

# SPOTLIGHT



—Illustration by James Steinberg

## LITERACY INSTRUCTION

### EDITOR'S NOTE

In addition to finding ways to boost reading proficiency, schools are working to make literacy instruction translatable to the workplace. In this Spotlight, learn how employers are valuing strong speaking skills, consider the effectiveness of ability-based reading groups, and take steps towards data-driven instruction.

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# Using Job-Related Texts To Make Reading Real

## How news articles and technical manuals might help career-technical students master complex texts

By Stephen Sawchuk

**L**arissa VanderZee's students are all going on to work with patients, not patents—but that doesn't mean they're getting out of her classes without a hefty dose of reading. Far from it.

As they go about their clinical rotations, her students read news articles from *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic* about issues facing elderly patients. Later, she will task them with researching a health profession like nursing or being an EMT, compiling an annotated bibliography, and weighing the strength of online and print sources.

"In any kind of environment, you're going to be thrown all sorts of texts, always. My students need to process them in a way that makes sense to them," said VanderZee, an English/language arts instructor at the Traverse Bay Area Career-Tech Center who works in its allied-health program.

From business careers to graphic design to electrical occupations, she and her colleagues at the center in Michigan put an explicit focus on how to build the literacy skills of students within the context relevant to the work they will perform upon graduation.

It's an unusual approach in an era when most of the increasing attention to career and technical education has highlighted science or math, technical skills, or apprenticeships.

And it raises the important question of what the reading demands are for most entry-level jobs and how CTE programs can best meet them.

Admittedly, reading does not show up nearly as frequently as writing and oral communication in most surveys of what employers find lacking in new talent. That's not surprising: Reading is so essential to everyday functioning in the workplace that, like the eyeglasses sit-

ting on the bridge of your nose, it's easy to overlook.

### Different Name, Same Skill

But when employers say they want new hires to have "the ability to understand and synthesize information from disparate disciplines," "critical thinking," or "document analysis"—as they did in response to an *Education Week* online crowdsourced query last year—they are clearly prioritizing specific aspects of reading.

### Data Snapshot

**73** percent of executives and **79** percent of hiring managers said that ability to "find, organize, and evaluate information from many sources" is a very important skill for college graduates.

What's more, the inability to read and understand complex, technical materials tends to have more serious consequences, sooner, for students who are heading off to the workplace than it does for those planning to spend several years more in an academic track, said Travis Park, an associate professor of agricultural education at North Carolina State University, in Raleigh.

Use the wrong fertilizer in an agriculture program and you risk killing a bunch of crops, Park pointed out. Fail to read a technical manual in manufacturing and you can damage machinery or parts. Misinterpret a patient's chart in the health field, and he or she can get sicker.

"The consequence of not understanding *Romeo and Juliet* may be just as se-

vere for students," Park said. "But it is less immediate."

### Michigan's Evolution

The Traverse Bay center's evolution dates back to 2005, when Michigan lawmakers adopted a requirement that all students take 18 credits from among the core disciplines to graduate, including four in English/language arts.

In effect, to justify its continued operation in a suddenly crowded curriculum, the center had to prove that its CTE programs also provided strong instruction in English/language arts and math that could count toward the new state curriculum goals.

Today, the center has three full-time and two half full-time ELA teachers, including VanderZee. Importantly, they are not "coaches" or trainers but full-fledged colleagues who, with their technical teachers, create a rich and relevant ELA experience for students attending the center. The center serves students from 16 public school districts, and it's ultimately up to each to decide how to allocate earned credits. But most of the center's three-credit programs are designed so that students can be awarded at least one credit of English or math, and two in their chosen technical field.

Generally, the reading materials used in these classes take three forms: textbooks in the fields, if they exist; lots of nonfiction news articles; and the technical documentation specific to each program.

Of course, the details vary by the field, said Kelly Hawkins, an ELA teacher. Her culinary students once annotated a *New Yorker* article on the art of writing a menu, and her power-equipment students analyze highly technical instructions on the use of micrometers.

The Common Core State Standards, the shared expectations that undergird dozens of states' ELA guidelines, including Michigan's, emphasize reading within and mastering the specialized vocabulary of each academic discipline, and that same principle applies to workplace readings, she said.

"Even if you are reading a user manual, or trying to read for information to draw out specs because you're going to use this micrometer and need to know tolerances and ranges, you need to understand how it's organized," Hawkins noted. "Students have to identify words that are difficult for them and how they can navigate them."

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64%

of US 8th graders are not proficient readers\*

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The content might vary, but they are using very much the same tools in order to navigate those more difficult words.”

## Reading in Context

Research dating back more than 40 years supports the idea that reading can effectively be taught in relation to a specific job field.

In the 1970s, researcher Thomas Sticht was charged with developing a method for improving the reading abilities of military recruits with low scores on the armed services’ qualification exam. Ultimately, his program taught the soldiers reading within the context of the work they were preparing for, based on specially produced texts mapped to teach each job’s demands. On pre- and post-test measures, recruits taught in this method advanced more on a measure of job-related reading than those taught via general literacy programs, and made equal progress in general reading.

Aside from revolutionizing remedial literacy within the military, Sticht’s work spawned a new approach to adult education that is now generally called functional context education.

Curiously, the concept is still fairly unknown in K-12 education circles, and only a handful of studies specifically address effective literacy teaching within a CTE setting.

“There is no written curriculum you can purchase,” said Stephanie Long, the curriculum supervisor for the center. “Our program staff had to educate ELA teachers on

which standards lent themselves or could be crosswalked to the common core, and the [ELA] teachers had to develop the curriculum using the content of the program.”

Her point is seconded by other CTE experts.

Administrators at Health Science High School in San Diego have set up RSS feeds looking for newly published articles and texts that might be worth reading in each of its various career programs, among other strategies, said Douglas Fisher, the dean of academic affairs there.

Some fields offer ample readings, but teachers have to be creative in others, like law enforcement. Students in that program read summaries of famous criminal cases alongside sections of relevant code and regulations.

“I do think we need some repositories of good materials for the different career and technical subjects for students’ reading,” Fisher said. “And I think we need more attention to preparation so that when CTE teachers are getting their credentials, they take a course in reading methods.”

## Room for Fiction?

As always, discussions about reading instruction focus not just on amount but also on the type of texts students are reading. That brings up this question: Does fiction still matter in a CTE context?

Thomas Newkirk, a professor emeritus of English at the University of New Hampshire, rephrases the question this way: Do

the students’ reading diets expose them to enough different types of narrative? After all, from journalism to an office memo to a presentation, most texts effectively depend on telling a story of some kind and getting a reader to persist from start to finish. Studying both fiction and narrative nonfiction can accomplish that, he argues.

“Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is one of the very best accounts of the decline of a patient. And a lot of nonfiction has the quality of great fiction,” Newkirk said, citing nonfiction pieces by Malcolm Gladwell and Elizabeth Colbert as examples. “I think it would be great to bring those into a classroom.”

He has an ally in VanderZee, who was trained in rhetoric and thinks a lot about its role in reading and writing in the workplace. She and her colleagues have not given up on fiction; she has taught *The Fault in Our Stars*, which features two teenagers with cancer, in the allied-health program, while the manufacturing program has occasionally used *The Goal*, a management-oriented novel that draws parallels between a manufacturer’s work challenges and his relationship with his wife.

And Hawkins requires each student to keep a fiction book going, usually starting off her lessons by examining students’ progress in their novels.

Most of all, the teachers said, being pioneers just takes a lot of trial and error.

“Finding materials is the biggest challenge,” VanderZee summed up. “I think it’s also a godsend. If we do something one year and it doesn’t work, we throw it out.” ■

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# ‘Elevator Speeches’ and Other Skills Students Are Missing

Strong speaking skills are in high demand in the workplace

By Catherine Gewertz

**E**mployers say they have trouble finding new hires with good oral-communication skills. But relatively few regular public K-12 schools explicitly teach those skills, and even fewer teach them with real-world workplace scenarios.

That mismatch doesn’t bode well for young people’s job prospects, or for companies searching for new talent.

In survey after survey, employers say they need people who are good communicators. And they say that strong speaking skills are even more important than good reading or writing skills.

In a survey released in August, executives and hiring managers said good oral communication is the skill they want most from job candidates. It outranked others that get far more public attention, such as critical thinking, solving complex problems, working in teams, and writing well.

More than 80 percent of the executives and hiring managers surveyed said good verbal skills were very important, but fewer than half said recent college graduates were ready to hit that ball out of the park.

“Students haven’t been given much practice with these skills,” said Lynn Pasquerella, the president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which conducted that survey of 500 business executives and 500 hiring managers.

“You can’t find a business that doesn’t involve oral communication. It shows up everywhere on lists of skills employers

value but no place on the lists of skills teachers feel they need to teach,” said Erik Palmer, a 20-year teacher who is now a consultant helping schools develop oral-communications programs.

## Teaching What’s Not Tested

Reading and writing dominate schools’ English/language arts instruction, but some schools also include speaking and listening. Typically, that instruction takes a traditional academic form, in PowerPoint presentations, debate coaching, respectful classroom discussions, or delivering a report in front of the class.

The Common Core State Standards, which guide learning in half the states, include speaking and listening. They envision students expressing themselves clearly, learning to build on one another’s ideas in discussion, and posing questions that “elicit elaboration.”

By 11th grade, students should be able to “ensure a hearing for a full range of positions” on a topic, resolve contradictions in conversation, and “work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions.”

But relatively few schools emphasize, or even teach, those standards, perhaps in part because they’re not generally tested.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced exams designed for the common core originally planned to test students’ speaking and listening skills, but those plans were downsized as the tests were shortened. Seventeen states currently use those tests, but neither one measures speaking skills, and only Smarter Balanced assesses listening skills.

Some schools and teachers are prioritizing oral-communication skills anyway. The Nashville, Tenn., school district’s literacy plan uses the “accountable talk” model designed by the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute for Learning. It develops students’ abilities to listen to one another; build on one another’s ideas; speak clearly, concisely, and accurately; and support their statements with facts.

“It doesn’t matter to us that speaking skills aren’t assessed. Being able to communicate clearly in speech, to a variety of audiences, is a 21st century demand on workers, and our students need to be ready,” said Monique T. Felder, Nashville’s chief academic officer.

Teacher Kelly Gallagher is well known for his teacher-coaching books about reading and writing. But he weaves speaking skills into his instruction at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, Calif. Working



Illustration by James Steinberg

a lot in small groups, his students practice responding to one another’s comments in ways that elicit more discussion.

“It’s not just, ‘Oh, that’s nice,’ but ‘I like what you just said. I also wonder if you’ve thought about. ...’ It’s a response that indicates you’ve listened carefully and it teaches them how to deepen discussion,” Gallagher said.

## Learning the Hard Way

After 33 years at Magnolia High, Gallagher thinks teaching oral-communication skills is more important than ever. Career preparation is less on his mind, though, than his students’ technology-saturated lives.

“A lot of them live in such entertainment bubbles, and they speak to one another digitally, but their face-to-face communication is not as developed as it used to be,” he said.

Career preparation is front and center for Melanie Dever as she teaches math and science at Mill Creek Middle School in Dexter, Mich. She infuses oral-communication skills into her classes by requiring students to design a solar-energy product and pitch it to a panel of community members in the style of the “Shark Tank” television show.

The students watch episodes of the show, analyzing what their grown-up counterparts did well—and not so well. They adapt the most effective tactics to their own presentations.

Working as an automotive engineer before switching to teaching, Dever learned the hard way that employers often want different kinds of communication skills

than high schools and colleges teach. Her boss wanted shorter, more powerful presentations, for instance. And until she went to business school, no one ever taught her oral skills in a workplace context, such as how to explain weak quarterly results to a board of directors, she said.

When he coaches teachers, Palmer breaks oral-communication instruction into two phases: before you speak and while you speak.

In the first phase, teachers help students learn how to analyze their intended audience, build and organize content tailored to that audience, and add visual aids. In the second, they focus on what he calls the “PVLEGS” of delivery: pose, voice, life, eye contact, gestures, and speed.

Teachers who include oral-communication skills in their instruction typically do so in a context that has nothing to do with work, arguing that the skills are transferable to nonclassroom settings.

The workplace connections are more explicit in adult education or private-sector programs specifically geared to work.

But it’s rare for students in high school to learn verbal-communication skills in real-world, workplace-oriented ways. A large Detroit utility company, however, has taken on that task in its internships for high school students.

## A Private-Sector Approach

DTE Energy hires about 90 interns every summer as part of its push to cultivate a new generation of talent. Some students shadow construction and line workers in the field, while others are posted in the company’s offices.

All interns get training in skills such as résumé writing and PowerPoint. But they also build their spoken-communication chops by training with the public-speaking organization Toastmasters and by learning how to give an “elevator speech,” said Tracy DiSanto, the company’s senior manager for workforce planning.

Students devise a powerful, short pitch to sell themselves to potential employers, and then they ride up and down in DTE elevators with their company mentor, giving the speech to anyone who happens to join them.

“In real life, you need that 60-second elevator speech to explain who you are,” DiSanto said. “That skill is good for later on, when they’re networking, or interviewing, to be able to be clear, concise, and confident.”

But that kind of instruction is rare in public schools. Verbal communication is often categorized as a “soft skill,” which can convey less urgency and importance.

Schools could also be uncertain about which verbal skills employers want most. Should they teach debate-type skills to buttress argumentation skills? What about responding to constructive feedback? Or learning how talking with colleagues on a team is different from talking with a boss?

Company surveys rarely identify or define the specific, concrete communication skills employers need. Matthew T. Hora thinks that’s a problem.

“Those lists aren’t detailed enough. They don’t break it out by mode: oral, digital, nonverbal, written. And they don’t break it out by discipline, either,” said Hora, a cultural anthropologist who has studied different types of oral communication as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Traveling around Wisconsin to study the kinds of verbal interactions that are most important for nurses and petroleum engineers, Hora found differences and commonalities.

Nurses told him that it’s crucial for them to know how to listen attentively to patients and families and speak with warmth and empathy, he said. The engineers and nurses both needed to master the skill of translating technical jargon into accessible language, to convey ideas to lay people or to train newcomers, Hora said.

To build the skilled workforce they want, employers might have to do a better job of “signaling” what they need from job candidates, a 2017 report by Burning Glass Technologies and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation says.

But schools also need to reach out to businesses.

“Schools can’t understand the skills employers need without having a conversation with employers,” said Caitlin Codella, the senior director of the foundation’s Center for Education and Workforce. ■

## Is There a School-Workplace Mismatch on Speaking Skills?

### Oral communication skills commonly taught in K-12 schools:

- Book report presentations
- PowerPoint presentations
- Debate/argumentation
- Discussion skills (stating an idea, listening respectfully, asking questions)

### Oral communication skills employers often cite as important and rare among new hires:

- Constructing a clear, concise message and tailoring it to differing audiences
- Interacting well with a team (discussing ideas respectfully with colleagues, formulating good questions, being prepared for thorough answers)
- Public speaking (being well prepared and confident, making eye contact)
- Receiving feedback (listening and responding well to constructive criticism/guidance)
- Participating respectfully in conversations to resolve conflict

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## Is Professional Writing the Missing Link in High School English Classes?

Some experts say students also need lessons on the kinds of writing they will one day use on the job

By Sarah D. Sparks

If you want a hint of the gap between students’ writing skills and workplace demands, look at Amanda Baker’s new English class in Wayne, Mich.

Forget composing technical manuals; when the Wayne Memorial High School teacher developed a new course in pro-

fessional writing, she found her students weren’t familiar with writing formats of people even a few years older.

“The vast majority of my class have never attempted to write email; they only text,” Baker said.

While employers and educators have been working to infuse more career and

technical content into K-12 curricula, studies show some of the most common writing tasks in the work world never find their way into high school English courses, and modern students may be less likely than those in previous generations to learn professional writing on their own.

“The assumption is typically that writing is a single skill, and that’s not really a correct assumption. I might be good at writing scientific articles, but God help me if I had to write a novel or poetry,” said Steve Graham, a writing education expert and a professor at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. “It’s pretty clear there is not a strong match between what businesses are looking for and what schools are doing. [Writing in school] really has more of an emphasis on what might happen in college than in the workplace.”

From business leaders to engineers, industry professionals consistently rate writ-

ten communication skills as among the most important for new workers. Yet even in the wake of new academic standards in most states that encourage more writing, educators and researchers find writing instruction inconsistent and more focused on academic than practical writing. That's why some educators and business leaders are experimenting with ways to infuse career writing into students' high school years, in or out of English class.

Baker's English class at Wayne Memorial High, and Tony Nassivera's business class at Hudson Falls High School in Hudson Falls, N.Y., are two cases in point.

While in two different departments, both teachers developed their courses to bring in working professionals and human-resource staff from multiple fields to help students understand what writing they will need on the job. Baker's students use simulations of common work scenarios, from company meetings to product proposals, to learn to write alone and in groups.

"In my general English class, I have to keep reminding students, 'Even if you don't become an English teacher, this will still be useful,'" Baker said. "In business writing, they see that here immediately."

## What Is Workplace Writing?

Though employer surveys tend to be vague about the specific skills in "written communication," studies and interviews do show some consistent requests, including the ability to analyze and explain concepts and situations succinctly, engage in clear and courteous conversations, present evidence-backed arguments and requests, and switch tone and format to respond to different audiences.

"It's small things," said Kyleen Gray, a literacy department head at Rainbow District School Board in Ontario, who also coaches U.S. teachers in how to incorporate business writing in English. "Academic writing is almost universally third person; business communication can be as formal, but more personal and more purposeful—getting someone to buy something or hire you, for instance. A report is not the same as a [book] review."

A 2018 survey by the American Society for Engineering Education found that leaders in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields listed professional communication skills as the most important in their fields, above even problem-solving, analytical skills, and technical-writing skills.



—Illustration by James Steinberg

## Data Snapshot

**76** percent of business executives and **78** percent of hiring managers identify being able to communicate effectively in writing as a very important skill for recent college graduates.

"As you look at Gen Z, the kids in middle and high school and those entering the workforce right now, they've grown up in a world of 120 characters and Instagram; that's how they've learned to communicate," said H. John Oeschle, the president and chief executive officer of Swiftpage, a Denver-based digital marketing firm. Oeschle is also a member of Gov. John Hickenlooper's Business Experiential Learning Commission, which is working with businesses to help students develop workplace skills. "What we're finding is, as younger folks are entering the marketplace, they have a real issue with putting together short, concise, and clear written communication about something, whether it's a project or a problem that they're trying to solve. This is a real problem, and it's getting worse, not better."

National surveys of middle and high school teachers have found that even after the advent of the Common Core State

Standards, which stress writing across all subjects, teachers use relatively few writing tasks frequently. Of the tasks they did use at least once a month, virtually none involved the kinds of writing that would be needed in the workplace, such as analysis or formal persuasive writing. In both middle and high schools, the most common written tasks were short-answer questions, worksheets, and note-taking while reading or listening. Explanations and analysis were used in high school but not as commonly as the other tasks.

"The most common activities involve writing without composing. How often do kids write stuff that requires more than a single page? Not very often," said Graham of Arizona State University. "There's not enough writing going on for students to meet the needs employers are looking for to be successful in the workplace."

In 2011, the National Assessment of Educational Progress changed its writing exam to focus on more real-world writing tasks, such as persuading, explaining, and conveying experiences. Little more than 1 in 4 students at either 8th or 12th grade performed proficiently on the 2011 writing exam. For example, only 23 percent of students wrote a competent or effective letter giving evidence for or against a proposed business in a town. And nearly 40 percent of students exhibited developing, marginal, or no skill at explaining a type of technology they used frequently. Moreover, 8th grade gender and racial achievement gaps were significantly wider on the writing test than in the same year's reading NAEP.

The writing test allowed students to use more digital tools for writing, such as computer-based spell-check, thesaurus, and editing functions. Students who frequently used editing and thesaurus tools performed better on the test, but most students did not use those tools.

## Leveraging Tech or Pushing Back?

Like Baker, Nassivera said the transition from emotional, casual, highly abbreviated texting to business correspondence tends to be the hardest skill for students to master in his business course.

“When you are going into the professional world—I can’t find a less blunt way to say it—you have to sound smart. In the way you write and the words you choose, you have to sound credible,” Nassivera said. “If you are working with someone in their 50s and you are in your 20s, a smiley emoji is just not going to be considered professional.”

Knowing the basic format for an email isn’t enough, according to a forthcoming study in the October issue of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. Researchers in England and Hong Kong gave students a series of assignments in which they were asked to write a series of emails with a client and a manager in an ongoing business scenario, using information from both prior emails and a voicemail.

Stephen Bremner, an associate English professor at City University of Hong Kong who focuses on workplace communication, found the student writers faced “considerable challenges” in deciding what information to include from different texts, how to present problems, and how to consider their readers. “Students need to be encouraged to think about the relationship as well as the message and to consider the question of how to acknowledge the ongoing dialogue and relationship effectively,” Bremner and his co-author noted.

In a series of assignments, Nassivera helps his students build up from their texting. Students take a recent substantive text and try to rewrite it using no abbreviations but keeping the meaning. From there, students study how businesspeople like Apple founder Steve Jobs wrote emails and memos and work their way up to writing formal e-mails to district staff.

### ‘Immediate Payoff’

Baker said she tries to adapt her English course each year to practical skills in areas that interest students, such as writing business plans to pitch a new company or practicing the résumés, cover letters, and formal correspondence associated with job searches. That project proved particularly useful for one of Baker’s 12th grade students, Jessica Leigh, who graduated this spring. “The job I found was a coaching job, and I needed the money, so I did the project but at the same time, I actually applied for the job,” she said.

A few classes later, Leigh asked Baker’s permission to keep her mobile

## Most common writing tasks in secondary school:

- Note-taking while listening
- Short-answer responses
- Worksheets
- Reading analysis/interpretation
- Explanations
- Common professional writing tasks:
  - Clear and courteous emails
  - Succinct explanation of concepts or situations
  - Evidence-backed persuasive writing
  - Conveying the same information for different audiences
  - Conducting or responding to a written interview

SOURCE: “High School Teachers’ Use of Writing to Support Students’ Learning: A National Survey,” Reading and Writing, 2014; *Education Week*

phone turned on in class; she was expecting a call back from Sky Hawk Sports, the youth-coaching company she had researched.

“I put it on speaker, and everybody in class was quiet while the guy was talking with me”—to offer her the job—“but after we hung up, everybody was cheering and stuff,” she said. “It was really cool.”

Baker agreed. “It was so nice to see that immediate payoff for her. That is where the growth became really tangible.”

Leigh noted that neither her other English nor business classes in high school taught her how to communicate in a professional environment. “I even had a marketing class where I worked in the school store and learned money handling, but it never taught me anything about writing or résumés or job interviewing. Until I had [Baker’s] class, I didn’t know anything about it,” Leigh said.

She has continued to coach children for the sports group over the summer to save up for college to pursue a business degree later this fall.

“I’m really glad I took that class,” she said, “because otherwise, I wouldn’t have this job.” ■

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# Doubts Cast on Ability-Based Reading Groups

By Sarah D. Sparks

**E**ducators and researchers are looking to update one of the oldest, most popular—and at times one of the most controversial—methods of targeting instruction: the elementary reading circle.

Grouping students of similar reading skills—think “bluebirds” or “redbirds,” for example—has become ubiquitous in American classrooms as a way to target instruction to students’ learning needs, spreading from 68 percent of classrooms in 1992 to more than 90 percent by 2015. But evidence suggests that the practice may be less beneficial than teachers think: It can exacerbate achievement gaps and even slow reading growth for some children unless the groups are fluid and focused on skills rather than overall achievement.

The spread of modern ability grouping is likely in response to growing pressures to raise test scores under the No Child Left Behind Act’s accountability system, said Adam Gamoran, the president of the William T. Grant Foundation and a long-time researcher of ability-grouping strategies. “Many people believe it is possible to use ability grouping as differentiated instruction to maximize achievement growth,” he said. “It often doesn’t work out that way in practice.”

Early grades are particularly likely to group students by ability, because the typical bell curve in a kindergarten or 1st grade classroom is so wide.

In one forthcoming study, Marshall Jean, a research fellow at the Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research, tracked nearly 12,000 students from kindergarten through 3rd grade in more than 2,100 schools, following them through high, middle, and low reading groups or ungrouped reading classes.

He found about half of children who were in the lowest reading group in kindergarten were able to improve to at least the median group by the end of 1st grade. By the end of 3rd grade, 46 percent of those who had previously been in the low-

est group in 2nd grade were able to move up. However, Jean found that none of the students initially placed in the lowest kindergarten group ever caught up to the reading level of their classmates who had started out in the highest reading group.

“The structural inertia is considerable,” Jean noted, finding that having been in the highest reading group in an earlier grade tended to protect students from being put in a lower group later, even with significantly lower scores. Students in lower reading groups not only progressed more slowly academically, but while they were in lower reading groups, they were also slower to develop “learning behaviors,” such as varied interests, concentration on tasks, and persistence in the face of difficulty. Those behaviors, in turn, reduced the students’ likelihood to move up to higher reading groups in later grades.

### Potential Bias?

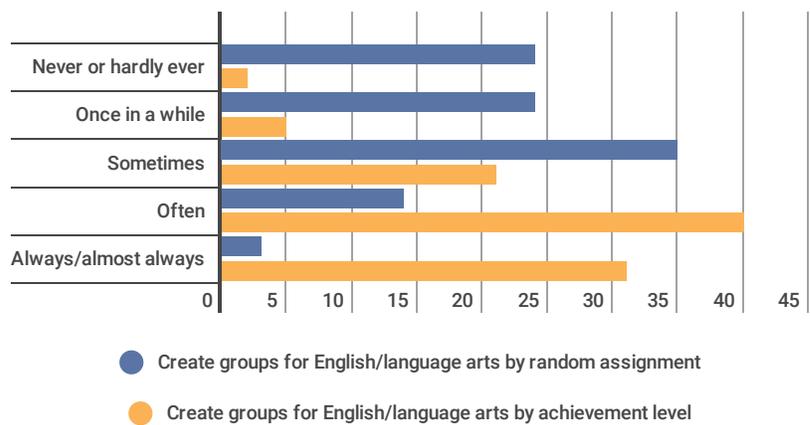
“If you are more motivated and the teacher perceives that about you, you are more likely to be put into a higher reading group,” Jean said. “But there was also some evidence for bias: Even after controlling for prior reading achievement and learning behaviors, students in poverty were more likely to be assigned to lower groups, and their wealthier peers more likely to be tapped for higher reading groups. They were small effects, but they are there and consistent across grade levels and statistically significant.”

Similarly, in a series of three new studies in Switzerland, researchers asked practicing teachers and college students to evaluate profiles of students whose scores put them on the borderline of more or less academically rigorous tracks in high school; the students’ achievement scores were held constant but their backgrounds were altered to make them appear to be either high- or low-income. Over multiple studies, recently published online in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, both student and practicing teachers were more likely to refer lower-income students to a lower academic track and higher-income students to a more challenging track, even though their scores were the same.

“Because of inequality outside of schools, children from different socioeconomic and racial and ethnic backgrounds often come to school with different levels of preparation. And so by separating the children by their initial reading ability, the teachers are also separating [them] by socioeconomic status or race or eth-

## How Often Are Teachers Using Reading Groups in 4th Grade?

Teachers are more likely to place students in reading groups based on ability than they are to randomly assign them. Among the 4th grade teachers who use reading groups, the majority of them report using ability-based groups often or always.



### Reading Achievement

High- and low-poverty classes that used ability-based reading groups “almost always” scored lower on average than those that used them “hardly ever” on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

	High Poverty Schools	Low Poverty Schools
Never or hardly ever (use ability grouping)	220	228
Always/almost always (use ability grouping)	219	226

SOURCE: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2017 Reading Assessments

nicity,” said Gamoran of the William T. Grant Foundation. “And, of course, when teachers have low expectations for their weaker readers, they slow down the pace even more than they would need to, so the low-achieving students fall further and further behind instead of catching up.”

### Fluid Groups

Besser Elementary School in Alpena, Mich., switched to ability grouping in its early-reading classrooms about three years ago. It’s not clear yet how well the practice is working. About half the

school’s students live in poverty, and their achievement gap with higher-income students has stayed stubbornly wide.

“We were focused on making instruction more meaningful for all students. Teachers need to focus on struggling students, but on the other end of the continuum where students needed to be enriched, those students were being left behind,” said Eric Cardwell, the principal of Besser Elementary. “The challenge teachers have seen now is they’re having to plan for three to four different groups.”

Those high-achieving students have improved, he said, but the groups

themselves have remained more stable than he'd like.

"What we frequently see is slight movement of students. You don't generally see them jumping two levels at a time when we only do data reviews three times a year," Cardwell said. "Ideally, there would be more [reviews] so that there would be more fluidity, but time is always the monster that's chasing you: time to review data, time to plan."

Internationally, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that countries that predominantly use ability grouping showed significantly deeper performance inequality on the Program for International Student Assessment but no significant benefits for the countries' overall performance. OECD noted that more than 9 in 10 U.S. 15-year-olds attend schools where they are grouped by ability.

"What we know now that we didn't know back in the '80s is that when you group up students, it has to be specifically relative to the content that's going to be taught," Gamoran said. "There're no IQ tests, not even a general reading-ability test that can tell you how to form the groups so that you can meet their needs. You have to form the groups specific to the instruction that's coming and then reassess to

form new groups specific to the next instructional unit."

### Changing the Calculation

One California program has shown promise in making reading circles more flexible and less stigmatizing. In Assessment to Instruction, or A2I, teachers give a diagnostic assessment to all students every eight weeks to identify strengths and weaknesses in particular reading skills in four areas of literacy: decoding, fluency, comprehension, and usage. An algorithm based on the assessment tells teachers how much individual, small-group, and independent working time each student needs, and students are grouped for instruction based on particular focus skills rather than overall reading ability.

"What we've discovered is that it's fine to have a group of students of different levels, as long as they all are working on the same learning needs," said Carol Connor, an education professor at the University of California, Irvine, who developed the program. "You can have students of different reading abilities who all need to work on decoding. ... What doesn't work is if you put your kids who already know how to code in a group to learn how to code, again. You receive more behavior problems because they're really bored, ... and

our research suggests that it has a negative effect on their growth."

Phoenix Collegiate Academy (now ASU Prep) in Arizona was one of the schools that piloted the A2I program, and Amanda Jacobs, then-principal, said it changed the way teachers and administrators approached differentiating instruction in small groups. Previously, teachers focused on providing equal time with each small group, but "it shifts your perspective from trying to get to every kid in the time you have to being more strategic with how you're spending your minutes with each child."

In a recent longitudinal, randomized controlled study, students who participated in the targeted reading groups over three years performed significantly higher than students in a control group that used standard reading classes. Though 45 percent of the students in the targeted reading groups came from a low-income background, by 3rd grade, all of them had higher reading scores than the national average for their grade, and none had scores below the expectations for their grade level.

"There are no 'bluebirds' being the bluebirds all year long," Connor said. ■

*Research Analyst Alex Harwin and Librarian Holly Peele contributed to this article.*

## COMMENTARY

*Published October 26, 2018, in Education Week*

# Why Doesn't Every Teacher Know the Research on Reading Instruction?

## Three recommendations for greater reading proficiency

By Susan Pimentel

**A**lmost two decades ago, the National Reading Panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and arrived at recommendations for how students should receive daily, explicit, systematic phonics instruction in the early grades. Why is this literacy research not more widely known? Why is the fact that reading skills need to be taught, and

that there is a well-documented way to do it, not something highlighted in many teacher-preparation programs (or parent-ing books, for that matter)?

Recently, a remarkable audio-documentary by Emily Hanford went viral, shining a spotlight on such crucial literacy research—none of which is new, but much of which is unknown to today's teachers. Like many in the literacy community, I worry about our failure to bring research into classroom practice. My con-

cern is greatest for teachers who are being sent into classrooms without the tools they need to succeed. I'm hopeful this renewed interest will serve as a catalyst for overhauling reading instruction in our teacher-preparation programs. However, relying solely on better preparation for the next generation of teachers is a slow delivery system to children. The stakes are too high. We need more immediate solutions.

Only roughly one-third of our nation's 4th and 8th graders can demonstrate pro-

iciency on national tests, with students from low-income families and students of color faring the worst. When students can't read, they have trouble learning; the great majority of students who fail to master reading by 3rd grade either drop out or finish high school with dismal lifetime earning potentials.

I'd like to build on the momentum Hanford's piece has sparked to call attention to additional research-based practices that go hand-in-hand with the importance of phonics. As educators experience 'aha' moments about the need for stronger phonics instruction, let's talk about some other literacy practices that need fixing in elementary classrooms. Here's my short list of practices and resources to add to the conversation:

**1. Let all kids read the good stuff.** The pervasive practice of putting kids into reading groups according to their "just right" reading level has meant that large numbers of students receive a steady diet of below-grade-level instruction. The texts they're reading don't require them to decipher unfamiliar vocabulary, confront challenging concepts, or parse new and complicated language. Noted literacy researcher Timothy Shanahan has written extensively about why this is the wrong approach, documenting that "after 70 years there still isn't any research supporting the idea of matching kids to just-right texts" after 1st grade—yet still the practice persists. This, despite research showing that the ability to handle complex text is the distinguishing characteristic between students who go on to do well in college and work and those who don't.

Why would we deprive our youngsters of the opportunity to build this muscle in elementary school, when all that's standing in the way of their doing so is the opportunity and the support that close reading can provide?

The Council of Chief State School Officers offers a host of resources to help teachers guide students with complex texts.

**2. Build students' general content knowledge.** Some of the most profoundly important, yet under-recognized, reading research shows that students' reading comprehension depends heavily on their background knowledge about the world—knowledge that comes largely from learning about science and social studies topics. When students know something about a topic, they are better able to read a text in which that topic is discussed, even when the sentence structure is complex or the



—Getty

words are unfamiliar. Cognitive science expert Daniel Willingham explains this principle clearly, and the Knowledge Matters Campaign expands on it further.

The implications for literacy instruction are enormous because young children are receiving less time with science and social studies content in their school day. According to a 2007 study, instructional time spent on these subjects dropped by an hour and a half per week since the 1990s. The diminished attention to these knowledge-building topics creates less fertile ground for reading comprehension to flourish and is a significant culprit in our stagnant national reading outcomes. Given that time is a scarce commodity in most schools, the takeaway for school leaders is to incorporate rich content, organized around con-

ceptually-related topics, into the reading curriculum so that students learn new information about the world while they develop as readers. Student Achievement Partners has ready-made resources that teachers can pull into their classrooms.

**3. Let quality English/language arts curriculum do some of the heavy-lifting.** Poor-quality curriculum is at the root of reading problems in many schools. It is not an overstatement to say that a school that doesn't have a phonics program is doing its students a huge disservice. Increasingly, the same can be said about the lack of intentionality for building students' knowledge of the world and access to complex text. The current lack of educator know-how can be remedied by curriculum that points the way.

Fortunately, bolstered by emerging research about the "curriculum effect," we're in the midst of a curriculum renaissance. In recent years, a number of respected organizations have developed curricula that are tailor-built to both state standards and the latest research. Educator reviews conducted by organizations such as the nonprofit EdReports or Louisiana Believes can help schools easily identify the best curriculum for their context. No longer should classroom teachers need to scour the internet for materials. Instead, educators can spend their time focusing on how to become the best possible deliverers of thoughtfully arranged, comprehensive, sequential curriculum that embeds standards, the science of reading, and the instructional shifts described above.

I have great empathy for teachers who have labored under the weight of misdirected teacher preparation, insufficient curriculum, ever-shifting educational fads, and ever-increasing professional demands—and welcome the attention of journalists who are shining a light on the opportunity represented by the convergence of science and a new class of high-quality curriculum materials. Based on my own experiences with educators taking this improvement journey, significant reading gains are possible with the right support. Our students' reading future can be bright—if we seize the moment. ■

*Susan Pimentel is a co-founder of the StandardsWork and a founding partner of Student Achievement Partners, both nonprofits dedicated to improving K-12 student achievement through evidence-based action. She was the lead author of the Common Core State Standards for English/language arts literacy.*

# It's Dyslexia: What's a Teacher to Do?

By Dr. Louisa Moats

## WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

Dyslexia, by its Greek roots, means difficulty with words. Specifically, dyslexia is an unexpected problem with accurate, efficient recognition and spelling of printed words.

Dyslexia is the most common type of developmental reading disability and one of the most studied of all learning disorders. Given its prevalence, every teacher should be familiar with the nature of the disorder and how to teach students affected by it.

## TAKING AIM AT LANGUAGE ABILITIES

Since learning to read words depends on linguistic awareness and knowledge of language forms and uses, good instruction explicitly and systematically builds students' command of word recognition and language comprehension. In a nutshell, here's how:

- **Phoneme awareness**
- **Orthographic (spelling) knowledge**
- **Oral and written language comprehension**

## IT'S CALLED STRUCTURED LITERACY

Structured Literacy is shorthand for the content and methods referred to here. What teachers should know and do to reach students with word-level reading and spelling problems is detailed in the Center for Effective Reading Instruction's Knowledge and Practice Standards (KPS) for Teachers of Reading. *LETRS*<sup>®</sup> (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) professional development provides a way to learn that content and methods. *LANGUAGE!*<sup>®</sup> *Live* embodies that content and methods effective for all adolescent students with underdeveloped language and reading abilities.

To read Dr. Moats' complete blog about dyslexia, common myths, and Structured Literacy visit [go.voyagersopris.com/its-dyslexia](http://go.voyagersopris.com/its-dyslexia)

**FIND OUT MORE: 1.800.547.6747**



*Dr. Moats served on the board and as vice president of the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) for many years. She led the effort to develop the organization's Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading, which specify the practices of Structured Literacy and how to apply them. Dr. Moats also is the lead author of LETRS professional development and LANGUAGE! Live for adolescent poor readers.*



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# You're Right

## Your Professional Development is Missing 5 Essential Components

When educators at Hilldale Elementary School in Oklahoma began the professional development program *LETRS*®, Principal Price Brown immediately realized, “This is something that our teachers are missing, and I don’t mean just our teachers. I’m talking teachers everywhere.”

Teachers matter more to student success than any other aspect of schooling. They, not programs, teach students how to read. Yet a study of most teaching institutions found only 29 percent actually prepare teachers with all five essential components of literacy instruction, including: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.\* Coincidentally, another national study found **63 percent of U.S. fourth grade students are not proficient readers.**\*\*

### Learning to read is complex

Reading requires multiple parts of the brain learning to work together. Visual symbols must be connected with language. For example, the letter b represents /b/, which, in turn, distinguishes bat from pat. Brain pathways connecting speech with print must be built by every reader. Teaching reading should be based on scientific research applied to the classroom, and tailored to individuals. Without a deep understanding of the science behind how we learn to read, why we spell the way we do, or how phoneme awareness and phonics lead to comprehension, teachers are left feeling ill-prepared—like riding a bike without wheels.

### *LETRS* closes the gap in teacher training

“Going through *LETRS*, you sit there, moment-by-moment, thinking, ‘I should have known this,’” said Ebony Lee, Ph.D., director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, Clayton County, Georgia Public Schools. “It’s the tool to change lives and change communities.”

In Ohio, where Niles City Schools implemented *LETRS*, students reading at or above average increased from 53 percent to 89 percent within one school year.†

With *LETRS*, decades of research translates best practice into everyday classroom success, including a systematic approach to building oral and written language to improve reading instruction overall.

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“Going through *LETRS*, you sit there, moment-by-moment, thinking, ‘I should have known this.’ It’s the tool to change lives and change communities.”

Ebony Lee, Ed.D., Clayton County Public Schools, Georgia

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OF READING AND SPELLING

## COMMENTARY

Published October 17, 2018, in *Education Week's Education Futures: Emerging Trends in K-12 Blog*

# 6 Steps to Data-Driven Literacy Instruction

By Mary Brown

Everywhere you turn in the education community these days, people are talking about data-driven instruction. And that's great!

More information about what students understand and where they still need help is a good thing.

But we're educators, not data analysts, and sometimes all these numbers can feel like, well, a whole lot of numbers that aren't connected to real students with real learning successes and struggles. However, by taking a step-by-step approach to analyzing and acting on data, a school or district can turn all those numbers into improved student learning.

As a literacy specialist for nearly two decades, I have had the opportunity to use a slew of intervention programs and, though they were all perfectly fine, it was always incumbent upon me to determine the specific foundational skills students needed to work on to grow and progress toward grade-level benchmarks. For the last four years, my district has truly embraced tech-enabled literacy instruction. Here are six steps we've taken to make data work for us.

### 1) Begin with solid assessments and reports.

To generate reports that help our literacy team and district collect data and put it to work for our students. The assessments and the data generated allow for both diagnostic and prescriptive instruction. Unlike in years past, I have every tool I need to provide data-driven instruction, as well as generate reports for local and state accountability.

The standards report we use illustrates the level of mastery for each Ohio State Standard for every student, as well as their projected growth toward each. The Pathway to Proficiency Report has strong correlations to our state test, and the line recalibrates each time

the student is assessed, so teachers instantly know who is on track for reaching proficiency.

### 2) Establish your benchmarks early...but not too early.

The next step is to assess students to create benchmarks of where they are when the school year begins. Accurate information means not wasting unnecessary time on intervention for those who really don't need it and keeping those students moving forward in their classroom with daily, rigorous, districtwide adopted reading instruction.

It can still be a challenge to ensure benchmarks are accurate, so we try to improve the accuracy of early assessments a few ways.

First, we allow time for students to get past their "back-to-school mode" after summer vacation by not testing for the first week or two that they're back.

Teachers make sure to provide quiet testing environments with limited distractions. Some even offer noise-canceling headphones.

Finally, teachers give clear pre-test instructions and explain the importance of the assessment to their students.

### 3) Look beyond obvious metrics.

Students' reading proficiency isn't the only thing you can benchmark during these assessments. For example, we all know that some students will persevere where others may not. To help build their stamina, I track the actual time they spend on the test and reward their effort when they spend a little more.

### 4) Build groups.

Using the benchmark assessments, we build our reading groups with students scoring above the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile constituting the non-intervention group, those between the 40<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> percentile being on watch, and students who performed below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile flagged as being in need or in urgent need of intervention. This school year we are raising those benchmarks.

I form groups so I can target instruction and provide practice for interventions based on Star's skill recommendations for each range of scores. I also use learning progressions to determine the prerequisite skills my students need to understand and determine the most critical skills they need to learn next.



## 6

**5) Intervene and monitor.**

We set goals for students who need intervention and monitor them for progress every two weeks to ascertain if the interventions are appropriate and effective. Once we have four data points from progress monitoring, we begin building trend lines.

With each test, we have immediate access not only to a student's percentile ranking, but to their grade-level proficiency and their zone of proximal development (ZPD), which allows teachers to gear the students' independent and instructional reading assignments according to the Lexile scores where the optimal range of reading challenge is provided and the most reading growth will occur.

A new tool I'm looking forward to using this year is Renaissance's new custom assessments tile, which will allow me to plan assignments based on the median score of my intervention groups and pull up activities that correlate with the skills my students have demonstrated they need, saving time in planning targeted instruction.

As students are monitored, I like to look back at how each of my intervention students performed during the quarterly benchmarks of the previous year to see if there are any trend lines.

**6) Abandon habit for choice.**

"Not choice, but habit rules the unreflecting herd," said William Wordsworth. Sometimes teachers, just like anyone else, can fall into the rut and comfort of habit.

As we have learned over the past four years, accurate data applied in a consistent and thoughtful manner can remind us that we have a choice in how we reach out to students, and it can empower that choice significantly. ■

*Mary Brown is a reading intervention specialist at Franklin Local School District.*

**COMMENTARY**

*Published September 5, 2018, in Education Week Teacher*

**Is 1:1 Technology the Elixir of Bad Writing?**

By Elizabeth Brown

**W**e are graduating bad writers. Despite increases in the number of students finishing high school and enrolling in four-year colleges, poor writing is ubiquitous. Students with subpar writing skills end up struggling in English 101 or in remedial college classes. Many resort to using "paper mills," or paying online writing services to craft essays, or even dissertations, for them.

Having taught writing to students in high school, college, and at a correctional institution, I have found commonalities in poor writing habits across these settings. The degree of struggle runs the spectrum, from writers who are barely able to write a sensible paragraph to hidden gems who are steeped in trepidation.

After working in a high-performing high school in Plainville, Conn., which has adopted 1:1 technology, I'm convinced we've stumbled on the elixir for writing ailments.

The 1:1 technology initiative provides each student with a light, wireless laptop to use both inside and outside of school. Emerging writers need a modern tool with which to flex their writing muscles, precisely what the 1:1 technology offers—convenience, freedom, and more instant and frequent feedback, extending the dialogue beyond the classroom walls. The learning is dynamic, personalized, and organic, leading to less scripted and stilted writing.

The classroom ambiance is a writing instructor's dream—the dim lights, soft clicking, students wired into writing. And how can we discount the trees spared—in the billions.

Paper and pencil is like parchment and charcoal to the tech-savvy students of the digital era. We have pushed and prodded and forced our students to endure an archaic model of education for too long, and in the process, created a generation of dysfunctional writers burdened with an assortment of neurotic writing habits.

I've observed a myriad of writing neuroses, mostly anxiety induced—from the gifted writer's eloquent style obscured by awkward phrasing and grammar faux pas, to the passive aggressive writer's intentional misspellings and punctuation omissions, to the inept yet honest writer lacking finesse and deficient in the most basic skills. These perplexing behaviors are learned over time, perhaps in response to a forced writing instruction deemed irrelevant to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century student, and considered banal in comparison to a rich technological world outside the classroom walls.

One-to-one technology gives tech-savvy students a greater level of comfort with the writing process. The more familiar and comfortable the student feels, the more inspired he or she will be to write, freely and more frequently.

When students are frustrated with writing instruction, it is revealed in the product—the poor writing they produce and their indifference or shame of it. For some, the awkward writing is intentional, almost retaliatory. And for others, sadly, it is their best, even if it is incoherent.

Writing should be exploratory and organic in nature. All students deserve the opportunity to use technology and to type their ideas freely and uninhibitedly. Writing rarely takes a linear course. In fact, the finish line is nonexistent, as the writer is continually revising and improving. High-quality writing instruction requires the most efficient tool to manage multiple drafts and revisions. An English teacher working with a pen and paper is at a disadvantage.

I am witness to it. In our study of William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* last spring, my freshmen chose a character to analyze. They typed freely, unencumbered, explored "Ralph's inept leadership," Jack's "descent into savagery," Simon's "innate morality," Piggy's "social awkwardness," along with Golding's take on our brutish nature. Only in a few situations did I have to remind them to "elaborate." The ideas flowed, unimpeded. Afterward, we took it a step further, and

students provided a psychological report of their character in a creatively designed presentation via Google Slides.

Nevertheless, despite the many benefits, some critics view 1:1 technology as the leviathan of the modern classroom, pointing to the potential data mining, privacy breaches, and early recruitment to a lifetime of Google, for instance.

Yet, technology is here to stay, and it is our job as educators to be flexible and progressive, rather than encouraging neurotic behaviors and a resistance to writing.

The day before spring break, I reminded students to keep at their essays and fine-tune their theses. With their laptops they have a solid footing, and I am confident they will be writing and sending me ideas, drafts, and revisions along the way.

I'm hopeful that 1:1 technology initiatives help students feel unfettered freedom to hone their writing skills and build confidence and expertise—eventually putting the paper mills out of business once and for all. ■

*Elizabeth Brown is a native of Connecticut and an English adjunct and writing tutor at Goodwin College and Asnuntuck Community College. She also taught college English to early-release inmates in the Second Chance Pell Program, and at the secondary level in various suburban and inner-city high schools. Her writing has been featured in the Hartford Courant and literary magazines such as Pithead Chapel, Gravel, Literary Orphans, Sleet, and Wilderness House Literary Review.*

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