

Creating Successful Writers in Grades 6-12: Parent Forum  
Ridge High & William Annin Middle School Joint PTO Meeting

Monday, March 16, 2015, 7 pm

Ridge Lecture Hall B

David Hunscher, K-12 English Language Arts Supervisor

And

Dr. Kristen Thorpe, Ridge High Language Arts Teacher of:

AP Literature and Composition

Honors British Literature

Essential Elements

Handouts provided:

1 page “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing”

1 page “Tips for Parents from the National Council of Teachers of English – Helping Your Teenager to Write Better”

[Power Point Presentation by David Hunscher, K-12 Language Arts Supervisor](#)

Goals of the presentation:

1. Discuss why writing matters
2. Illustrate how Bernards Township teaches writing
3. Offer parents guidance on ways to support their teens in developing writing ability

#### WHY WRITING MATTERS

Audience participation on two questions from Mr. Hunscher:

1. Q: What types of writing do you engage in daily?

A: Email, texts, business writing, drafting scientific papers

2. Q: Why is it important to you that your teen become a good writer?

A: To become independent communicators for their future college applications and careers

Sources in literature:

- “Because Writing Matters,” The National Writing Project and Carl Nagim  
Writing = gateway to success in academia and the workplace
- Joan Didion, writing helps one make sense of experience  
“I write to find out what I am thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see, and what it means.”

Reasons for working on writing

1. Writing is hard but rewarding. Writing is the most complex of human activities.
2. Writing helps you sort things out.  
In class, “Do Nows” and “Journaling” help students identify gaps in their own knowledge.
3. Writing helps you persuade others.

Colleges and corporate America are looking for articulate students/employees who can persuade.

4. Writing makes you a better reader.

Stephen King said, "If you don't have time to read, then you don't have the tools to write."

Use text to model one's own writing.

5. Writing helps you learn.

Writing aids in memory retention of learned information.

#### Writing Expectations for College and Career Readiness (First handout)

##### Writing Types and Purposes:

- To Persuade: Dr. Thorpe mentioned that returning college students report their required freshman writing courses are all persuasive writing. Even Ridge's C students are frequently the best in their college writing seminar courses.
- To Inform: e.g. Future scientific papers
- To Narrate: Students learn to zoom in on a precise moment.

##### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Appropriate to audience
- Revision/Editing process
- Use technology to produce, publish, collaborate

##### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct both short and sustained research
- Use multiple print and digital sources

##### Range of Writing

- Write over both extended and short time frames

##### Conventions of Standard English

- Grammar, usage, and mechanics
- Use and acquisition of vocabulary (Need 8-10 encounters with a word to make it part of your vocabulary)

### HOW BERNARDS TOWNSHIP TEACHES WRITING

#### How Bernards Township Has Responded to Common Core Writing Requirements

1. Aligned curriculum with common Core State Standards
2. Sequenced WAMS courses to have short and long writing assignments alternating in the 2 language arts classes.
3. Infused specific grammar foci in each unit – from the texts being read
4. Included more and smaller research opportunities throughout the year instead of one culminating research paper
5. Aligned curriculum with textbook in writing and grammar
6. Infused writing mentor texts
7. Inserted text-based SAT-level words

Tools to Teach Writing (jointly presented by Dr. Thorpe and Mr. Hunscher)

1. Both a **process piece** and a **timed write** are completed every marking period in high school. Students receive help on the process piece in order to develop skills, while the timed write (on demand) allows teachers to see where the students are performing when unsupported. The timed writes also help students develop pacing of writing for standardized assessments like the SAT.
2. **Thesis writing.** Templates for thesis writing are on teacher websites and are modeled in class.
3. **Mentor texts.** Provide examples, e.g. Ernest Hemingway is a model for avoiding wordiness.
4. **Peer editing.** E.B. White in “The Elements of Style,” noted that writing is rewriting. You are not actually writing until you are rewriting.
  - keeps the students in that active role, to see it, evaluate it, revise it
  - e.g. in a single 10<sup>th</sup> grade class period, students received feed-back from 7 different peer editors, each evaluating for one specific element of style.
  - is more work for the teacher who has to assess the peer feedback as well as the original
5. **Minilessons.** Introduce concepts with practice during class
6. **Conferencing.** Devote a week to any writing assignment so there is time to teacher conference with every student. Helpful in determining specific difficulties like trouble analyzing quotes.
7. **The Writing Coach.** Has practice on the 20 most common grammar mistakes.
8. **The Writer’s Notebook.** A place to practice.
9. **Journals.** A creative writing opportunity in every grade at Ridge.
10. **Quick Writes, do nows, exit slips.** Help students in setting goals for themselves.
11. **Google docs and Turnitin.** Ridge has exploded the use of Google docs so that teachers can provide feedback.
12. **Rubrics.** A list of expectations.
  - Function to set clear expectations at the outset
  - Help ensure impartial and consistent grading (Developed in the Professional Learning Communities, PLCs, consisting of teachers of the same subject for consistent grading across sections)
  - Allow communication to students of specifically where they did well and what needs improvement.
  - Ridge classes also introduce ACT, SAT, and NJ Standardized Testing rubrics.

### Sample Writing Assignments

1. 7<sup>th</sup> grade creative writing assignment on science fiction
  - Prompt mimics NJASK (now PARCC) for practice
  - Teaches STEAL (Speech, Thought, Effect on others, Action, and Language) technique of character analysis
  - Expects strong word choice, compositional risk, tone, correct use of adverbs and adjectives, etc.
  - Peer editors assess for the requirements and also provide a compliment
2. 6<sup>th</sup> grade Minilesson Anchor Charts  
Concerned with sentence structure, complex sentences, introducing independent clauses with an LY adverb.

3. 8<sup>th</sup> grade argumentative writing based on research.  
Dr. Thorpe mentioned that all these skills are repeated at the high school level, e.g. in AP Lang.
4. 9<sup>th</sup> grade writing your own memoir. Reflect on a life lesson learned.
5. High School example of peer editing on Turnitin.com
6. 12<sup>th</sup> grade, AP Lit analyzing author's use of tone, semicolons, etc.
7. Example of teacher feedback, showed teacher highlighting errors such as passive voice.

#### HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR TEEN BECOME A BETTER WRITER (Second handout)

1. Target your effort by asking your teen how you can help.
  - Check grammar?
  - Read for content? Does it make sense?
2. Ask to see the rubric for the assignment to know the goal of that writing assignment.
3. Have your teen talk his/her ideas out while you take notes. (Boys especially may express themselves better verbally and can take this technique on to college by using a voice recorder.)
4. Point out areas that confuse you and ask for clarification, but be very careful with the feedback you give. Don't crush your teen's self-confidence. (You should not need to have read the book to be able to understand your teen's writing concerning any novel/work.)
5. Don't edit for them. Talk with them about their writing.
6. Encourage your teen to read his/her writing out loud, so he/she will hear his/her own errors.
7. Find something specific to praise in each piece of writing.

In summary, Bernards Township has a program in place to produce writers, but parents should not outsource this entirely to the school. Be involved at home.

#### Q & A

1. Q: How much help is there with college application essays?  
A: Dr. Thorpe said the first writing task of senior year is a college essay. Teachers usually conference on college essays on Fridays throughout the fall. She recommended strategizing to select similar prompts across many schools. The reason college essay writing begins fall of senior year is because the application prompts are not out until August.
2. Q: What can be done about the lack of creative writing opportunities?  
A: Mr. Hunscher said, "All writing is creative" and mentioned that Ridge's literary magazine (extracurricular) was reestablished this year. Also, Ridge offers an elective class in creative writing.
3. Q: How can parents help a child who does not appear to want help?  
A: Dr. Thorpe suggested finding out specifics on the assignments from the teacher websites in order to be able to ask very specific questions when offering assistance.
4. Q: How do teachers handle kids who appear unmotivated?

A: Dr. Thorpe suggests students who give this impression are likely to be procrastinators. Teachers try to conference first with these students to get them started.

5. Q: When beginning college essays, some students seem shocked at the expectation that each essay will require multiple edits. How much emphasis is placed on doing multiple drafts in the curriculum?

A: Mr. Hunscher quoted Oscar Wilde, who said, “Books are merely abandoned. They are never perfected.” He said the curriculum emphasizes editing consistently and extensively. He attributed some students’ response to the current “culture of immediacy” with fast-paced expectations of instant gratification.

6. Q: How do Ridge’s CP language arts students fare in writing in college?

A: Dr. Thorpe said fine and gave an example of a recent visitor who was a B student in CP courses at Ridge and is now going on to pursue a PhD after successful study at Rutgers.

7. Q: If your teen has glaring mistakes in his/her writing (e.g. repeated words or repetitive sentence structure), how should a parent approach editing?

A: Mr. Hunscher advises to say, “I notice” you are starting sentences in the same way and suggest alternatives. He advised to focus on repeated patterns of errors and not point out every single mistake.

8. Q: The students on the Honors and AP track do not have opportunities to practice personal memoir writing throughout high school until the college essay process begins senior year. Couldn’t the time after AP exams in May of junior year be used to read examples of short memoir, perhaps even magazine autobiographical sketches, to introduce effective writing in this genre and perhaps practice transferring their writing skills to the unfamiliar task of writing effective, short, personal memoirs?

A: Mr. Hunscher mentioned that students perform literary analysis on memoirs during junior year in AP Lang. Another parent mentioned that the sophomore year history project presents an opportunity for the students to write on their volunteer work. However, the assignment differs from the emphasis that would be demanded by a college essay, and the essay is not tied to a language arts teacher/class.