

English 2 Honors and English 4
**Analysis of Student Writing
with Teacher Conclusions and Reflection**

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This year as part of my growth-based evaluation process, I wanted to assess whether my students improved their writing skills during the course of the school year. Do I impact my students' writing? Are my students better writers at the end of their time with me? In the past I have received a great deal of positive anecdotal and perceptual data from my students and their families in regard to these questions, but during the 2008-09 school year, I wanted to try for "harder" evidence. I chose to look at students' essays for this study (even though they would be writing in many genres), because students would produce multiple essays over the course of the year, and differences between those essays would be measurable using a consistent rubric (see SAT Scoring Rubric in Appendix B). In addition, I felt improvement in students' essays would indicate improvement in their writing overall since all good writing pays attention to many of the same fundamental principles such as audience and purpose.

The Results

I compared two essays for each student, one written at the start of the school year and the other written at the end of the school year on the same prompt (see Appendix A). The results are clearly positive. 76% of 67 English 2 Honors students gained points on the SAT Scoring Rubric from September to May with an average gain of 1.8 points. 66% of 59 English 4 students gained points with an average gain of 0.9 points. When looking at how the essay scores were clustered in the fall and spring, class gains are more dramatic with moves of approximately 3 rubric levels overall.

The Process

In September 2008, at the beginning of the school year before I started writing instruction, I asked my English 2 Honors and English 4 students to write on an SAT prompt (see Appendix A). I filed the completed essays away as a baseline samples without evaluating them. Then, I embarked on a year of writing instruction focused on South Carolina state standards, essay-writing around SAT scoring criteria and expectations, and writing to learn/think, especially in regard to students' reading. I did not focus on explicit grammar instruction, but instead during the first semester gave mini-lessons around SAT criteria, writing good leads, introductions and conclusions, essay structure, and elaboration/support. These are common essay problems I had noticed in the writing of this year's students as well as in the writing of previous years' students. I emphasized the writing process heavily, asking students to reflect on their processes after each writing assignment through the year. I also worked on developing students' writing fluency through focused and unfocused freewriting. Students actually wrote only three to four essays; much of their writing work revolved around a variety of other genres. Senior English 4 students also worked on cover letters, resumes, research webpages, and fictional narratives. English 2 students wrote memoirs, poetry, and dramatic scripts in addition to their essays. In all writing assignments I focused students on using real texts as models for their writing and use of the writing process.

In May 2009, I asked students to review the goals and standards of our writing program (see Appendix C) as well as everything we had done to meet those goals. Then, I shared my data analysis plan and asked students to write on the same SAT prompt (see Appendix A) they had responded to in September. Students never saw their initial responses and most did not write

their essays on the same book. Because the prompt deals with a book students feel everyone should read, it is important to note that students read and critically analyzed a great many texts during the course of the school year. Outside class texts, our independent reading program was extremely successful. When students listed what we had done to meet our state and class writing goals in discussion they included all of the critical analysis they had completed in class and as part of their independent reading.

To determine growth, I asked another English teacher at Mid-Carolina to grade the 252 essays using a 6-level SAT Scoring Rubric (see Appendix B). I removed student names, coded each essay, and mixed them up. The evaluating teacher had no way of knowing whether each essay came from the September or May batch, who wrote which essay, or even which class – whether English 2 or English 4 – each essay came from. Once the essays were graded, re-labeled, and organized by student and class, I returned students' fall and spring writings, shared the overall class data, and asked them to complete an Essay Comparison and Reflection sheet (see Appendix D). Students shared their reflections and data with their families on a voluntary basis.

Data Analysis

The results are clearly positive. 76% of 67 English 2 Honors essays gained points on the SAT Scoring Rubric from September to May with an average gain of 1.8 points. 66% of 59 English 4 essays gained points with an average gain of 0.9 points.

	Fall 2008 Class Average	Spring 2009 Class Average	Overall Average Class Gain	# Essays Gained Lost NC	Total # Essays Counted
3A	1.6	3.7	+2.1	14 2 2	18
2B	2.1	3.7	+1.6	19 2 5	26
8B	1.7	3.3	+1.6	18 4 1	23
English 2 Totals	1.8	3.6	+1.8	51 8 8	67
1A	1.8	2.6	+0.8	15 6 2	23
7A	1.6	2.6	+1.0	15 6 1	22
6B	2.1	2.9	+0.8	9 2 3	14
English 4 Totals	1.8	2.7	+0.9	39 14 6	59

Note: In the above class averages, essays with a score of NS (Not Scoreable) were counted as 0's.

When looking at how the essay scores were clustered in the fall and spring, class gains are more dramatic. In the following data tables, essays with a .5 score were rounded up. A score of NS means completed but not scoreable, usually because the essay did not address the prompt. Overall English 2 scores moved from a 1 in September to a 4 in May. English 4 scores also moved from a 1 to a 4.

English 2 Honors classes made more of a gain overall than my English 4 classes. Differences in gains between same-level classes were not significant, except in English 2 Honors. My small 3A class made a more dramatic increase than 2B, a larger class who started the year with much higher scores overall.

English 2 Honors Number of Essays at Each SAT Level

Class 3A: 0 → 4/5 (18 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	6	3	4	3	1	1	
Spring Scores	2		2		7	7	

Class 2B: 3 → 3/4 (26 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	4	6	4	7	3	2	
Spring Scores	1		3	7	7	6	2

Class 8B: 1 → 4 (23 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	5	9	3	2	2	1	1
Spring Scores	2			8	11	1	1

English 2 Total: 1 → 4 (67 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	15	18	11	12	6	4	1
Spring Scores	5		5	15	25	14	3

English 4 Number of Essays at Each SAT Level

Class 1A: 2 → 4 (23 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	3	6	8	4	1	1	
Spring Scores	5		3	5	8	1	1

Class 7A: 1 → 4 (22 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	5	7	4	4	1	1	
Spring Scores	6		3	3	7	2	1

Class 6B: 1 → 3 (14 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	1	5	2	4	1	1	
Spring Scores			2	9	3		

English 4 Total: 1 → 4 (59 students)

SAT Level	NS	1	2	3	4	5	6
Fall Scores	9	18	14	12	3	3	
Spring Scores	11		8	17	18	3	2

Conclusions and Reflection

I am relieved to know that I am having a positive impact on my students' writing. There is so much curriculum at play in a Language Arts classroom – vocabulary study, writing and reading of various genres, grammar instruction, reading processes and literary analysis, research, technology, media and visual literacy, as well as the content itself (authors, text selection, literary techniques) – that it is easy for teachers to get lost. I often become overwhelmed at all I “should” be including in students' instruction.

I have always been a “less is more” teacher. What I teach, I work to teach well. I am careful in my curricular selection, choosing based on potential student engagement, state standards and assessment of those standards, and overall usefulness to students' academic, cultural, emotional, and personal growth. I am an avid reader and an active, publishing writer (of essays, no less), and that also impacts my approach to the classroom and student work. Like most educators, however, I worry that I am not doing enough...enough explicit grammar instruction, for example.

The data show that, in general, my students are better writers at the end of a year with me. I stress the importance of the writing process in my instruction and I think the reasons behind the process came through for many students. Mac M said, “I have learned to appreciate the writing process, whereas in the beginning it seemed meaningless.” On their reflections, many students wrote about how their writing process had improved and how they can now analyze and evaluate their own writing. Julia said, “I think this year I have actually grown. I say this because I have been able to recognize my mistakes and go back and fix them.” Steven said he now knows to read his writing out loud “and let someone else read it and make them be harsh on it instead of just telling me it's good.” Taylor said one of the most important things he learned was “how to analyze text and score my own papers on an SAT rubric.” It's interesting to me that my students tend to take on my way of speaking about evaluation and assessment. In regard to what they learned two students discussed being able to “analyze their data” better. Many of my English 4 students mentioned the fact that they are now more fluent writers and can write more. Asa said, “I think the freewrites really helped me with how much I write.”

Essay writing and writing in general can be taught in a very formulaic manner. As a writer I know that's dangerous, and I was glad to find out that it seems my students felt free to use and discover their own voices in their writing. Hannah O said, “I like how I can still have my own writing style but make it into a great essay. Doing independent reading assessments (IRA's) has helped me the most with writing this year, being able to read great books and reflect. There are a lot of ways to reflect on what you read and you're allowed to be creative.” Mac L reiterated this learning: “Writing can be done in many ways. JUST WRITE!” In looking at students' reflections and discussion about how their essays compared, I noticed how students' levels of sophistication in the writing itself had improved, but also in the ways in which they think about writing. Cadeedra said, “I'm writing now with more of a purpose. I learned how to relate to the audience better.” Rebecca S said, “I feel like my writing is more grown up. When Mama reads some of my work she asks if I copied it.”

In general, English 2 students felt the most important things they learned in my class were vocabulary, annotation, the IRA's and literary analysis, the ability to read Shakespeare, and writing fluency. English 4 students felt the most important things they learned in my class were writing more/fluency, prewriting/brainstorming, the origins of the English language, literary terms, reading methods like annotation and the post-it note method (which I never had a chance to share with my English 2 students), professional writing like cover letters and resumes, and reading more. It was interesting again to see how students made connections,

like Hannah O above, between her improvement with reading and her improvement with writing. I base much of my overall instructional design on that reading/writing connection and it is gratifying to see how my students put it together. I was very surprised to see how many students said that their writing vocabularies had improved through our independent text-based vocabulary program, especially since that is something I had not especially noticed in students' writing. Perhaps the vocabulary/writing links resides in what Mac M said: "Improving your vocabulary improves your communication skills." Several students also mentioned improving in their grammar, though I never included much in the way of explicit grammar instruction in the course. I was more focused on having students seeing the importance of and developing strategies for editing and proofreading (reading final copies aloud, having second and third readers, etc.). Many students were forced to work on their spelling and grammar for final drafts and the experience taught them. Scott said, "Yes, I have grown as a writer. I have worked on my grammar a lot. I gained more grammar than I ever had. My spelling isn't bad, either."

Of course I would like to see even greater gains. I do not have comparable data from any previous years with which to think about this year's results, though last year's English 4 seniors in their portfolio review rated how much they learned about writing as a 4.2 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being "I learned an incredible amount in this area" (average of 45 responses total). I suspect that if I had conducted studies like this in previous years, the results would have been similar (with the usual year-to-year fluctuations). For the last three or four years, I think I have been teaching in this range, with rubrics, asking students to reflect and think from piece to piece, focusing on conferencing, and helping students to develop good writerly thinking habits around process, revision, and editing. I floundered with the teaching of writing, and grammar as an aspect of writing, for the first few years on my career. I knew I had a problem when my National Board assessment showed writing to be my only area below standard in my fourth year of teaching. I think I was confused. I had students writing, but for no purpose other than an interesting assignment. In the years since, I have developed myself as a writer and as an assessor, and focused a good deal of my content area professional development around the teaching of writing from a National Writing Project perspective. At this point, in the twelfth year of my career as an ELA teacher, I clearly target standards, know what I am trying to teach and how to assess it, and feel confident saying that grammar should be taught as an aspect of and attached to students' writing experiences. As I tell my students, revision makes a piece of writing good. It has to be good before you bother with fine details of the mechanics. A bad piece of writing will still be bad, even if all the spelling and grammar is correct.

What would I do differently? In looking at students' writing, I think greater gains in these students' writing would come from more time, more writing, and more one-on-one conferencing with me. I've found that conferencing is my most powerful instructional strategy when it comes to individual students' writing. It is in these conferences that I can help students reflect on and think deeply about their writing purposes, choices, and voice, and it is where I can lead them to the important "a-ha" moments that create big learning that lasts. In conferences, I also mold students into writerly thinking, through my questions and comments, but also with the expectation that they come to the table as writers with purpose, specific questions about their writing, and a desire to improve the work for their intended audiences. Marks on papers can create this kind of thinking, but only if they are tied to another work in progress and give students some basis for improvement. I kept students' mid-term essays (graded on the same SAT rubric) until they were in the midst of drafting their spring essays, and at that point, I saw students carefully analyzing the old essays for pitfalls and problems they needed to address as they revised and edited the final essays discussed here.

Name: _____ Block: _____ Date: _____

SAT Prompt – Book

SC Academic Standards for ELA 2 and 4: 4.2-4.4, 5.4

The Western Canon refers to a list of books that has been the most influential in shaping Western culture. Often called classics, these are books taught in schools and colleges and are considered part of any well-rounded education. Although previously held in high regard, the Canon has been the subject of increasing contention through the latter half of the 20th century.

Assignment: What book do you think every person should read as part of his/her education? Why? It can be one you have read in school or one completely outside what might be expected to be read in school. Plan and write an essay in which you develop your point of view on this issue. Support your position with reasoning and examples taken from your readings, studies, experience, or observations. Your essay will be evaluated using the SAT Rubric.

Prewriting

SAT Scoring Rubric

6	<p>Clear and consistent mastery (may have a few minor errors)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> effectively <i>and insightfully</i> develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates <i>outstanding</i> critical thinking, using <i>clearly appropriate</i> examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position is well organized and clearly focused, demonstrating <i>clear</i> coherence and <i>smooth</i> progression of ideas exhibits <i>skillful</i> use of language, using a <i>varied, accurate, and apt</i> vocabulary demonstrates <i>meaningful variety</i> in sentence structure is free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
5	<p>Reasonably consistent mastery (occasional errors or lapses in quality)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> effectively develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates strong critical thinking, generally using appropriate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position is well organized and focused, demonstrating coherence and progression of ideas exhibits facility in the use of language, using appropriate vocabulary demonstrates variety in sentence structure is generally free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
4	<p>Adequate mastery (some lapses in quality)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> develops a point of view on the issue and demonstrates competent critical thinking, using adequate examples, reasons, and other evidence to support its position is generally organized and focused, demonstrating some coherence and progression of ideas exhibits adequate but inconsistent facility in the use of language, using generally appropriate vocabulary demonstrates some variety in sentence structure has some errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
3	<p>Developing mastery (marked by one or more weaknesses)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> develops a point of view on the issue, demonstrating some critical thinking, but may do so inconsistently or use inadequate examples, reasons, or other evidence to support its position is limited in its organization or focus, or may demonstrate some lapses in coherence or progression of ideas displays developing facility in the use of language, but sometimes uses weak vocabulary or inappropriate word choice lacks variety or demonstrates problems in sentence structure contains an accumulation of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics
2	<p>Little mastery (flawed by one or more weaknesses)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> develops a point of view on the issue that is vague or seriously limited, and demonstrates weak critical thinking, providing inappropriate or insufficient examples, reasons, or other evidence to support its position is poorly organized and/or focused, or demonstrates serious problems with coherence or progression of ideas displays very little facility in the use of language, using very limited vocabulary or incorrect word choice demonstrates frequent problems in sentence structure contains errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics so serious that meaning is somewhat obscured
1	<p>Very little or no mastery (severely flawed by one or more weaknesses)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> develops no viable point of view on the issue, or provides little or no evidence to support its position is disorganized or unfocused, resulting in a disjointed or incoherent essay displays fundamental errors in vocabulary demonstrates severe flaws in sentence structure contains pervasive errors in grammar, usage, or mechanics that persistently interfere with meaning
NS	Essay is not written on the assignment or is unscorable due to poor handwriting, etc.

Writing Program Goals and Standards

Numbers denote SC Academic Standards for the English Language Arts (English 2 and 4).

Essay

- 4.2 Use complete sentences in a variety of types in written works.
- 4.3 Create multiple-paragraph compositions that have an introduction and conclusion, include a coherent thesis, and use support such as definitions and descriptions.
- 4.4 Use the conventions of written Standard American English.
- 5.4 Create persuasive writings such as editorials, essays, speeches, or reports that address a specific audience... (English 2 - and support a clearly stated thesis with facts, statistics, and/or first-hand accounts, English 4 – and use logical arguments supported by facts or expert opinions).

Writing Process

- 4.1 Use prewriting techniques such as creating lists, having discussions, using graphic organizers, using models, and using outlines to organize written works.
- 4.5 Use proofreading skills to edit for the correct use of written Standard American English.
- 4.6 Use revision strategies to improve the organization and development of content and the quality of voice in written works.

Morrison - Know the difference between and the purposes of revising and editing.

Morrison - Be able to articulate and reflect on strategies for prewriting, revising, and editing.

Morrison – Develop writing fluency.

SAT Preparation

Morrison - Prepare for the written portion of the SAT.

Reading/Writing Connection

Morrison - Use professional texts as models to become a better writer.

Morrison - Use new vocabulary and literary terms in his/her writing.

Morrison - Use writing to reflect and think about reading/texts. (1.6 Create responses to literary texts, 2.4 Create responses to informational texts)

Name: _____ Block: _____ Date: _____

Essay Comparison and Reflection

Fall Score: _____ Spring Score: _____ Change: _____

How do your scores compare to other students' scores?

Considering the SAT Rubric, the prompt, and your essays, what do you notice?

What will you continue doing or improve in writing your next essay?

Have you grown as a writer this year? Please explain.

What are the three most important and/or useful things you have learned in English this year?
