of their students score within these two
categories. They all also had varying socioeconomic and racial compositions. Pali Elementary School was categorized as High White/Low FRL; Cactus Elementary School and Sierra Elementary School were classified as “Middle” for both White and FRL numbers; and Millman Elementary School and Newman Elementary School were classified as Low White/High FRL.

In addition, one of the schools, such as Newman Elementary School, was located in a tiny town within the district and had only two fifth grade teachers. The official statistics for the five schools were:

Table 1: Overview of Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Percent White</th>
<th>Percent Qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Percent Testing in Categories 2 and 3 on the NAWE standardized test</th>
<th>Percent Testing in Categories 3 and 4 on the NAWE standardized test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cactus Elementary School</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millman Elementary School</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newman Elementary School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pali Elementary School</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Elementary School</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My original goal was to consult only the first three schools in different groups that responded to my invitation to join the study. For example, for the schools in the “middle” of the continuum (Cactus Elementary School and Sierra Elementary School), I might consult Sierra Elementary School first because its statistics are closer to the average (50%) than Cactus Elementary School’s. However, if Sierra Elementary School’s principal declined to have his school participate, or if I had not received enough permission letters from the teachers at Sierra Elementary School, then I would consult Cactus Elementary School next. My goal was to find
three schools (about fifteen teachers) to work with, so that once I had gotten a school with a certain socioeconomic and racial composition to agree, then I would not continue to consult other similar schools in the same group. However, as the study progressed, it became clear that there were certain teachers who had little interest in participating in the study. In fact, I had to contact all five schools so that I would have enough teachers participate in the research project.

I first contacted the principals to ensure that they would support my requests of the teachers to be interviewed. Once the principal verbally gave consent, I sent a principal consent form for him or her to sign. After I had received the principal consent form back from the principal, I was free to contact the teachers. I attempted to contact them by both phone and email. Once I had received a teacher’s verbal consent, I would send a consent form to the teacher at his or her school. After I received the teacher’s consent form back and it had been signed, the teacher and I set up a time for the interview. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and ten minutes.

Participants

The participants in the project are all fifth grade teachers within the Washoe County School District. They teach all general subjects, including writing. Their names, as well as the names of their schools, have been changed to protect their privacy. These five teachers represent four different schools and a wide variety of socioeconomic and racial compositions of students.

Sue Smith (pseudonym) works at Pali Elementary School and has extensive experience in teaching at the elementary school level. She holds a bachelor’s degree as well as the equivalency of a master’s degree in elementary education. Interestingly, though she has had great success teaching at the fifth grade level, she has done so for only three years—the first fourteen years of her time as an educator were spent in kindergarten and first grade. She has taught only at high-
risk schools in Washoe County, so she understands the needs of students who are disadvantaged socioeconomically.

Jane Jones (pseudonym) has taught for three years at Sierra Elementary School, having earned her bachelor’s degree in elementary education at a nearby university. While she enjoyed the program, she felt inadequately prepared in terms of her knowledge of writing instruction. She felt that writing was briefly discussed and that most literacy instruction centered on reading and spelling. While those are certainly essential components, the lack of writing-centered pedagogy led to a gap in her knowledge when she proceeded to teach in her own classroom after graduation. At the same time, she feels that her elementary school has not provided much guidance whatsoever, and that everything she has learned to this point has been gleaned on her own or in discussions with other teachers at her grade level.

Alex Alvarez (pseudonym), who has taught for seven years, has experienced three different elementary schools in two states during those seven years. She currently works at Millman Elementary School. Her undergraduate program in elementary education left much to be desired in the arena of writing instruction—believing it was best to create one’s own methods for teaching—so most of her knowledge of writing curriculum was learned after graduation. She is trained in and uses several specialized writing and literacy programs, including Project G.L.A.D., a “language acquisition program” focused on high expectations from the teacher for the students (McCoy, 2010); Step Up to Writing, a writing program that is “easy to implement” and complements the No Child Left Behind Act (Null, 2007); Four Blocks, a reading program that “incorporates on a daily basis four different approaches to teaching children to read—Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words” (Cunningham & Hall, 2010); Six Traits (see above section in Chapter 2: Literature Review for more detail); and
Four Square, a graphic organizer that helps students organize their writing (McKenzie, N.D.; see Appendix D). Ms. Alvarez also incorporates the teaching philosophy of Dr. Robert J. Marzano, a well-known researcher in the field of education who focuses on “implementing standards” (Marzano Research Laboratory, 2009), into her writing curriculum. She believes that it is imperative for teachers to become specialized and trained in various programs to become better writing teachers, and that the undergraduate curriculum is often sorely lacking in education programs.

Melissa Sanchez’s (pseudonym) background is quite unique in comparison to the other teachers, since she has a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a master’s degree in business administration. Having lived and taught in two Latin American countries, she moved back to the United States to receive her teaching credentials through a University of California school. However, this teaching program was quite different from most others: she underwent a six-week pre-service program and then attended class one night each week and every Saturday while she taught in the classroom at an inner-city school. While Ms. Sanchez likens the urban environment where she worked to “Coach Carter country,” she says teaching there was an incredible experience in which she felt that she was making a difference and changing “the life of people of color.” Currently entering her tenth year of teaching, she has taught fourth, fifth, and sixth grade in Washoe County. She teaches at Millman Elementary School.

Thomas Nakamura (pseudonym) teaches at another Washoe County school, Millman Elementary. He has taught for two years, having gotten certified through a master’s degree program in elementary education. He enjoys teaching but finds teaching writing difficult because so many of his students are below grade level in their studies, and for him writing is not a subject that lends itself to being easily taught. Still, each year his curriculum for teaching
writing improves, having benefitted greatly from extensive development provided at his school by the Northern Nevada Writing Project and other well-known organizations.

**Data Collection**

I interviewed five teachers among three of the five schools. These interviews took place over the telephone. It is more convenient for the teacher to be interviewed in his or her preferred environment instead of enduring a face-to-face interview as they share the strategies and methods that they each use for teaching students writing. Each interview lasted approximately one hour in length; the interview questions that I asked are listed in Appendix A at the back of this paper.

I determined which sources to use as part of the natural course of this project. I spent time reading, determining which researchers’ names were mentioned often and which scholars had developed well-known programs within the writing field (such as Spandel (2004), who developed the writing traits curriculum). It was also extremely important to read experts who wrote about the writing process from different angles. As I began to read the material, recurring themes kept occurring throughout the various books, regardless of which author’s perspective I was reading. Slowly, I developed a list of several writing strategies and methods that those scholars highly recommend for teachers to use or incorporate into their lessons.

**Data Analysis**

Once I finished interviewing the teachers, I analyzed their answers to determine whether there is a pattern of strategies used among successful teachers. I also compared what the successful teachers state as the best strategies to what renowned scholars and researchers have determined is most beneficial.
I spent time reading a variety of well-known writing scholars’ books. I searched for similar themes that tied the various works together. While there are many specific ideas about how to teach writing, I focused on the several most common strategies that the scholars mentioned and which virtually any teacher can implement in the classroom.

I then compared their successful methods with the methods and strategies that renowned researchers and scholars in the field recommend, based on the books I have read about teaching writing in the classroom. I determined if there was any overlap between the two groups and what, ultimately, a successful curriculum for instruction in writing would look like.
Chapter 4: Results

Throughout the interviews, several common themes were identified. Some overlapped with those that scholars recommended; others were unique ideas that teachers found from other sources or developed to fit their classroom needs. Teachers used the research of certain famed pioneers in the education field, drawing on their own research regarding how to teach writing or their days as an undergraduate. Others used similar graphic organizers, the same websites, or explicit ways of phrasing specific concepts. Below is a comprehensive, detailed description of the common, successful writing strategies and methodology identified by teachers.

Borrowing from the Writing Experts

Ms. Alvarez named education pioneer Lucy McCormick Calkins (1994) as someone who was held up as a role model for writing instruction in her undergraduate courses. A well-known scholar, Lucy Calkins is currently a Foundation Professor at Columbia University Teachers’ College. She is heavily involved in creating “state-of-the-art teaching methods” and responsible for providing professional development to thousands of teachers every year. Though she works with the Reading and Writing Project, Dr. Calkins is best known for first proposing the idea for a mini-lesson to be used as a component of writing workshop (Milltown Public Schools). The mini-lesson can cover a variety of topics, from organizing one’s writing to punctuation, but these targeted instructional periods provide students with critical instruction that is not overwhelming or time-consuming. Ms. Sanchez read Lucy Calkins’ work during her undergraduate study and found it helpful, describing the “reading and writing” curriculum in her program as “pretty strong.” She describes Lucy Calkins’ work as “nurturing of the soul.” However, Ms. Alvarez found Lucy Calkins’ work to be based largely on theory and “unrealistic.” As a result, with the encouragement of an education system that was focused on an ideology of “do what you want to
Ms. Alvarez instead created much of the curriculum and strategies that she uses herself. She pulls pieces from a variety of different sources, but she does not point to one scholar as having the answer for perfect writing instruction. Instead, when she finds a program that works, she continues using it until she finds a better method.

Ms. Sanchez mentioned vocabulary specialist Dr. Leif Fearn (2000) as a great mentor for teaching writing. He had been cited repeatedly in her undergraduate studies at an out-of-state university. She describes his work as “textbook-y, but yet he’s easy to read.” Currently a professor at the School of Education at San Diego State University, Dr. Fearn seeks to eliminate problems that teachers have when teaching vocabulary. He often hears the complaint, “I taught this vocabulary to the kids, but they don’t use it when they write” (cited in SDSU College of Education). These repetitive issues made Dr. Fearn wonder whether there are two processes taking place when students learn vocabulary. One occurs when students are reading and one when students are writing. Dr. Fearn summarizes the theory: “In reading, I don’t know the meaning of the word. In writing, I know the meaning, but I don’t know the word.” As a result, he is working to specify the differences between the two methods of learning vocabulary, in order to “quantify it” and determine an appropriate course of action. Ms. Sanchez mentioned Mr. Fearn’s book, *Interactions: Teaching Writing and the Language Arts* (2000), as a helpful guide to teaching writing. She uses his idea of calling punctuation “readers’ marks, because everything you do as a writer can be done for the benefit of your reader.”

Ms. Jones uses the methodology of Ruth Culham (2003), a leading researcher in the field known for developing instruction in the writing traits. The book offers “a pretty good guideline” for teaching writing that is both realistic and practical to implement in the classroom. Ms. Jones chose Culham’s book because she is “seen as a strong figure in teaching, and so I felt that her
insight from one of her books would be helpful to me, and I feel that it was.” Ms. Sanchez also incorporates Culham’s work, describing her work as reminiscent of *Writing for Dummies* and a strong source for writing instruction even if you are “not the best writing teacher in the world.” She believes Culham’s work is beneficial in that “you can pick up the book and be pretty good” at teaching writing. Culham “explains traits carefully,” working step by step so that “you can do that with your kids” and be confident in the writing instruction provided to them.

Ms. Alvarez is trained in and uses several specialized writing and literacy programs. First, the third, fourth, and fifth grades at her school incorporate Step Up to Writing, a writing program that “uses organizational tools” and is “easy to implement.” She also relies on Ruth Culham’s Six Traits of Writing program (2003) because her school chose the program for its writing instruction. Ms. Alvarez “trained heavily in Marzano” in the previous state that she taught in, especially in the area of teaching vocabulary. Dr. Marzano is a well-known researcher in the field of education who emphasizes “implementing standards” (Marzano Research Laboratory, 2009) in one’s writing curriculum. Other programs Ms. Alvarez is trained in include Project G.L.A.D., a “language acquisition program” that focuses heavily on the teacher creating high expectations for the students (McCoy, 2010); Four Blocks, a literacy program that “incorporates on a daily basis four different approaches to teaching children to read—Guided Reading, Self-Selected Reading, Writing, and Working with Words” (Cunningham & Hall, 2010); and Four Square, a graphic organizer that helps students organize their writing (McKenzie, N.D.; see Appendix D). There is also a Four Square chart for teachers to use when teaching writing (McKenzie, N.D.; see Appendix E).

Ms. Smith and Mr. Nakamura mentioned Corbett Harrison (NNWP, 2010), a Northern Nevada Writing Project leader who has visited for professional development at their schools. At
Ms. Smith’s school, Harrison began working with the fourth graders in the springtime as part of a “pre-fifth-grade state writing” exercise. As the students moved up to fifth grade, he continued to work with the students, practicing writing prompts from previous writing proficiencies that have actually appeared on the NAWE examination. Her students have also sent their work to Harrison for him to review and return. In addition, Harrison has done in-service staff development on incorporating Ruth Culham’s Six Traits curriculum into their writing instruction. Mr. Nakamura, too, heavily relies on the Northern Nevada Writing Project website, particularly their Six Traits lesson plans, and points to Harrison as a key leader of the program.

In addition to providing examples of strategies and methods that they use to teach writing, each teacher offered at least one professional development writing-based book that they would encourage other teachers to read to improve their writing instruction. All of the teachers incorporate the six writing traits into their curriculum. Ms. Jones also mentioned Guiding Readers and Writers in Grades 3 through 6 (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000) as “a wonderful resource for both reading and writing strategies.” Both Ms. Smith and Ms. Sanchez utilize Mastering the Mechanics: Grades 4-5: Ready-to-Use Lessons for Modeled, Guided, and Independent Editing by Hoyt and Therriault (2008) as helpful in teaching mechanics. The writing resource book for teachers offers “good, easy-to-follow lessons” with “clear and transparent” examples. Even if one does not appreciate Hoyt and Therriault’s examples, it is relatively easy to “figure out examples” on one’s own. Ms. Smith was even part of a small group of teachers at her school that read the book and discussed how to use it to impact their writing instruction. She also uses daily a book that helps teachers prepare their students for the writing assessment, Blowing Away the State Writing Assessment Test: Four Steps to Better Scores for Teachers of All Levels (Kiester, 2000).
**The Writing Process**

The pre-writing stage of the writing process is important for brainstorming the writing trait of idea development. Ms. Smith “does a whole lot of brainstorming” with her students, as it is such an important part of developing writing skills. She begins this stage with the whole class; after assigning the prompt, she asks the class to discuss possible avenues to explore in their writing. These discussions help the students who tend to require more time to brainstorm and process become a little more encouraged about starting their writing. After a five-minute whole-class discussion, Ms. Smith has her students return to their seats and use the rest of the pre-writing time to brainstorm on their own. Ms. Smith also provides webs and other handouts for her students to use as graphic organizers so that they have a pre-made outline to give them an idea of how to organize their writing. Ms. Jones’ students make their own graphic organizers to use during the pre-writing stage, dividing the paper into four boxes to develop a three-paragraph essay. One box is for general ideas and content, whereas the other three boxes each holds the information for one main paragraph.

After the pre-writing stage, Ms. Jones allows her students free-writing time during the drafting stage so that they are able to get their ideas onto paper. Her students are encouraged to talk to other students during this time to bounce ideas off of each other and exchange advice; she believes that “they have to be able to talk about writing to improve it.” The drafting time is an integral part of writing as a whole, because it is the time when, as Ms. Sanchez says, they begin “to see themselves as writers with stories to tell.” Drafting is also one of the times during the writing process when students in her classroom leave their seats to “come and find interesting words” on the word wall in the back of her room. However, the main goal of the draft stage is for students to write as much as possible and not focus on perfecting their wording or concerning
themselves with punctuation. The writing trait of ideas and development takes center stage during this point in the writing process.

Ms. Sanchez’s class does some peer editing, but she does not feel that it is always productive. Her classroom had several second language learners last year, and they struggled more than her previous classes have. She first teaches her students the highlighting trick for editing (see Chapter 4, subsection: Use of Assessment in Guided Writing), and that has been an extremely beneficial strategy in getting students to recognize their own mistakes. Essentially, even though her students were fifth graders, Sanchez felt that she needed to “go back and just teach, What is a sentence?” Her students were unprepared enough and lacked enough background in writing that she had to return to teaching basic information that should have been taught much earlier in their education. However, once she reverted to teaching more basic skills, the students improved and she found more benefit in peer editing. Still, though, there were students who, even at the end of the year, would still “just sprinkle periods throughout the paper” with little to no understanding of English grammar and punctuation.

Ms. Sanchez tries to explicitly explain the difference between revising and editing to her students. Revising, she says, is “telling a story the best way you can, choosing the best words, [and] making sure our ideas are clear.” Editing, on the other hand, is “when we look for those boring things that should come naturally, like capitalization, and periods, and spelling.” She summarizes the two concretely: “Editing is for conventions; revision is for ideas. It’s as simple as that.” While the students understand the difference between revising and editing better when she explains them in that way, it is still difficult for them to truly revise their stories. The reason is because when “you’re ten and when you think your story’s done, you think your story’s done.” However, she tries to help her students by discussing what editing and revision are like for
authors or poets and how much time and effort they must put in to revision and editing before their work is finally complete. Ms. Smith, too, agrees that students tend to treat time spent revising their papers is time for editing; they “don’t know how to truly revise,” and they “don’t structurally change their writing” when necessary.

In addition, all five teachers concurred that having small-group conferences was the best method for revising and editing students’ work. The students were able to talk to each other, bounce ideas off of one another, and hear others talk about writing. It was most beneficial to hear other students talk about writing and for each student to be able to talk about writing itself, as there is a certain amount of terminology and confidence required to converse about writing with others. As Ms. Jones says, students “have to able to talk about their writing in order to improve it.” Ms. Sanchez actually had begun conferences in her classroom as time to spend with her students one-on-one: she would answer their questions individually whenever a student raised his hand. However, she spoke with another teacher about the peer and small-group conferencing she had seen that teacher do and was impressed by her testimony to the practice. Ms. Sanchez was thoroughly convinced that small-group editing was the best method for students and has never returned to one-on-one conferencing since. In addition, she believes that “heterogeneous groupings” are “even more powerful” for conferences, and she implements them in her classroom. However, Mr. Nakamura tends to conference with students one-on-one even while he places them into groups during writing workshop. He believes that it is difficult for students to work together on their writing, as most of his students do not have a strong background in writing from which they can pull ideas to help their fellow classmates.

Interestingly, most of the teachers say that they do not publish students’ work often enough. Ms. Smith only has students publish their works of writing monthly. Ms. Jones’
students publish every two weeks or so, choosing a piece of writing to share in the context of a small group. She does not usually have students share in front of the whole class because whole-class sharing can be “very daunting to sit in front of your class of peers and read something as personal as your own piece of writing.” Ms. Jones speaks about the lack of publishing of her students’ work with regret, saying that she should have students share “at least once a week, or when a piece is completed.” However, a crucial reason that teachers do not publish students’ work a lot is because they are teaching to the test and there is often not a lot of variety in students’ work. Ms. Jones puts other projects or pieces of writing up on bulletin boards to recognize students’ work, but because there is not a lot of writing done before the writing test unrelated to the state assessment, there is usually not a lot of work available to post on the bulletin board. Sometimes there is also a lack of creativity in students’ work since they are so focused on working to pass the test.

However, Ms. Alvarez has a very unique method of publishing students’ work. When she taught second grade, she hung pieces of writing and artwork on the wall. Now she ensures that the students in her classroom all share their writings. Each student sits in the Author’s Chair, which is a specifically designated chair that each student looks forward to sitting in each time they publish a story. During the author share, the students in Ms. Alvarez’s classroom listen to or read through other students’ work and give stars or wishes. “Stars or Wishes” is a program she discovered while student-teaching under her mentor and has implemented it in her own classroom so that every student can provide constructive feedback without focusing too much on negative criticism. A star is awarded when a student really likes something about the author’s work, whether that is their strong voice, creative language, or interesting storyline. A wish is a component that the students wish the author had included, whether that is a different
angle on the storyline or a longer, more detailed conclusion. Ms. Alvarez will take notes as well and give them to the author after Stars and Wishes has concluded, with the option of the author returning to the revising and editing stages if necessary.

**Writing Workshop**

Writing workshop incorporates four components: mini-lessons, writing time, share time, and conferencing. Though many teachers prefer to teach to the whole class as a group and have the entire class move from step to step in the process together, Ms. Alvarez believes that treating writing “as a workshop” instead of as a whole-group activity “works better because some children are great writers, and it doesn’t them a long process to get through the whole thing,” while other students require an extended period of time to develop a strong piece of writing.

Jane Jones, too, has her students conference together; the most important part of conferencing is ensuring that students are talking about their writing, bouncing ideas off of each other and sharing advice.

Ms. Alvarez devises her mini-lessons in response to errors or misconceptions she has witnessed in her students’ writing. For example, if students have difficulty determining when to use a comma or a semi-colon, she teaches that day’s mini-lesson on the difference between commas and semi-colons. After her lesson, the students practice incorporating the information she has just taught and then work on recognizing and correcting those errors in their writing.

Discussion of writing, too, is important, as Ms. Alvarez believes it is imperative for students to be able to voice their opinions and “what I’m thinking” for their writing to improve. These discussions happen as a whole group during the presentation of her mini-lesson.

Around the time of the mini-lesson, Ms. Alvarez always reads aloud a book to her students. This book serves as the basis for their quick-write of the day. She finds that the
students are more “excited” about writing when they have a read-aloud that serves as a foundation for their quick-write because “it’s a connection they have” with the prompt. Students write for “about ten minutes” on a prompt she gives them. These quick-writes are important; some become the early rough drafts of future pieces of writing that the students will work on. Quick-writes also provide the students with ownership: “instead of me telling them what’s happening, they can choose from their quick-writes” which story to expand through the entire writing process. She also finds that their enthusiasm lasts longer than the ten minutes; her students “always tell me, ‘I need more time!’” When she responds to their demands for more time, Ms. Alvarez reminds them, “You have a choice now…you can go back and finish the story.” Then, when the students return to their writing in the future to determine what work to expand, their excitement about previous quick-writes returns, translating to more engaged, creative students who develop stronger, more cohesive writing.

Ms. Sanchez conferences with her students, but interestingly, she began conferencing with them one-on-one, mostly because she did not realize that other methods could be more effective. However, she talked to another teacher who chose to incorporate group conferencing instead and found that “it was so much more powerful for four or five kids” to conference together in a small group with her because “they learned how to talk to each other and listen to each other.” She also notes that time spent in conferencing became much more “efficient” because students worked with each other instead of relying on her, and “they better understood revision and whatever traits you were working on.” In addition, she feels that one-on-one conferences are “awkward” because she has to teach more explicitly; in group conferences, the students can ask questions and thoughts of each other.
Finally, Ms. Alvarez ensures that there is always time for authorship share. This is a time at which the whole class listens to one student read his or her story aloud. Then, the students have the opportunity to impart nuggets of advice and compliments through a program called “Stars and Wishes.” Share time in her classroom occurs “just before the revising stage” so that students can respond to their classmates’ advice by incorporating it into their writing if necessary.

**Writing Traits Instruction**

The one connecting strand tying all of the teachers’ methodology for teaching writing together was that every teacher used the Six Traits or Six Traits Plus One (Culham, 2003) curriculum, books, and website in some form, Ms. Alvarez because her school required it. They all found Six Traits writing instruction to be extremely useful and beneficial in their teaching. Ms. Alvarez relies heavily on the Six Traits book to formulate ideas for mini-lessons. In addition, her students learn about and reference the official rubrics similar to the Northern Nevada Writing Project ones located in Appendices F through I to ensure that their writing is up to the standard expected on the NAWE test.

Ms. Jones develops a writing traits “flip book” with her class. The class creates a metaphor that describes each trait well. Then, each page has the name of each trait and the metaphor drawn on it. The flip book helps the students remember what traits they must keep in mind when writing. In addition, drawing the metaphors for the traits aids students’ memory during the test so that they can more readily remember what traits to incorporate in their writing.

In order to develop ideas, Ms. Alvarez has students brainstorm during the pre-writing stage of the writing process. Ms. Smith, too, uses class discussion to develop strong ideas about a particular prompt before sending students back to their desks to continue brainstorming or
begin drafting. After a few students have shared their ideas, the other students “begin to relate and come up with things.” However, ideas can be difficult to develop because many of the students, at least in Ms. Smith’s classroom, have never left the Reno area. As she says, “If all you’ve seen is downtown Reno, you can’t talk too much about tropical Africa, China, or a swamp.” Exposure to an increasing number of books and multimedia sources about a variety of topics can help lessen the gap, but these secondary sources pale in comparison to actually experiencing China or a swamp.

Ms. Alvarez finds organization to be a relatively easy trait to teach. Students only need to have graphic organizers because “you can give them each a map to fill out, pretty much,” and they will be able to outline their writing. “Teaching them how to use different types of graphic organizers to get what they want” is imperative, however, as specific graphic organizers lend themselves better to certain genres than others. She finds that graphic organizers help the students apply their organization skills during the writing assessment; even though they cannot bring graphic organizers into the test, they “can just write down a few little notes” and then start a successful piece of writing. However, because students cannot bring graphic organizers to use during the NAWE test, Ms. Alvarez has resolved upon reflection to teach future students more about the benefits of outlining as well. The students also use picture maps to organize “examples of writing” that they have already read, and “we study those a lot” to learn about the trait of organization. Ms. Smith, too, incorporates graphic organizers in the form of webs and handouts in order to help her students organize their writing, though she emphasizes that graphic organizers are not simply an exercise in “filling in a blank worksheet;” they are beneficial to students’ writing when used correctly.
To teach conventions, Ms. Alvarez incorporates peer editing into her conference time. Students learn from what their peers say, and they build off of each other’s opinions. In addition, the Daily Oral Language (Byers, 2001) program that provides a brief exercise daily to test students’ mechanics skills is a staple in Ms. Alvarez and Ms. Smith’s classrooms. However, she amends the exercise to fit what is needed; because she does not “want kids to write it the wrong way first and then rewrite it,” she will instead type up the exercise for the day and walk through the exercise together with students so that they do not have to write out the incorrect sentence. Ms. Alvarez worries that exercises that require students to write a sentence incorrectly first and then correctly will result in the poor grammar getting “stuck in their heads.” Ms. Sanchez uses “the easiest lesson” to teach conventions: she finds a written or published work and types it up without any punctuation or capital letters. Then, the students rewrite the work, replacing all of the punctuation and capitalizing all necessary letters. Her students benefit because they understand “how hard [grammar] is and why you need to do it.”

It may seem intuitive that sentence fluency is an easy trait to teach, but Ms. Sanchez feels that it is difficult because many of her students are English Language Learners. As Ms. Smith notes, many of the second-language students struggle with writing because “they don’t have the experience with writing” and lack experience with the English language in general. Ms. Alvarez, too, believes that sentence fluency can be tough to teach, as many students “don’t understand the difference between flowing smoothly and choppy sentences.” If students already speak English poorly, with little knowledge of the inner-workings of the grammar and mechanics of English, then sentence fluency can be a very difficult trait for the students to grasp.

The most difficult of the six writing traits for the teachers to teach is voice. Every teacher mentioned voice as a trait that is difficult to teach explicitly, and, according to Ms. Alvarez, a
very “abstract” concept. It can be difficult to teach students what their unique writing voice is; as Ms. Alvarez says, “Either they get it or they don’t.” As a result, teachers share various types of writing with students and to encourage them to read, because as students increase the number of storylines in which they recognize the author’s voice, recognizing their own voice becomes easier when they begin to write. For Ms. Smith, teaching voice is difficult because, by the fifth grade, it “feels so black and white with them,” and the students “don’t know how to bring their true feelings out in paper” because they have never been trained to do so. However, she attempts to make the definition of voice clearer for her students by telling them that voice is the process by which “you make people feel sorry for you, or you get them to laugh.” For fifth grade teachers to attempt to develop students’ voice in one year while trying to prepare them for the state standardized test as well is very difficult without sufficient background knowledge. As a result, she argues that teachers in every grade should be responsible for teaching the writing concepts appropriate to that grade level.

In order to teach voice, Ms. Smith reads aloud various picture books throughout the year that she thinks will portray strong voice to her students. Since Ms. Smith finds it difficult to teach voice explicitly, as trying “to make it original is hard,” she hopes that teaching voice implicitly through the reading of a variety of books will help students finally understand the concept. Perhaps they might strongly identify with a particular character, and that will help them discover new ways of injecting voice into their work. Ms. Alvarez, too, always incorporates a read-aloud at the beginning of her writing instruction every day. To teach voice, she chose the picture book *Pinkalicious* (Kann & Kann, 2006) because “it just has lots of description.” One activity that Ms. Alvarez used the picture book for was to “read a page out of *Pinkalicious* to the kids without showing the picture, and the kids had to draw a picture of what they were hearing.”
Once the students had completed their drawings, the class launched a discussion on how they knew what to incorporate into their drawings. Eventually, the students pointed to “all the voices used and the description” as their inspiration for what to draw. As a result of the activity, students learned of a concrete example of “how a story should sound” when an author incorporates strong voice into it. The class referred back to *Pinkalicious* extensively towards the end of the year, when they focused specifically on voice.

Ms. Alvarez mentioned a specific part of the program G.L.A.D. that she uses to teach voice. She is trained in Project G.L.A.D., which is a “language acquisition program” focused on high expectations from the teacher for the students (McCoy, 2010). The portion she incorporates to teach voice is called “Farmer in the Dell.” The students use a large piece of poster paper divided into sections to brainstorm parts of speech, such as adjectives, nouns, adverbs, and prepositions. The students then “build this really great amount of sentence” by playing with all of the varied sentences that can be created from this one activity. While she sometimes has students pull topic sentences from the sentences created, she admits that this activity does not provide a great quantity of useful sentences that students can use throughout future works. Still, they learn how to incorporate exciting, attention-grabbing words and phrases using this activity. Developing the ability to add more detail and choose more specific words helps students build voice in their writing. She also believes that peer editing helps build voice, as “kids really have a good instinct on what to say.”

Ms. Smith believes that it can be difficult to teach word choice because students “must be allergic” to the dictionary and thesaurus. They will resist very strongly to looking up a stronger, more exact word, and instead they will choose less descriptive and exciting words. Word choice translates to creative writing as well: if students usually utilize the word “good” instead of
“beneficial,” “benevolent,” or “incredible,” their writing will remain stagnant and lack the growth that results from a stronger vocabulary. As a result, she has created a highlighter exercise to force her students to use more imaginative, creative words. Once students enter the revising stage, Ms. Smith requires them to highlight at least ten unimaginative words that they will replace with vibrant, colorful words in their place. Highlighting words forces students to incorporate better word choices into their writing. While she does not explicitly require them to use a thesaurus, most students choose to do so because of the great quantity of vivid words available in it. On the other hand, Ms. Sanchez finds that the use of a thesaurus can create additional problems, since her students “get so excited about using really night words that they’ll…use one that really doesn’t fit in the sentence.” It can be difficult, especially for English Language Learners, to understand the nuances of slightly different definitions of two very similar words, such as “expressive” and “evocative.” Still, “as a teacher I appreciate the effort” and enthusiasm her students display when “learning new words, new language.”

**Incorporating Different Genres to Teach Writing**

Because it is the only genre tested on the NAWE writing assessment, personal narratives are the only formal genre taught for most of the year, until students have taken the examination. Ms. Sanchez expresses frustration with this system but feels that it is the only option given the students’ lack of writing preparation in previous grades. Upon reflection, she admits that “we did not play with writing enough and we did not take other types of writing as far as we did the narrative,” resulting in a less well-rounded writing education for much of the year. However, fifth grade focuses so extremely on the personal narrative that there is little time for any other genre. As a result, once the writing examination has passed, Ms. Sanchez allows her students more control in choosing what types of writing to explore. During this past year, her students
chose to develop character analyses of literature that they were reading and “science write-ups” about topics that interested them.

Although genres are not her main method of teaching writing, Ms. Smith does implement the Houghton Mifflin reading program (Cooper & Pikulski, 2004) to teach genres. She specifically focuses on poetry, though she also teaches note-taking, research writing, narrative writing, and expository writing. When teaching about a specific genre, such as poetry, Ms. Smith follows a general guideline that she uses for each of the genres. For example, Ms. Smith recently taught her class about a form of Japanese poetry, haiku, as part of a unit on poetry. The class began by reading different haikus and discussing the process of forming lines with five, then seven, then five syllables. Then, the students have the opportunity to practice creating haikus about a variety of subjects so that they become more used to working in the new format of a haiku. Finally, students “produce a final copy” that is neat, revised, edited, and published. Ms. Smith follows these steps for every genre that her class explores.

After students take the NAWE test, Ms. Jones’ class, too, switches their focus from personal narratives to other genres of writing. Specifically, her class discusses four different genres in addition to the personal narrative: persuasive essays, in which students attempt to convince the reader of their viewpoint; poetry, including haiku, free-verse, and rhyming; personal opinion essays; and fact-and-opinion essays about a variety of topics. Though the students had to wait until March to learn about other genres, Ms. Jones believes that the time spent learning about other genres is enjoyable and adequate for the students.

Modeling for Student Writing

Mr. Nakamura and Ms. Alvarez both mentioned using picture books to model specific types of writing for students. Ms. Alvarez finds that students can often relate better to the type of
writing that she is trying to teach if they can experience it in a book first. Picture books are handy because they are shorter and can be read in one sitting while still imparting to students the knowledge that the teachers wanted the students to grasp. For example, Ms. Alvarez’s class read *Pinkalicious* (Kann & Kann, 2006) to illustrate the writing trait of voice. The picture book was the perfect model to demonstrate that “a story makes a picture.”

Another way to model is to use other people’s writing, including the teacher’s own work, to demonstrate a specific type of writing. Students benefit from reading the work of someone close to them that they know is a correct model. The students then feel empowered to create their own version of that type of writing. Ms. Smith uses this method, as it allows students to learn writing skills without “picking it out in their own writing,” which can be difficult for students to recognize at first. She asks her students questions to teach them about the mechanics of a piece of writing: “Why is this underlined? Why do we put quotation marks here?” Daily Oral Language (Byers, 2001), too, helps them read a sentence out loud and start to recognize audibly that it sounds incorrect.

Ms. Alvarez models writing through the mini-lessons she gives to the whole class during writing workshop. She works to model “authentic writing” because students must watch her “voice my thoughts so that they have a good model to see what a writer does while they’re writing.” Though she feels that she is a mediocre writer, Ms. Alvarez believes that the impact lies in the discussion of writing during the writing process. She has “noticed that it helps me get better, and it helps them understand the whole thought process.” As a result, she tries to incorporate discussion about writing as much as possible.

Other teachers mentioned using the work of students in their class to express good types of writing. (Usually, these students will have been the teacher’s former students so that no child
feels singled out about poor writing.) Sometimes the teacher will quickly write up a poor example to show the students what type of writing they do not want to see. They can also use examples of poor writing from previous years if the handwriting is not obvious and the person’s name is not on the paper. However, it is important that the teacher does not use a poor example from the class so that no child feels singled out as a bad writer.

Ms. Sanchez focuses on vocabulary to teach writing, specifically by creating a word wall. In order for students to become more creative and build a bigger vocabulary, they must constantly be exposed to new words. Vocabulary exposure is especially important for English language learners (the majority of students in her classroom this year were in this category), since they are working on building their knowledge of the English language as well. While I have heard about and seen many word walls, hers is rather impressive: an entire wall of her classroom is completely covered with words for her word wall. In addition, she organizes the words on the wall by category: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc. (An example of the word wall is given in Appendix J.)

The word wall gives students an opportunity to search for words that are easily categorized so that they have a better chance of finding the word they are looking for. It also gives them ideas that they can build off of in their writing. Once Ms. Sanchez introduces a word on this chart, she expects it to be spelled correctly in all papers that are turned in. If she notices that a student has misspelled a word, she hands the paper back and have the student correct the spelling of that word before he or she can turn the paper back in.

To further demonstrate that students can incorporate the words into their writing to make it more expressive, she has them do an activity at the beginning of the year that she deems “The Word Walk.” She asks the students, “How many ways can you get to the door?” Then she will
call out all of the different verbs that are on the chart—crawl, walk, hop, skip, jump, race, run, skate, cartwheel, etc. and have the students act one out each time that they head for the door. Ms. Sanchez says the students always remember this fun, exciting activity fondly. More importantly, the lesson demonstrates her point concretely: there are many options for words that students can incorporate into their writing, but finding that exact word will make their writing more meaningful and more eloquent.

**Time**

One question I had was how long successful teachers spend teaching writing each week. Do they teach it weekly, most days of the week, daily, or more often? In addition, I wanted to determine the teachers’ ideal amount of time that they would spend teaching writing. What were the factors impeding a teacher from spending the ideal amount of time on writing each day?

Ms. Alvarez spends time teaching writing “every day, for an hour a day.” She has implemented this amount of writing instruction in previous grades in which she has taught, as well as in fifth grade. The class begins with a quick-write every day on topics that the class has already come up with earlier, either from their discussions or a book that was read aloud. Then, after students have written quick-writes for a few days, they will choose which quick-write they want to expand. This elaborated quick-write will serve as the basis for the next piece of writing that the students will work on through the entire writing process. Everyone in her class understands that the quick-write they choose “they have to take through the whole writing process.” Ms. Smith, too, works on writing almost every day with her students. She always incorporates a “specific mini-lesson” on a particular topic that she finds her students are struggling with. Her goal is to provide specific, targeted instruction for her students on writing topics with which they are struggling.
Ms. Jones has been slowly increasing the number of days that her students spend time writing each year. Her first year of teaching, she spent two days per week teaching students about the writing process and spending time in writing workshop. This past year, her third year of teaching, her students spent time about three to four days per week on some element of writing. Ideally, she would like to teach writing every day, but her specials schedule (times for art, physical education, music classes) at her school has not provided the time to do so. However, when there is time for writing, she usually devotes at least an hour to writing, though sometimes her students work in half-hour blocks. She believes a full hour is an adequate amount of time because “I can present some sort of mini-lesson, give them some direction, and then have time to walk around and monitor and meet with students.”

In the year preceding our interview, Ms. Sanchez dealt with severe mechanics flaws in her students’ writing, and though many of her students were English language learners (ELLs), she believed that a hard stance was a necessary approach. By fifth grade, she believes that most of those errors were “habitual” as a result of previous teachers not holding students accountable to their work. This year, “more than half my class consistently left off end punctuation or capital letters;” her reaction was to not accept their work until they had corrected all of those errors.

**Use of Assessment in Guiding Writing**

Before the school year begins, Ms. Smith and the fifth grade teachers at her school evaluate students’ prompts from the previous year and fifth grade students’ scores from the previous two years. Though they cannot fully determine students’ knowledge until after they have scored the first prompt a short time into the school year, these evaluations allow them to determine whether there is “a trend about what our kids are lacking” in writing knowledge and
experience. Instead of focusing on each student individually, the teachers look at the entire
grade as a whole and structure their curriculum accordingly.

Sierra Elementary School, where Ms. Jones works, evaluated its writing instruction from
kindergarten through sixth grade and established a writing committee to counteract inadequate or
misguided instruction. At that school, there was a tendency to leave most writing instruction in
the hands of fifth grade teachers, since the standardized test for teaching writing occurs during
that grade. However, as an increasing number of teachers adopted that philosophy, the fifth
grade teachers I interviewed noticed a gradual decline in writing proficiency when students
entered fifth grade every year. Sometimes, they did not even know how to write basic sentences,
where to capitalize a letter, or where to put a period in a sentence. Since the teachers had to
confront basic mechanics issues, there were also more integral underlying issues beneath. For
example, in terms of the writing traits that fifth grade teachers teach religiously, students did not
understand how to choose more expressive and descriptive words, write a coherent sentence, or
develop a line of thought that flows effortlessly from one paragraph to the next. As a result, the
school created the writing committee. It is composed of at least one representative from each
grade level, as well as specialists and the principal. However, the fifth grade teachers are
working on including special education teachers as well, hoping that they can spread the writing
curriculum across all grade levels and subsets of students.

Ms. Sanchez’s school, Millman Elementary, also created a writing committee. This
writing committee “transformed” writing instruction at their school into “traits writing,” creating
an environment in which teachers from kindergarten to sixth grade worked together to develop
cohesive writing instruction that would flow from grade to grade. Before the writing committee
was created, the school had focused on a very “formulaic” approach to teaching writing, but it
was too focused on teaching to the test. The writing committee, on the other hand, was beneficial because it allowed all of the teachers to work together, and all of the fifth grade teachers “really tried to bring all we knew to the table” to guide the other teachers to stronger writing instruction.

In order to teach mechanics, Ms. Sanchez has students choose the piece of writing that they are working on and highlight “every capital letter and every punctuation” in their sentence. Once the students finish highlighting, she instructs them to count the number of highlights that they made. (The students all have pieces of relatively the same length.) Then, she tells the students that if they have a small number—“only three highlights on your paper”—they could return to editing their work and to try to find places that should have had correct punctuation that they had missed. Ms. Sanchez has found this activity to be one of the best methods to teach punctuation. For some reason, using a highlighter to visually and kinesthetically demonstrate where periods and capitals should go finally makes an impact on the students. Eventually, the students, “visually, could see that they’re missing punctuation—or, if you see one line that has six periods in it, you probably aren’t making a lot of sense.” This represents great success to Ms. Sanchez because she had been working on the development of punctuation and other mechanics skills all year but the students had never grasped the concept very well. Suddenly, with one technique, Ms. Sanchez witnessed tremendous results.

Ms. Sanchez’s school works hard to ensure that their students are prepared for the state assessment in March. Throughout the year, there are three school-wide prompts that are completed according to grade level. Two of the fifth grade teachers, as well as the vice principal, are trained in scoring actual NAWE writing assessments for Nevada. Ms. Sanchez ensured she
became state-trained in scoring specifically so that she understood how to best teach writing to her students and help them pass the assessment.

**Teaching to the Test**

Many of the teachers feel that they are either forced or highly encouraged by their principals to teach to the test. The belief is that teaching to the test is the only viable method for preparing students to pass the assessment, especially because fifth grade students are not instructed in writing in previous grades. Ms. Jones summarizes her principal’s instructions for teaching writing succinctly: “We’ve been told to prepare them to pass the test.” As a result, these fifth grade teachers find themselves teaching the personal narrative essay—which is the only kind of writing prompt that students must answer on the standardized test—exclusively until March, when they have the opportunity to teach other genres or types of writing.

In addition to teaching the personal narrative, Ms. Jones has her students use the official Nevada Writing Test paper, which she orders from the test company. Using official examination paper gets her students used to utilizing the exact paper that they will see on the test. The template that Ms. Jones uses is on the Northern Nevada Writing Project (NNWP) website (2010). The template has bubbles for the teacher to fill in and official information for the student to input (such as name, date, and school).

Ms. Smith uses the state standards rubrics, including the ones available on the NNWP website (2010). There are four rubrics available on the website, one according to each trait tested on the Nevada writing assessment: Ideas and Content Development (Appendix F); Organization (Appendix G); Voice (Appendix H); and Conventions (Appendix I). She now teaches her students explicitly what is expected from them on the writing assessment, as she has seen marked improvement since she began teaching her students two years ago explicitly what is
expected of them on the NAWE assessment. The entire staff at Ms. Smith’s school decided as a whole that they would not make up their own rubrics but expose students to the actual rubrics available so that they “know exactly what is expected of them.”

In addition, Ms. Jones does not give out handouts or graphic organizers to help her students with writing, since they cannot use any previously created materials on the test. As much as possible, she tries to re-create the exact environment that students will experience during the test so that they are as prepared as possible. As a result, even the mini-offices of writing resources that she provides to each student at the beginning of the year sit unused by November. They must be able to create their own graphic organizer or use none at all.

All of the teachers give their students practice prompts to prepare for the state test. They want the students to be as knowledgeable as possible about what they will see on the test. In their effort to prepare their students for the test, some also use writing prompts that have appeared on the test in previous years. Anything that might further prepare the students to do well on the test is utilized by the teachers. The writing committee at Ms. Alvarez’s school creates the prompts that the entire school uses for their trimesterly prompts.

Unfortunately, many of the teachers interviewed in this study also believe that providing previous writing prompts and focusing on the personal narrative essay that appears on the test results in teachers teaching to the test. As a result, the teachers fear that the students are not receiving a well-rounded writing curriculum as they should. The potential deficiency of a well-rounded writing curriculum is an important point; students need a writing curriculum that teaches students how to utilize and incorporate various styles, formats, and genres into their writing. If students can only write narrative writing, then they will not be prepared for future teachers in whose classes they will be required to build creative writing skills by working with a variety of
formats, genres, and styles. In addition, while the NAWE writing test for fifth grade focuses solely on descriptive writing, the middle school writing test switches to informational writing. If students are only learning how to write from a descriptive point-of-view, and never have the opportunity to practice informational writing, then they will be ill-prepared for the middle school writing exam and, most likely, perform poorly.

Most of the teachers felt that they were encouraged or pushed to “teach to the test,” but once the standardized tests were completed in March, they felt more positive about teaching writing because they could teach genres and types of writing other than the personal narrative, which the standardized writing test focuses on.

**Student Accountability**

All of the teachers noted that it is imperative to have students be accountable in their writing and take responsibility for the work that they have created. First, however, Ms. Sanchez believes that students must see themselves as writers before they can truly take ownership and pride in their writing. She reads Lois Lowry’s book *Gooney Bird Greene* (2002) aloud to her students at the beginning of the year. Using a series of wild, imaginative stories about varied topics such as flying from China on a carpet and receiving diamond earrings from a gumball machine, this book teaches the students to see themselves as writers and to truly develop a sense of ownership about their writing. In addition, her class referred to Gooney’s stories throughout the year in reference to each trait or specific element of writing they were working on. For example, when teaching transitions, Sanchez referred back to Gooney’s stories. A favorite of transition of hers was “Suddenly…” in the book. Because the students remembered the story and could relate to Gooney, Sanchez was able to teach them “how to move time” in their stories. As a result, she says, it is much easier to have students create well-written pieces of work. Once
they have invested some time, effort, and value into their work, they are much more apt to care about their writing and work as much as is necessary for their work to be finished at the highest level possible. (There are more books in the Lois Lowry series that teachers can use to further build on the ownership and responsibility that teachers might attempt to impart on their students.)

Frustrating for many fifth grade teachers preparing their students for the standardized tests is that teachers in other grades do not focus on teaching writing. Ms. Smith notes that at her school, there is often a sentiment of “only the fifth grade teachers need to teach writing, since that is when the standardized test for writing occurs.” Unfortunately, this means that students are often inadequately prepared to write when they enter the fifth grade in August. To prepare students with five years’ worth of knowledge, in addition to teaching what is required of fifth graders before the standardized test in February or March, is nearly impossible. As a result, students’ lack of preparation has likely resulted in lower test scores. Ms. Smith believes that much more accountability must rest with the teachers of earlier grades. It is impossible to teach students everything they need to know for the writing test if they have not received a solid foundation in writing knowledge in the first place. To her, fifth grade is about “fine-tuning” the writing knowledge that should have already been taught in first through fourth grade.

However, Ms. Jones’ school, Sierra Elementary School, has implemented a writing committee to handle the lack of cohesion among grade levels when teaching writing. In general, fifth grade teachers at her school were frustrated because “a lot of kids coming into the fifth grade don’t know very much about the traits at all.” This is an important issue, as the vast majority of the writing instruction at her school is focused on teaching writing traits, since the NAWE writing assessment is scored according to four traits (organization, ideas, voice, and
conventions). The goal of the writing committee is “to get everyone at our school on the same page” so that writing instruction does not occur “in a bubble.” Instead, the committee seeks to “create common rubrics throughout the grade levels, and for them to have a common language throughout the school about the traits and about writing.” Unfortunately, the committee was formed late during the school year last year, so as of the date of our interview the committee had only met once. However, her school still is very excited about the creation of the committee. In addition to the current representatives—all fifth grade teachers, plus one representative from every other grade, and the principal and vice-principal—Ms. Jones hopes that the committee would be able to add representatives from special education and ESL (English as a Second Language) as well.

Ms. Alvarez’s school, too, has created a writing committee to counteract misconceptions and flaws in the writing instruction program at her school. The members of the committee are responsible for developing the three annual personal narrative prompts that the entire school practices. Examples of past prompts she could provide are, “Describe a time you helped someone,” or “Write a story about something you did with your family.” The increase in communication has created hope that, eventually, fifth graders will be adequately prepared to write at the beginning of the school year.

Ms. Sanchez also focuses on accountability in her classroom. It is extremely important to her to do so, as otherwise “things I really shouldn’t be worrying about…in fifth grade” become omnipresent in their writing. She holds students accountable to what she has taught, not accepting work if, for example, it lacks capital letters at the beginning of sentences or proper end punctuation. Poor spelling, too, is “unacceptable;” she tells her students, “if the word’s on the wall, you better spell it correctly.”
Use of Graphic Organizers

Several of the teachers also mentioned that the students use graphic organizers to make their work more cohesive. Some of them use worksheets, but Ms. Jones has her students make their own because, she says, they will not be able to bring graphic organizers into the standardized test, and she does not want to handicap them. Two of the graphic organizers she uses are called the “Neat Things” box and the “Four Square” box (an example of the “Four Square box” is given in Appendix D; teachers’ lesson plans are included in Appendix E). She found both ideas in a developmental writing book. Another teacher has the students use graphic organizers at the beginning of the year but then weans her students off of them sometime during the month of November because she, too, is worried about handicapping their performance on the test. She wants to make sure that the students do not become attached to using graphic organizers while preparing for the test, since they will not be able to use them on the test. Instead, she focuses on teaching them how to create simple, meaningful graphic organizers that they can re-create during the test and will actually be beneficial.

Ms. Alvarez also uses Step Up to Writing in her writing instruction. She describes it as an organizational tool or graphic organizer. Sanchez, however, believes that Step Up to Writing is “too formulaic;” students will only become strong, skilled writers if they are “motivated from the inside.” This program helps students write by having them associate each step of the writing process with a color. A simple table to demonstrate the four steps of the Step Up to Writing program (Laurich, 2010) is below.
Ms. Jones spoke in her interview of creating a “writing mini-office” for each group of desks to encourage students to stay on task as writers. A few summers ago, she glued two file folders together to create three panels, and on the different panels she glued important reference materials that students could reference while writing. The different writing resources include “Editors’ Marks; What are the traits?; What does my score mean and what was the method to get there?; What is my score on each of the traits?; a quick reference chart on basic punctuation and grammar; what reasons to write,” etc. However, because Ms. Jones does not want to handicap her students and have them expect these supplies during the test, she only provides these mini-offices for the first three months of the school year, until November. After that, she slowly eliminates them from her classroom by no longer reminding students to take the folders out.
while writing, so that students utilize them for fewer and fewer writing sessions until, finally, they are no longer available. Ms. Jones is concerned that “we almost do them a disservice by providing” writing tools and organizers when practicing for the writing assessment if students cannot actually use them when they take the test.

**Incorporating Technology into Teaching Writing**

Writingfix.com is a website that most of the teachers (Mr. Nakamura, Mr. Jones, Mr. Alvarez, and Ms. Smith) mentioned. This is a convenient location online connected with the Northern Nevada Writing Project that offers graphic organizers, a variety of lesson plans and ideas, and strategies for teaching content. The teachers felt that it was easy to use, extremely helpful and practical, and a great supplement to their pre-existing plans. Mr. Nakamura, especially, relies on the writingfix.com website for most of his writing lessons, since, in his second year of teaching, he still feels inadequately prepared to teach writing. In addition, the website offers the Nevada Writing Test paper template and the writing traits rubrics that some of the teachers use. The writing committee at Ms. Alvarez’s school also uses technology, pulling prompts off of “websites or cards” for their trimesterly meetings.

Ms. Smith incorporates technology into writing by using Power Points to teach new writing concepts to her students. “Kids love Power Point,” she says; it is novel and engaging, and it incorporates technology, which most of them are very comfortable with. She also allows her students to create their own Power Points for research projects that she assigns. Students receive complete ownership of the project; they are responsible for note-taking, writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, which is all completed at school. At first, the “parents try to take over too much,” as this is the students’ first project that they “do without parent support;” but at the end, students “take so much pride in the ownership of what they’ve done.” The Power
Point affords them the tool necessary to work individually and be accountable to the progress they make in their education. Ms. Smith encourages other teachers to give students as much ownership as possible over their education: “Let the kids become more creative with a lesson that you’re doing;” they will become stronger students, capable of relying on themselves and more internally motivated than ever before.
Chapter 5: Analysis of Results

Alex Alvarez says that writing instruction is “authentic,” something “you can apply.” This type of strong writing instruction provides students with the knowledge and understanding to successfully write in every format and genre available. Scholars (Barone & Taylor, 2006; Tompkins, 2006), too, suggest that writing instruction means much more than simply teaching the writing traits and the writing process in the context of writing workshop. Instead of developing instruction based on one or two programs, writing instruction should be a balancing act of a medley of those elements mentioned above in addition to others mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4: incorporating technology in the classroom, organizing one’s own teaching, using graphic organizers, modeling, spending extensive time working on the topics, and assessing students’ writing. The teachers I interviewed incorporated most of these ideas into their instruction in a variety of ways, but they were so heavily focused on teaching to the test, particularly the four writing traits that are evaluated on the NAWE examination, that they brushed over others, such as the variety of assessments available, genres and formats, and the purposes scholars believe are critical for teaching writing.

The Writing Experts

No teacher mentioned any of the scholars noted in my Literature Review except for Spandel’s (2004) writing traits. They generally use programs rather than ideologies and philosophies: instead of developing a writing curriculum that is based on a culmination of several writing scholars’ research about teaching writing, the teachers I interviewed pull a program from here, an idea from there. Every teacher I interviewed teaches his or her students the five stages of the writing process, taught by means of writing workshop. In each classroom, writing workshop consists of a mini-lesson; writing time; conferencing; and share time. However, the
interviews seem to denote a sense of being stagnant in writing; the teachers no longer seem enthused, but instead overwhelmed about teaching to the test and attempting to develop students’ writing abilities to the extent that they could pass the NAWE examination and the school could make AYP. In addition, some of the teachers utilize the programs that their schools require, but most of the schools allow the teachers to incorporate any methodologies they desire as long as the students are able to pass the writing exam.

Several teachers did mention Leif Fearn, Corbett Harrison, and Lucy Calkins as scholars whose work they use. At first glance, each seems to have his or her own teaching philosophy based on research. However, each teacher uses the programs each scholar has developed rather than the philosophies that they preach. Leif Fearn believes that vocabulary development is extremely important, so he focuses on ways of expanding students’ word choice. Corbett Harrison is a leader on the Northern Nevada Writing Project, which offers teachers in Nevada lessons, rubrics, and worksheets to use to aid in teaching writing. Finally, Lucy Calkins researches about writing workshop and was one of the first scholars to encourage teachers to incorporate mini-lessons into their writing workshop time. Again, each teacher offered a program that fulfills a component of writing instruction rather than an ideology of what successful writing instruction should look like.

The Writing Process

All of the teachers allow at least some time for writing, but the first component of the writing process, pre-writing, composes a relatively small amount of time compared to the “70% percent” of the writing process that Tompkins (2008, p. 8) believes should be taken up by brainstorming. During brainstorming, students write down everything that comes to mind, in order to be as creative as possible; but the pre-writing stage also provides the time for students to
use graphic organizers that will help them organize their work so that readers can better comprehend what the author is trying to portray.

Students in the five teachers’ classrooms spend a good amount of time writing every day. Several of the teachers teach writing an hour per day, every day; every teacher teaches writing at least three to four days each week. However, in the interviews the teachers tend to focus on the latter three stages of the writing process—revising, editing, and publishing. As a result, it is not clear how much time students spend in free-flow writing during which they are not interrupted and are encouraged to never allow the pencil to leave the paper.

The teachers talked the most about the revising and editing stages of the writing process. Unfortunately, these are the most difficult stages for students to understand, as they often treat their first drafts as their final drafts. Instead of changing some of the content of the essay or making structural changes, such as moving around paragraphs, students often relate to the revising stage as a precursor to the editing stage, making small mechanics changes where necessary. Rather than creating significant changes in the body of the work, the teachers complained that the students would make simple changes, like changing a sentence every so often. The teachers have attempted to combat the students’ misconceptions about revising and editing with various techniques and strategies, but it seemed impossible at times to do so.

Publishing is, for the teachers, an oft-forgotten, last-second end to the writing process. Teachers rarely display students’ work on walls in the room or bulletin boards in the hallway; they average six to eight weeks between changes in what student work they publish on bulletin boards. One teacher changes the displays every two weeks. More common is sharing within the classroom, generally in small groups. Students read their work aloud after it is finished, and students might provide feedback or thoughts afterwards. However, one teacher incorporates
Stars and Wishes, which she observed from her mentor teacher during her internship during college, as a program for share time. The Stars and Wishes program allows one student to read in front of the class while the others listen. Then, the listeners share one great quality about the piece and one “wish” about a part that could be improved. The most important quality about Stars and Wishes, however, is that it takes place before the publishing stage. As a result, students have the opportunity to return to the revising and editing stages to make significant and minor changes if they so require or desire.

*Writing Workshop*

The teachers develop their writing instruction within the constraints of writing workshop. Writing workshop sets the stage for stories to be told, changes to be made, and skills to be acquired. It guides all writing instruction in the classrooms.

While mini-lessons are a component of writing workshop, the teachers generally use mini-lessons as a means to correct poor writing habits that they observe in students’ work. If students routinely misuse commas or capitalize unnecessary words, the teachers will target their mini-lessons to amend those behaviors. However, an unfortunate byproduct of this band-aid method is that most of the writing instruction does not look toward the future. Instead of mainly focusing on poor writing, teachers should model good behaviors that they would like to find in students’ writing. Word choice, vocabulary development, strong sentence beginnings, and details are four examples of mini-lessons that could be created to encourage students to take a step toward more positive, effective writing.

In the classrooms, writing workshop is strongly shaped by conferencing. The students spend most of the lesson, with the exception of the mini-lesson, in groups in which students can talk about their writing, give advice to each other, and share their stories. However, simply
putting students in groups does not mean that students will benefit by talking about writing together. In fact, Mr. Nakamura mentioned that he was frustrated that students did not talk much about writing in their groups. However, he was not sure how to break this cycle and redevelop conferences to be an effective part of the writing process.

The implementation of beneficial conferencing within writing workshop requires setting a writing environment from the beginning of the year and requiring students to conform to the expectations that are set. The teacher must explicitly teach students what is expected of them in writing workshop. If they are expected to discuss writing, then the teacher should give them a list of questions that they might ask of each other or from which they might build new questions to ask. However, students should not be expected to implicitly gain knowledge of how to conference correctly. Since many of the students have had minimal writing instruction in the past, fifth graders especially benefit from explicit writing instruction until they begin to grasp and implement the concepts.

**Writing Traits**

Every teacher incorporates Spandel’s (2004) six writing traits into writing instruction in his or her classroom. The teachers focused on teaching the traits to the detriment of teaching other aspects of writing, such as other formats and genres. Essentially, teachers teach the writing traits and the writing process by means of writing workshop. Some of the teachers focus mostly on idea development, organization, conventions, and sentence fluency, since those are the ones tested on the NAWE assessment. Each has different activities or strategies they used to teach the traits. While these methods are important and certainly improve students’ writing, scholars such as Bear & Barone (1998) and Tompkins (2008) argue that they are not to be used as a substitute for incorporating other important angles of writing.
Genres and Formats

The teachers do not extensively teach any genres and formats, with the exception of the personal narrative, until after the NAWE examination in February or March. Though teachers may include genres such as poetry as part of the occasional lesson, every one of the teachers focuses on the personal narrative format until after students have taken the examination. After the test, teachers have different methods of selecting which genres to teach and different reasons for picking these genres. Ms. Smith, for example, teaches genres through the Houghton Mifflin program that includes genres such as expository writing, poetry, note-taking, research, and narrative writing.

On the other hand, Tompkins (2008) believes that strong writing instruction must incorporate at least eight genres: journal writing, letter writing, biographical writing, expository writing, narrative writing, descriptive writing, poetry writing, and persuasive writing. She writes that students must be able to practice working with each of these genres throughout the course of one grade and throughout their entire school education. Each genre has different purposes and goals, and students must be able to use each genre or format accurately. Doing so requires a certain expertise that is different according to genre, and practicing in one genre will only help build the skills necessary to be successful in other genres. Finally, part of a successful writing curriculum is that students are able to effortlessly write regardless of genre. This requires time and practice, as well as being introduced to every type of genre. In order to provide students with the writing curriculum that they deserve, teachers must introduce them to all types of genres and formats.
Modeling

Mr. Nakamura repeatedly mentioned modeling during our interviews as the most important aspect of teaching writing. Even though he, like many other teachers, does not believe that he himself is a strong writer, he strictly adheres to modeling many concepts he teaches. Students learn by example, and many are visual learners who must see someone else perform the task that they will then complete. In addition, all of the teachers except for Mr. Nakamura use conferencing as a way to model writing and how to talk about writing. Mr. Nakamura groups his students while they write, but he speaks with each one individually because of the strong differences in ability level in his class. He consistently finds that his students do not understand writing enough to truly benefit each other on their writing. In addition, the students tend to focus on superfluous points, such as one word that should be changed, rather than helping their fellow classmates amend whole sections of work. Ms. Alvarez, however, believes that it is critical for students to conference so that they can bounce ideas off of each other, help answer each others’ questions, or ask for a specific word that they are trying to think of. She considers conferencing to be a crucial part of the development of students’ ability to write, since students must be able to say to someone else “what I’m thinking” in order for their writing to improve.

Scholars, too, agree that teachers must model and explicitly teach concepts, skills, and knowledge to students if they are expected to succeed. Spandel (2004) believes that modeling is the most critical part of teaching students how to write successfully, coherently, and decisively. In her book, she emphasizes that “Nothing, absolutely nothing, you will ever do as a teacher will be more powerful than modeling writing in front of your students” (p. 163). This is an extremely strong statement for the power that modeling writing for one’s students can have. Crawford
(1993) advocates that teachers incorporate conferences as a means of modeling how to talk about writing, interpersonal skills, and giving and receiving constructive criticism and feedback.

**Time**

Each of the teachers would, in a utopian world, teach writing every day. However, only Ms. Alvarez teaches writing “every day, for an hour a day” in her classroom. Ms. Smith achieves this goal most of the time as well. Ms. Jones has slowly been increasing the amount of time her students spend writing every year that she has taught. Currently, her students spend time on some aspect of writing three to four days per week; in earlier years, she would teach writing only two to three days per week.

In addition, Ms. Sanchez discusses the importance of time in terms of breaking poor writing habits developed in previous grades or experiences. For example, in the year preceding the interview, her students often lacked capital letters at the beginning of sentences and periods at the ends of sentences. In order to counteract these flaws, Ms. Sanchez shared her expectations about capitals and periods with her students. Then, whenever she found an example of such an error in a student’s writing, she would return it to the student and not accept the work until the errors were fixed. Eventually, the students became more conscious of their work and learned to check their writing for words that should be capitalized and locations for periods before turning in their work. As a result, Ms. Sanchez was able to break two very strong habits over the course of time.

Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) strongly encourage teachers to teach writing every day of every week. They argue that teachers who say that they do not have enough time to teach writing every day often are those who create ineffective or less productive lesson plans. In order to ensure that writing is taught every day, teachers should incorporate writing into every subject
in the curriculum. Instead of teaching mathematics in an isolated session, for example, teachers should develop mathematics lessons that incorporate writing. Students can write each step that they take in a mathematics equation, explain their answer to a problem, or hypothesize how to fix an incorrect answer. Any of these prompts provides an opportunity for teachers to incorporate writing during a lesson that does not specifically teach writing. However, every chance that students get to practice their writing, no matter how small, is a step in the direction of teaching writing every day for an hour per day. When students are given ample time and opportunities to practice writing, their writing improves exponentially, they “write more text,” and they become “better writers” (McCarthey, 2008, p. 469) overall.

Assessment and Teaching to the Test

Much of the fifth grade year is spent teaching to the test. Almost all writing instruction through February or March is related to the writing exam; even most of the prompts given are designed to help students practice skills related to the personal narrative. These prompts are created by a writing committee at some of the schools, such as at Ms. Sanchez’s school. The most important part of writing instruction is to ensure that students pass the test. However, writing instruction is largely left to the teachers’ discretion. For example, Ms. Sanchez has been instructed by her principal to use some writing tools that she deems “formulaic,” in addition to having the students participate in monthly prompts that are later scored. With the exception of these two relatively small components of the overall curriculum, she is responsible for managing and organizing all other aspects of instruction. However, Ms. Sanchez does believe that the term “teaching to the test” is “a little strong;” though much of her school’s writing instruction is focused on ensuring students succeed on one particular writing examination, she argues that the teachers emphasize “authentic” writing from the very beginning of the school year. As a result,
though much of the writing instruction is focused on one genre of writing, she still expects her students to produce strong, “authentic” writing regardless of what genre is being taught.

Hughey and Slack (2001) outline several types of assessment, but ultimately they advocate for portfolios to be used in classrooms. While Hughey and Slack do encourage teachers to incorporate a wide variety of formal and informal assessments when evaluating their students, portfolios provide the best comprehensive evaluation of the student’s accurate ability. Portfolios allow teachers to compile a student’s work over a long period of time and in a wide variety of genres and formats, which provides a more accurate picture of the student’s writing ability than one particular examination taken on one day. While Hughey and Slack believe that standardized tests and other formal assessments certainly can be important, the portfolio is the most comprehensive method of accurately evaluating each student individually. Finally, portfolios provide an added benefit: “only selected pieces of writing need to be graded” (p. 79). This encourages students to become less focused on attaining a certain grade and more focused on creating the best writing they possibly can.

**Student Accountability**

Students are accountable to their teachers for the effort they put in working on writing, and the teachers I interviewed are no exception. In each class, teachers require students to work on persuasive writing prompts. In addition, several schools have whole-school writing prompts, during which the entire grade works together in the cafeteria on one writing prompt. The principal leads this exercise, which demonstrates to students that the administrators of the school, in addition to the teachers, care about how well the students perform on the standardized test.

Teachers, too, hold students accountable for smaller habits and behaviors. Ms. Sanchez expects her students to create work that is devoid of grammatical, spelling, and mechanical errors
that she has already corrected during one-on-one conferences and mini-lessons. As many of these mistakes are habitual, carried over from previous grades, Ms. Sanchez aims to break these poor habits by no longer accepting work that, for example, lacks capital letters at the beginning of sentences and periods at the end. While this requires a teacher to be consistent over a period of time, Ms. Sanchez’s students have largely curbed this habit as a result.

Crawford (1993) believes that accountability also rests on the teacher’s shoulders. It is the teacher’s responsibility to create a positive, academic learning environment in which students do not feel threatened but instead as though they can succeed. Teachers must listen to students attentively so that students believe that their ideas are welcomed, important, and substantive. In addition, Crawford expects teachers to always be looking for opportunities to mold students’ ideas, attitudes, and behavioral habits. When teachers recognize poor self-worth or an attitude of not being able to succeed in their students, teachers should grab that opportunity to encourage the student to think beyond the moment of doubt. Even saying something like, “Take five and we’ll start again,” gives students the chance to begin anew and leave negative feelings behind. While this strategy is not specific to writing, often students feel inept or unprepared in the area of writing more than in others, and teachers should, as a result, search harder to find situations in which they can help build students’ confidence. No teacher, however, mentioned talking to their students in such a way during our interview.

**Graphic Organizers**

All teachers used graphic organizers or taught their students how to make them on their own. Ms. Jones is very concerned about handicapping her students, so she teaches them to make their own using a pencil and piece of paper. She teaches them how to make the “Four Square” (see Appendix E) and “Neat Things” (see Appendix D). Some students made outlines on the
Sue Smith encourages her students to bring highlighters to use during the test so that they could carry over strategies they had used in class. These strategies include looking “for specific details,” ensuring that the writing was not “too vague,” and choosing “one or two sentences” to rewrite in a chosen paragraph. The highlighting “guide(s) their thinking” so that students have a prescribed course of action to follow that they have practiced for months before beginning the examination. Ms. Alvarez uses Step Up to Writing (Laurich, 2010), a program that instructs students to think about the writing process as if it were a stoplight, albeit with four lights. In order, students are to “write a topic sentence;” add details and facts; add examples; and “remind the reader of the topic” (Laurich, 2010).

However, none of the scholars I selected highly encouraged teachers to incorporate graphic organizers into their instruction. While graphic organizers might be a small component, the scholars believe that writing instruction should instead be focused on learning how and why to write.
Chapter 6: Significance of Results

Balance in instruction is lacking in school writing programs. Instead of developing a curriculum based on a variety of components of writing instruction, the teachers heavily focus on teaching the minutest details of the personal narrative with little information about other genres and formats. The NAWE examination is considered to be the most important task of the writing program, with little thought given to developing a well-rounded writing curriculum. The lack of variety available is in stark contrast to the ideas that the scholars described in the Literature Review. Experts encourage teachers to give ample attention to each of the various components of a writing curriculum, including genres; formats; the writing process; writing workshop; writing traits; and any other programs or philosophies that the teacher finds to be beneficial. The current situation in schools, it seems, is that writing instruction is extremely unbalanced in favor of teaching the personal narrative, which is the only genre evaluated on the fifth grade NAWE examination. This revelation essentially means that teachers are teaching to the test in a desperate attempt to succeed at having their students pass the test. Instead of providing students with a well-rounded education, schools are teaching only the personal narrative for six months of the year. A troubling consequence of this reality is that the writing examination that students take during eighth grade does not evaluate their writing skills in the context of the personal narrative, but non-fiction writing. If teachers continue to teach to the test, students will not be prepared in the future when writing examinations occur and students are expected to write in other genres and formats than simply the personal narrative.

The pre-writing stage is often given little attention compared to the other stages when students are working on the writing process in the classroom. It is evident that, according to Tompkins (2008) students do not spend enough time brainstorming during the pre-writing stage.
Tompkins (2008) advocates that “70% or more writing time” (p. 8) spent throughout the entire writing process be spent on the pre-writing stage. On the other hand, Piazza (2003) encourages teachers to allow their students to choose how much time is spent on the writing process. However, as the teachers who were interviewed rarely mentioned brainstorming and pre-writing when discussing the writing process, it becomes clear that too little time is spent preparing and planning for what students are going to write. This issue can be very detrimental to the quality of students’ work; if it is not planned ahead of time, focused, and organized, the reader may not be as interested in the writer’s work. Tompkins (2008) would argue that teachers should aid their students in spending a large amount of time in the pre-writing stage so that the students will be entirely prepared before they begin writing, and their writing will be organized and coherent.

Every teacher interviewed incorporates graphic organizers in his or her classroom, whether the students make their own graphic organizers or teachers develop handouts to give to the students. However, the scholars discussed in the Literature Review, such as Fletcher & Portalupi (2000), do not include graphic organizers in their discussions of the important components of a strong writing curriculum. When reading the scholars’ research, it becomes clear that they believe graphic organizers to be simply a tool to use in the larger arena of the writing process and writing workshop. Scholars like Tompkins (2008) would most likely advocate that graphic organizers should be used during the pre-writing stage to brainstorm and write down ideas, but that the organizers should be used to a lesser extent than they currently are in the classrooms of the teachers I interviewed.

It seems sensible that students must be held accountable for the effort that they put in to their education. However, in order to be able to be held accountable, students must have received a balanced education in each of the previous years of their education and developed
adequate writing knowledge and skills already. Unfortunately, because—according to the fifth grade teachers interviewed—students are not taught much writing knowledge until the fifth grade, this is largely impossible. Instead, the teachers I interviewed argue that greater fault should rest with the teachers of kindergarten through the fourth grade: fifth grade teachers should not be responsible for developing the vast majority of writing skills simply because the NAWE examination occurs during the fifth grade year. While schools are beginning to develop writing committees to handle misconceptions and make clear the expectations of teaching writing for each grade, there is still extensive work to be done before the entire school can work together under a unified, cohesive writing curriculum.

Finally, writing is often pushed aside in favor of other subjects. While all of the teachers claim that their goal is to teach writing every day for an hour each day, some only teach writing three to four times per week, sometimes spending as little as thirty minutes on the session. Time is important because students must be allowed to practice the skills that they have been taught. Without time to practice, students’ writing will cease to improve. Fortunately, each of the teachers recognizes this and is working toward incorporating writing across the curriculum for at least one hour each day, every day of the week.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The result, then, of this thesis is to identify the key components of a strong writing program, as well as the missing pieces resulting from unbalanced instruction. As the scholars and teachers have stated, it is imperative that students learn how to walk a piece of writing through the writing process, from the pre-writing to the publishing stage. They must do so in the context of writing workshop, during which they conference with their teacher and their peers; learn of issues to target in their writing; share their writings with others; and have the opportunity to write extensively with others. Modeling, time, technology, and researching others’ viewpoints on writing are all critical pieces of a strong, coherent writing curriculum as well.

Hopefully, this thesis will result in more balance in instruction in teachers’ curricula across the country. Having identified a source of disequilibrium in fifth grade teachers’ writing, hopefully it can be resolved and writing programs amended to incorporate a more well-rounded curriculum. Everyone within the education community, including teachers, administrators, and parents, is responsible for making the proposed changes so that the students benefit. Ultimately, assessment, whether standardized or not, serves a purpose, which is to determine whether our students are being educated properly.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, passed in 2001, has colored the education system as well. Because the act emphasized standardized test scores as a means of measuring all students against one device that was presented equally to all, the goal was that the act would lead to improved education across America for students of all races, genders, grades, and socioeconomic statuses. Unfortunately, the focus on test scores has created another byproduct, intended or unintended: teaching to the test. Because school funding and teachers’ jobs are directly affected by whether their schools (and students) make AYP and pass their standardized
tests, the teachers I interviewed have largely resorted to teaching to the test. Each of them focuses on teaching only the personal narrative until the students take the NAWE examination in late winter or early spring (depending on what track, if any, the school is subject to). Until February or March, students rarely, if ever, benefit from learning about haikus or letter writing or persuasive essays. Fun projects like science write-ups and writing about topics that interest students are not even offered until the end of the school year. The focus on teaching to the test often leaves teachers overwhelmed, in addition to having the unintended consequence of decreasing students’ interest in school when assignments that are interesting to them are never offered.

The results of this thesis are important, as they make imperative a call for change in our education system. There is an imbalance in teachers’ instruction, one that favors teaching to the test over teaching all aspects of writing. Instead of solely learning about the personal narrative until they take the NAWE examination, students should benefit from learning about all genres and formats. A strong writing program should incorporate the writing process and the writing traits in the context of writing workshop. Students should be constantly moving fluidly between the five stages of the writing process; they should have no qualms moving from editing back to pre-writing if need be. Writing workshop should be the forum for the writing process: teachers give mini-lessons on issues that students are struggling with or need to learn so that they can apply what they learn to their writing; students have time to write; students conference with the teacher and with each other; and students share or publish their work so that they can receive feedback and appreciation for their work. The writing traits should a set of ideals to keep in mind when writing, but they should not be the foundation for writing; they are a guideline, a rubric by which writing is judged.
Another concern when “teaching to the test” is the impossibility of achieving every child’s best performance on a single day of standardized testing. Students who have consistently performed poorly in the past may suddenly test better on the day of the standardized examination. This, of course, would positively benefit the school’s overall test scores, as well as the school’s potential of making AYP. However, the more likely scenario is that some students who have presented strong ability consistently over the course of the school year will attend the test under unfortunate circumstances—the parents’ divorce they heard about last night, waking up late to their alarm, slipping in a puddle on the way to school—that will negatively affect their performance. As a result, providing the opportunity for assessment that continues over an extended period of time and demonstrates the student’s more accurate ability level without added pressure is a much more optimal means of evaluation. Thus, portfolios offer a much better comprehensive, accurate assessment of the student’s true ability.

In response to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the education community needs to move away from numbers and focus on strengths and growths made within each classroom and with each child. It is important to assess all students regardless of circumstance, but that should not be the only means of assessment. Students who are poor test-takers or who simply have difficulty on that one day should not be considered, necessarily, to be poor writers. Instead, Hughey and Slack (2001) advocate that there should be a large swath of assessment, from those that are more quantifiable (i.e., standardized tests) to those that are more quality-based and subjective (i.e., portfolios). Portfolios allow students to develop their work in a more realistic setting that affords them more time, less pressure, and more creativity. Instead of measuring students’ writing ability by having them answer an abstract question using vocabulary that they might not understand, portfolios offer an entire body of work that has been worked on
painstakingly throughout the writing process under the umbrella of writers’ workshop. The likelihood that pieces of writing included in a student’s portfolio will be an accurate assessment of true ability is, in my opinion, very high.

In order to deal with questions that undoubtedly come with subjective assessments, schools can use already-made rubrics or make their own. As long as a student is working to meet those standards or criteria, he or she will be judged according to a set of objective factors. Such rubrics can be based on the writing traits rubrics from the NNWP website (Appendices G through J), for example. Still, these rubrics are not enough; they do not allow for subjective assessments that only the teacher can make. While students must all be held accountable to the same high standards and expectations, a teacher is much better equipped to make subjective judgments, such as determining that a student who is still two grades behind grade level is working hard and improving and deserves a strong grade, even if others who receive the same grade are working at grade level. A rubric that allows for such subjective evaluation has, to my knowledge, not yet been developed, but it is critical to truly analyzing students’ abilities.

My research has also clearly demonstrated that the education system requires an overhaul to a more well-rounded curriculum in writing. As stated before, students must be exposed to a variety of different formats and genres throughout their education so that those types of writing become familiar, and so that students can alternate effortlessly between the various categories of writing. Unfortunately, the current reality is that students learn little about writing during their early years and then must learn everything they can about the personal narrative and strong writing in general in the six months before the NAWE examination occurs in the fifth grade. This is a dilemma for another reason: the writing examination students take in middle school is
based on non-fiction writing. The emphasis on personal narratives happens to the detriment of developing skills and knowledge in the other genres of writing.

There must be an overhaul in writing instruction throughout all of the elementary grades. The writing committees developed in some of the schools are moving in a positive direction, but in addition the committee must create a synchronized curriculum across the grades so that every teacher is accountable and responsible to his or her duties. Every teacher needs to be teaching writing every day or virtually every day. All genres should be covered every year. Or, the school can develop a curriculum in which three genres are covered the first year, four the next year, etc. until finally all genres have been covered. Students need practice with all genres in order to become strong writers. Skills that they learn in one genre will generally transfer over in various ways to other genres.
References


Spandel, Vicki. (2004). *Creating young writers: Using the six traits to enrich writing process*


Valuable Teacher Resources

These are resources that I have found during the course of my research, which teachers mentioned during the interviews, or that scholars have recommended in their books that I read. I believe that these would aid teachers in their efforts to teach writing. However, I have placed them at the end of my research because they were not quoted in this paper or used specifically for this research.


Kiester, J. B. (2000). *Blowing away the state writing assessment test: Four steps to better scores for teachers of all levels*. Gainesville: Maupin House Publishing.


Appendix A: Interview Questions

I. General
   a. What is your name?
   b. Where do you teach?
   c. What degree(s) do you have?
   d. Where did you go for undergraduate and graduate school?
   e. How long have you taught at your current school?
   f. How many total years have you taught?
   g. How many other cities/places have you taught?
   h. How many other schools have you taught at?
   i. What other kinds of schools have you taught at?
   j. What writing skills/traits were taught in your undergraduate or graduate program(s)?
   k. What professional development is provided at your school on writing?

II. Writing-Specific
   a. What research, if any, did you consider before deciding on a way of teaching writing?
   b. Are there any methods that seem to work better than others?
   c. Were you told to use a certain method by your school?
   d. Are you allowed to vary your methods, or does your school only allow you to teach by one method?
   e. What materials do you use (books, handouts, easy-writing templates, webs)?
   f. Which writing book by a professional author would you recommend?
   g. How many days per week do you teach writing?
   h. How do you structure your writing instruction?
   i. Do you confer with students about their writing? If yes, what do you most often focus upon?
   j. Do you have small group conferences to work with their writing? What is their purpose in your classroom?
   k. How do students edit their work?
   l. How often do students publish or share their work?
   m. Do you use writing rubrics in your classroom? How?
   n. What elements of writing do you share with students?
   o. What aspect of writing is easiest and then most difficult to teach?

III. Other
   a. Do you teach the six traits of writing? What are your best lessons to teach each writing trait?
   b. How do you teach writing mechanics?
   c. Which trait do you think is the most difficult to teach?
   d. Does your school use some type of writing diagnosis in the beginning of the year to assess their writing ability?

*I added additional questions where I deemed it necessary during the course of interviews.*
Appendix B: Brainstorming Web

Above is an example of a brainstorming web (Allen, Unknown), which Piazza (2003) encourages students to use during pre-writing sessions in order to organize their thoughts before writing.
While this is a higher-level example than one that fifth graders would produce, it demonstrates what a cluster map should look like. There are key points, but all of the interactions between the sub-points are shown as well (Deem, 1988).
Appendix D: Four Square Graphic Organizer

Above is an example of a Four Square box used for organizing students’ writing (McKenzie, N.D.).
Appendix E: Four Square Charts for Teachers

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<th>Tu</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>Th</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>____ - ____ - ____</th>
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**Comprehension**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Comp. Strategy</th>
<th>Vocab</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>After</th>
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**Working with Words**

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<th>On the Back</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>__Endings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>__Rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>__Cross Checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Guess the Covered Word
- Making Words
- Hen to a Fox
- Reading / Writing Rhymes
- Word Sort
- Rounding up the Rhymes
- Rainbow Words
- Using Words You Know
- What Looks Right?
- WORDO
- Hink Pinks

**Writing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minilesson</th>
<th>Prompt/Text as Intro</th>
<th>Teacher conferences with</th>
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**Self-Selected Reading**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Teacher Read Aloud:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre</td>
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<td>Teacher conferences with</td>
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<th>Share Chair</th>
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The above chart is a Four Square lesson plan to include all four areas in one day (Poe, 2010).
Appendix F: Nevada’s Analytic Idea Development Rubric (NNWP)

NEVADA STATE WRITING PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION ANALYTIC SCORING GUIDE *

IDEAS AND CONTENT (DEVELOPMENT)

5: This paper is clear, focused, and interesting. It holds the reader’s attention. Relevant anecdotes, details and/or evidence enrich the central theme or story line. Ideas are fresh and engaging.

- The writer seems to be writing from experience and/or knowledge showing insight/creativity.
- The writing has balance; main ideas stand out.
- Supporting relevant details give the reader important information that he or she could not personally bring to the text.
- The writer works with and shapes ideas, making connections and sharing insights.
- The writer controls and develops the topic in an enlightening way.

3: The paper is clear and focused. The topic shows promise, even though development is still limited, sketchy, or general.

- The writer seems to be writing from experience and/or knowledge but has some trouble going from general observations to specifics.
- Ideas are reasonably clear and purposeful, even though they may not be explicit, detailed, expanded, or personalized to show in-depth understanding.
- The writer is developing the topic. Even though it is fairly easy to see where the writer is headed, more information is needed to “fill in the blanks.”
- Support is present but doesn’t go far enough yet in expanding clarifying, or adding new insights.
- Themes or main points blend the original and the predictable.

1: As yet, the paper has no clear sense of purpose. To extract meaning from the text, the reader must make inferences based on sketchy details. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:

- The writer may restate the topic but has not yet begun to develop it in a meaningful way.
- Information is very limited or unclear.
- The text is very repetitious or reads like a collection of random thoughts from which no central them emerges.
- Everything seems as important as everything else; the reader has a hard time sifting out what’s critical.
- The writer lacks a sense of direction.
Appendix G: Nevada’s Analytic Organization Rubric (NNWP)

ORGANIZATION

5: The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or thesis. The order or structure is compelling and moves the reader through the text.
   • Organization flows so smoothly the reader hardly thinks about it.
   • An inviting introduction draws the reader in, and a satisfying conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of completion.
   • Details seem to fit where they’re placed; sequencing or structure is logical and effective.
   • Transitions are smooth and weave the separate threads of meaning into a cohesive whole.
   • Progression of ideas is very well controlled; the writer delivers needed information at just the right moment and then moves on.

3: The organizational structure is strong enough to move the reader from point to point.
   • The organization, despite a few problems, does not interfere with the main point or storyline.
   • The paper has a recognizable introduction and conclusion. The introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation; the conclusion may not leave the reader with a sense of completion.
   • Sequencing or structure is usually logical. It may sometimes be too obvious or create some confusion.
   • Transitions often work well; however, some connections between ideas may be weak or may call for inferences.
   • Progression of ideas is fairly well controlled, although the writer sometimes spurts ahead too quickly or spends too much time on the obvious.

1: The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a random, haphazard manner or list, or else there is no identifiable internal structure at all. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:
   • Lack of organization makes it hard for the reader to understand the main point or storyline.
   • The writer has not yet drafted a real lead or conclusion.
   • Sequencing of details is limited or nonexistent.
   • Transitions are vague or missing; connections between ideas are confusing or incomplete.
   • Progression of ideas is not controlled; too much time is spent on minor details, or there are hard-to-follow leaps from point to point.
Appendix H: Nevada’s Analytic Voice Rubric (NNWP)

VOICE

5: The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individualistic, expressive, and engaging. Clearly, the writer is involved in the text, and the writing is writing to be read.
   • The writing is appropriate to purpose and audience.
   • The paper is honest. It has the ring of conviction.
   • The word choice brings the topic to life and clarifies the writer’s attitude towards the subject.
   • The writer establishes a strong connection with the reader and clearly convinces the reader of the writer’s commitment to the topic.

3: The writer seems sincere, but not genuinely engaged, committed, or involved. The result is earnest, but short of compelling.
   • The writer seems aware of an audience but stands at a distance to avoid risk.
   • The writing communicates in an earnest manner and may occasionally interest or move the reader.
   • The word choice reveals the writer’s attitude toward the topic in some places but may become general, vague, tentative, or abstract in other places.
   • The writer establishes a connection with the reader and demonstrates some commitment to the topic; however, the writing hides as much of the writer as it reveals.

1: The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved, or distanced from the topic and/or the audience. As a result, the writing is flat, lifeless, or mechanical. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:
   • The writer does not connect with the audience or have a sense of purpose.
   • The writing communicates on a functional level. There is no presence of the writer on the page.
   • The word choice tends to flatten all potential highs and lows of the message.
   • The writer is not yet sufficiently engaged to take risks or make a commitment to the topic.
CONVENTIONS

5: The writer demonstrates a good grasp of grade appropriate standard writing conventions (grammar, capitalization, punctuation, usage, spelling, sentence structure, paragraphing) and uses them effectively to enhance readability. Errors tend to be so few and minor the reader can easily skim right over them unless specifically searching for them.
   • Grammar and usage are correct and contribute to clarity and style.
   • Internal punctuation and external punctuation contain few, if any, errors and guide the reader through the text.
   • Spelling is almost always correct, even on more difficult words.
   • Sentence structures are varied and add to the stylistic effect.
   • Capitalization is correct.

3: The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of grade appropriate standard writing conventions. The writer handles some conventions well but may make some errors that do not significantly distract the reader.
   • Usage and grammar are almost always correct.
   • External punctuation is almost always correct; grade appropriate internal punctuation is present.
   • Spelling is usually correct on high frequency words, and some more difficult words may be misspelled.
   • Sentences are generally structured correctly and show some variety; an occasional run-on or fragment is present.
   • Capitalization is almost always correct.

1: Errors in grade appropriate spelling, punctuation, usage and grammar, capitalization, sentence structure and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:
   • Errors in grammar and usage are very noticeable and interfere with meaning.
   • Punctuation is often missing or incorrect.
   • Spelling errors are frequent, even on common words.
   • Sentence structure is seriously flawed; run-ons and fragments may impede meaning.
   • Capitalization is incorrect or missing.
Appendix J: “Ways to Go” Word Wall

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADJECTIVE</th>
<th>NOUN</th>
<th>VERB</th>
<th>ADVERB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smiling</td>
<td>Book</td>
<td>Crawled</td>
<td>Slowly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grumpy</td>
<td>Kids</td>
<td>Walked</td>
<td>Angrily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>Read</td>
<td>Once</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tired</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Jumped</td>
<td>Pleasantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The</td>
<td>Tree</td>
<td>Swam</td>
<td>Quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Hopped</td>
<td>There</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Read</td>
<td>Surprisingly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above is an example that I created of a “Ways to Go” Word Wall. Ms. Sanchez incorporates the use of Word Walls into her everyday lessons on teaching writing in order to form stronger vocabulary knowledge and usage in her students. Teachers can also implement other Word Walls that focus on other topics or categories.