Red-Marked Writing:

High-Stakes Consequences on High School Writing Education

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Abstract

The crucial role of writing in students' educational growth and development is indisputable. Not only does the process of writing engage students in each level of Bloom's taxonomy, but it also aids students in the development of their cognitive thinking skills. However, past and even recent statistics reveal a common trend: the vast majority of high school students lack even a basic understanding of writing. Though undoubtedly there are many issues contributing in this lapse of students' writing abilities, high-stakes testing is a key factor in the decline of writing education in high school classrooms. In order for students to develop effective writing skills, teachers must recognize the negative impact high-stakes testing will have on their writing instruction and thereby expend concentrated effort on sharpening their teaching to better challenge and engage their students in the writing process.

Therefore, the negative effects high-stakes testing has on high school writing education is the primary concern of this thesis. Within this thesis, this author discusses many problematic issues in current writing instruction that arise from high-stakes testing, such as a decrease in student engagement and ownership of writing, increase in student inability to make structural connections in their writing, and the elimination of a process-oriented approach to writing instruction. Furthermore, this author explains two methods of writing instruction that teachers can use to fight against these negative effects of high-stakes testing. It is hoped that this thesis will make future English teachers aware of the inevitability of high-stakes testing effects on their writing instruction, equipping them with a few methods that can counteract these negative influences.

Red-Marked Writing: High-Stakes Consequences on High School Writing Education

"I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all" (Wright 77).

Passion. Conviction. Determination. All these apply to Robert Wright and many other authors' understanding of writing as a form of art, of literature as small encapsulations of life that make readers contemplate their beliefs and restructure their worlds. For these authors, words give meaning to life, and writing draws out this meaning through words. The high school English classroom should foster this nearly reverent perspective of writing, encouraging children to transfer this perspective from one generation to the next. However, the current writing instruction prevalent in most high schools seems to be accomplishing the very exact opposite. Casting aside Wright's enthusiasm for creating the written word, more and more students groan their way through every test-driven writing assignment, harboring resentment against, if not complete hatred of, the entire writing process itself. And their papers sadly reflect this attitude as sentence fragments and disunity clutter and ravage their written works. Though writing instruction is crucial in students' educational growth, high-stakes testing is a contributing factor in students' lack of proper, effective writing skills, an issue necessitating a change in teachers' methodology and practice.

Importance of Writing Instruction in Education

An explanation of Bloom's taxonomy is essential in demonstrating the vital role writing plays in high school students' educational development. Bloom's taxonomy was created by Benjamin Bloom, an American educational psychologist, in 1956, and categorizes learning objectives specifically to target student learning. In her article "Assessing Student Learning: Applying Bloom's Taxonomy," Patricia A. Eber defines Bloom's taxonomy as "a tool that can help human services educators broaden the depth of their students' learning" (45). Although Bloom also formed the affective and psychomotor domains to classify students' psychological and physical development, his theory of the cognitive domain draws most of teachers' attention and focus since this domain is where academic learning develops. Bloom's cognitive domain consists of "six levels of abstractions" (Eber 45) that he encourages teachers to target within classroom instruction in order to develop their students' learning. Bloom coined these levels as *knowledge*, "retrieving information from Memory" (Eber 46); *comprehension*, the integration of knowledge "with existing cognitive frameworks" (46); *application*, the execution and implementation of knowledge already grasped; *analysis*, "breaking material into its constituent parts and determining how the parts are related to each other and to an overall structure" (46); *synthesis*, using knowledge and existing materials to build new structures, patterns, or meanings; and *evaluation*, drawing conclusions and judgments based upon the information already learned (46). All of these methods are essential in fostering students' educational growth, and countless instructors have consequently used Bloom's taxonomy for years as an instruction guide and measuring

rod for gauging the effectiveness of their classroom teaching.

The writing process proves a valuable tool for fostering students' education as it requires students to engage academically in each level of Bloom's cognitive domain. Whereas most exams and other assessment models have failed to concentrate on each level of Bloom's taxonomy simultaneously, writing requires students to apply each of the six stages. From even the start of the writing process, students have to remember and understand the knowledge they have learned within the English classrooms, such as proper grammar mechanics or specific details of a story, in order to effectively apply this information in written form. As a result, students already begin performing the first three stages of *knowledge*, *comprehension*, and *application*. Writing even pushes these students to go several steps further by requiring them to form thoughts and opinions of their own, thereby having them spend most of their time in the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy—*analysis*, *synthesis*, and *evaluation*. David Coker, co-author of the article "Beyond *Writing Next*: A Discussion of Writing Research and Instructional Uncertainty," illustrates this statement as he claims that "writers not only have to formulate their own thoughts but also organize and transcribe those mental representations into words that can transcend time and place, a process that few people would describe as undemanding" (233). Writing, therefore, allows students the opportunity of engaging each level of Bloom's cognitive domain, thereby stimulating their educational growth more than any other teaching method.

Writing further develops students' cognitive skills as it stimulates each individual learning style. In her article "Becoming Writing, Becoming Writers," Julia Colyer claims

that writing engages all forms of learning, thereby developing the cognitive skills of all learners no matter what learning style they may possess. Colyer lists the three modes of learning as "enactive learning (learning by doing), visual learning (learning by depiction), and symbolic learning (learning by representation in words," and claims that "[e]ach of these modes is active; each locates learning in a different place: The hand, the eye, and the brain" (426). Many educational researchers now label these three learning styles as *kinesthetic*, *visual*, and *auditory* consecutively. For kinesthetic learners, learning occurs when they physically interact with the subject material through "hands-on" assignments such as piecing together a word puzzle or drawing. For visual learners, instruction must be visually stimulating, providing images of historical figures or demonstrating a particular skill in order for these learners to "see" the instruction and better understand the subject material. Finally, auditory learners are perhaps the easiest learners for teachers to target as these students learn best through listening to and verbally processing instruction. In her article "Writing as a Mode of Learning," Janet Emig states that "[w]hat is striking about writing as a process is that, by its very nature, all three ways of dealing with actuality are simultaneously or almost simultaneously deployed" (124). Although Emig wrote her article in 1977, Colyer asserts her claims, stating that "writers use [these] three learning modes simultaneously" (426). As they interact with paper and pen, visualize the words they write, and read aloud their written works when revising their papers, students consequently engage their kinesthetic, visual, or auditory learning styles. Therefore, writing employs students' individual learning styles simultaneously,

consequently stimulating student learning to a much more profound degree than most other teaching methods.

This effectiveness of writing instruction displays itself the developed cognitive skills that writing produces. In his article, "Writing as Thinking," Richard Menary argues that the process of writing engages the cognitive abilities of the writer and thereby sharpens his or her thinking skills. Menary claims that effective cognition takes place only through the coordinated action of both external and internal processes as these processes manipulate vehicles, such as word structures, in order to accomplish a given task. This combination results in two divisions of cognition: "*hybrid* – involving both neural and external processes and *integrated* – [having] neural and external processes co-ordinate with one another in the completion of cognitive tasks" (Menary n.pag). The action of opening a door illustrates this two-fold nature of cognition. As people approach a closed door, their neurological processes recognize the need to open the door, thus triggering their external processes as their arms reach to grab the handle and accomplish the task. As a result, both the external and internal (neurological) processes coordinate with each other in order to manipulate a vehicle (the doorknob) and complete the cognitive task of opening the door. In the same way, Menary claims that writing applies this exact process except in a more challenging manner that extensively engages students' cognitive abilities. Menary defines writing as "thought in action" (n. pag.), a process he describes as "the entire coordinated result" of the "external processes involved in writing working with neural processes" (n. pag). Through writing, internal cognition externalizes itself in written form as the writer communicates his or her thoughts onto paper by

creating written structures, such as sentences and words, and manipulating them in order to achieve the desired meaning. Because of this joint coordination of internal thought and external action, writing stimulates and develops the cognitive skills of anyone engaging in the writing process.

Failure of Writing Instruction in the High School Classroom

However, despite this positive influence writing has on developing student learning, a current history detailing the writing abilities of high school students reflects a steady decline in writing achievement. Most high school students' writing in the past has failed to meet national standards. In his book *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, Charles J. Sykes presents disheartening statistics detailing the extreme writing deficiencies of American high school students. In one of his research studies, Sykes discovered that "[o]nly one high school junior out of fifty (2 percent) can write well enough to meet national goals" (20). Defining the national standards for students' writing brings to light the gravity of this statistic. According to NCTE, the National Council of Teaching English, the specific writing goals set forth for high school students to accomplish are the following:

1.) Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes

2.) Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes

3.) Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions

> (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts
>
> 4.) Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (n.pag.)

Boiled down, these goals challenge students to adjust their writing in order to communicate in a variety of formats and styles to people from a variety of backgrounds, to understand and apply a *general* knowledge of proper grammar and writing mechanics, and to become comfortable with writing as a vehicle of their own voice and their own agenda. While these goals established by the NCTE may be extensive, they are by no means unrealistic. Yet only a sad two percent out of the fifty high school juniors tested in Sykes study were able to fulfill these reasonable expectations in their writing. Although national standards for high school writing supplies students with realistic expectations for the development of their writing abilities, the writing of most high school students in the past failed to fulfill these national demands.

Recent statistics show that high school students' writing abilities show little to no sign of improving. Coker cites H.R. Persky's research on the "Nation's Report Card of 2002," claiming that "approximately 70 percent of students in grades four, eight, and twelve were deemed 'low-achieving' writers who wrote at or below the basic level" (234). This statistic leaves only 30 percent of students who fulfill or exceed the writing standards for their particular grade level. S. Graham and D. Perin support this finding in their book *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle*

and High School, claiming that most high school students fail to meet the writing goals established by the NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Coker 234). Carrying the past decline of high school writing into the present, high school students today demonstrate deficient writing skills as they cannot even write according to the standards of their grade level.

Although other current studies claim that high school students' writing has improved, this growth is minimal in that it has occurred only at a basic writing level. The Nation's Report Card of 2007 reports the following: "Since 2002, the percentage of students performing at or above the *Basic* level of achievement has risen in both grades, increasing from 85 to 88 percent at eighth grade and from 74 to 82 percent at 12th grade" (n.pag.). While this 8 percent increase in the writing abilities of students in the twelfth grade is a matter warranting an element of relief, the majority of these students' writing still display an understanding of only a *basic* level of writing composition and mechanics—the lowest possible level gauged by "The Nation's Report Card." Surely, parents and teachers alike would wish to see their children and students grasp more than just a basic knowledge and application of writing; surely, the educational system should do more for its students than equip them with just the bare minimum. Though some high school students have progressed in their writing, their writing abilities demonstrate proficiency at only a basic writing level.

High-stakes Testing: Effects on Writing Instruction

Although many problems exist in current writing instruction, high-stakes testing is one of the major contributing factors in this present failure of writing instruction in

high school classrooms. High-stakes testing exists for the purposes of maintaining teacher accountability in instruction according to specific standards and effectively measuring students' educational progress. Carolyn Piazza quotes the NCTE and IRA regarding their language standards in her article "The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: A Survey of High School Students' Writing Experiences": "[T]he ultimate purpose of these standards is to ensure that all students are offered the opportunities, the encouragement, and the vision to develop the language skills they need to pursue life's goals" (276). Teachers working in a high-stakes teaching environment uphold these standards in their classrooms, catering their instruction to these guidelines and evaluating the outcome or product of students' hard work through a series of testing and retesting.

However, high-stakes testing requirements bear serious consequences for teachers, students, and school systems if students do not achieve these standards. According to Wayne Au in his article "High-stakes Testing and Curricular Control," these tests are termed "high-stakes" because their results bare heavy consequences for students, teachers, schools, and even districts who fail to meet these standards (258). In her article "High-Stakes Testing, Uncertainty, and Student Learning," Audrey Amrein details these consequences for teachers, claiming that "[f]or teachers, low average class scores may prevent teachers from receiving salary increases, may influence tenure decisions, and in sixteen states may be cause for dismissal" (n. pag). While these consequences are rather severe, those in favor of high-stakes testing claim that the main goals for this grading system are to foster students' academic growth and prepare them for the future by providing accountability for both teachers and their students. Regardless,

high-stakes testing lives up to its name as students, teachers, and school systems that fail to fulfill high-stakes standards experience severe consequences.

Despite the good intention behind its design, high-stakes testing inhibits students from developing effective writing skills in that it contributes to the elimination of a process approach to writing instruction. Through a process approach to teaching writing, teachers incorporate *prewriting*, *writing*, and *rewriting* stages into their writing instruction. Because students have difficulty with writing, these stages act as essential guide posts to assist them along the writing process. In their article "Evaluating Students' Writing: A Process Approach," Lee McKensie and Gail E. Tomkins detail these three stages, claiming that *prewriting* is the stage where the writer chooses his audience and purpose for his paper as well as "decide on his topics and develop ideas about them" (202-203). This stage also often includes finding any research the writer feels necessary for his topics, brainstorming, and forming outlines. Once the writer finishes this stage, he begins *writing* his first draft. In this stage, the writer becomes increasingly aware of the message he wishes to communicate as well as the information he needs in order to effectively finish his written work. The writer therefore discovers any loopholes in his argument and gathers the information needed to cover them. After finishing the first draft, the writer enters into the last stage of the writing process: *rewriting*. McKensie and Tomkins state that "the revision stage helps [the writer] find the structure or the most appropriate form and then develop it fully, keeping in mind the needs of [his] audience" (206). During this stage, the writer uses peer-editing as a guide for his revision as he allows other writers to read and critique his paper. Through peer-editing, the writer

receives the perspective of an outside, objective source, thereby gaining knowledge of how readers might receive his argument. Comprehensive and thorough, teachers using the process approach to writing instruction involve their students in pre-writing, writing, and rewriting stages that guide them in the composition process.

The process approach to writing instruction is necessary in order for students to develop effective writing and cognitive skills. Linda Rief, in her article "Writing: Commonsense Matters," claims that "[w]riting is a recursive *process* [emphasis mine] in which the writer considers purpose and audience as [he or she] shifts back and forth, finding ideas, developing those ideas, and clarifying thinking for the strongest, clearest meaning through intentional revision and editing" (191). Here, this definition reveals that the very core of writing is a time-tasking process, a practice that *requires* writers to constantly edit and revise their written works. In order for effective writing and consequent cognition to take place, writers must contemplate their beliefs, determine their specific approach in presenting their argument, effectively organize this argument on paper, and constantly review their paper to ensure that their argument can be clearly received and understood by their audience. Therefore, especially for novice writers like high school students, implementing the process approach to writing of the prewriting, writing, and revising stages is essential in students constructing their written works.

Through this constant editing and revision, the process approach to writing allows writers the time necessary to sift through their ideas and find loopholes in their arguments. Throughout the writing experience, writers encounter countless roadblocks, sometimes having to completely revamp their arguments as this intensely cognitive

process reveals unfounded biases or opinions and even unconscious ignorance about the specific subject of their papers. Daisey alludes to this statement as she states that this systematic approach to writing is essential in student learning as students "recognize what they know and what they still need to learn" (158). As a result, students who approach their writing as a process have the time to develop more elaborate, detailed arguments as their constant reflection and revision sharpen their ideas and strengthen their written presentation.

Despite the importance of a process approach to writing instruction, teachers today rarely implement this approach within their high school classrooms. Piazza gives evidence for this statement through conducting a survey for students that questioned them about their writing experiences within the high school classroom. Although most of the students she polled agreed that their instructors provided excellent models of writing, these teachers rarely implemented peer-editing in their classrooms (288). Though the process approach to writing instruction is essential in students developing effective written communication, teachers veer away from incorporating this method within their classrooms.

High-stakes testing greatly contributes in this elimination of the process approach to writing as high-stakes teachers' instruction centers primarily on test material. Casting aside an implementation of the three stages of prewriting, writing, and rewriting within their classrooms, teachers instead focus their efforts on a more test-based approach to writing: *product-oriented instruction*. Whereas process-oriented instruction focuses on students learning through the method of writing, product-oriented instruction focuses on

students learning set concepts of writing determined by specific standards necessary for students to meet. In their article "Beyond Test Preparation: Nurturing Successful Learners through Reading and Writing Workshops," Melinda Miller and Betty Higgins support this statement, claiming that "[t]raditional writing test preparation is product-oriented instruction, with the product judged according to whether certain criteria set forth by test standards are met" (126). As a result of its test-centered approach, product-oriented instruction eliminates the three stages of writing composition as teachers emphasize the quality of students' quickly written products instead of the process leading up to their completion. McKensie and Tomkins allude to this statement, claiming that although the product-oriented instruction is "useful in judging the results of writing, [it neglects] the process that students use as they compose" (201). As a result, single-draft assignments seen only by the instructor dominate the writing classroom instead of the process approach of prewriting, writing, and revising. Tasked by high-stakes standards, teachers push aside the process method of teaching and instead favor product-oriented instruction, focusing their attention on developing students' academic achievement as measured by their standardized success.

The current writing instruction in high schools demonstrates the influence of high-stakes testing and its resulting product-oriented instruction as it centers on more tested writing material, such as grammar, instead of content. In their book *Bridging English*, Joseph O'Beirne Milner and Lucy Floyd Morcock Milner support this statement as they list the current trends in teachers' assessment of their students' papers: "[t]eachers' comments often address only an end product, not the process that preceded

it; focus on the narrow, easily graded issues of mechanics (spelling, grammar, and penmanship) rather than on student meaning: justify the grade rather than respond to the writing" (437). In this product-oriented approach to writing instruction, crucial content characteristics such as students' stylistic choices, the clarity of their argument, and the effectiveness of their organization become secondary to the grammatical and mechanical correctness of their papers. Consequently, teachers using product-oriented instruction exclude non-tested writing material, such as critiquing the message in students' papers and their individual writing styles, and instead focus their grading and instructional efforts on how grammatically proper the students present their message. Au alludes to this statement when he claims that "high-stakes tests encourage curricular alignment to the tests themselves . . . to the detriment or exclusion of non-tested subjects" (263). As grades and scores take center stage, teachers compromise their students truly learning the art of writing in order for their students to meet high-stakes standards, focusing their instruction on more tested writing subjects instead of content.

Writing prompts also have become the primary form of student writing assignments as a result of high-stakes testing. In her article "Self-Efficacy Beliefs and the Writing Performance of Entering High School Students," Margaret Johnson alludes to this effect of high-stakes testing, claiming that "[a]s they face increasing pressures to meet state standards, many teachers have traded authentic writing experiences for quicker, more scripted approaches to literacy instruction" (n. pag.). Although Johnson wrote her article in 1996, the veracity of her statement still applies today as test-driven writing prompts continue to dominate writing instruction. In the article "Beyond Test

Preparation: Nurturing Successful Learners through Reading and Writing Workshops," Wolf and Wolf support this statement, claiming that "[d]riven by state testing, teachers are being pulled toward prompt-and-rubric teaching that bypasses the human act of composing and the human gesture of response" (qtd. in Miller 126). Through high-stakes testing, writing therefore transforms into another mental drill for students as they learn writing for the sake of the test instead of for the development of their cognitive and writing abilities. As a result of high-stakes testing, teachers primarily depend on prompts to serve as student writing assignments.

High-stakes Testing: Effects on Students

Through the contribution of high-stakes testing in the elimination of a process approach in writing instruction, students quickly learn to approach their writing only as a means to a good grade. Because their teachers assess only the final outcome of their work, students adopt the mindset that writing is more about the grade, or rather the expected quality of the finished product, than the experience. As a result, students cheat themselves out of learning and educationally developing to the best of their ability. J.S. Mayher supports this statement as he details the consequences of student writers writing solely for the purposes of grades:

> [It] takes the responsibility for choosing how to most effectively compose a piece away from the writer and cedes it to the teacher/grader. Experimentation is therefore restricted, and everyone sticks as carefully as possible to those pre-structured genres of anti-writing which have proved themselves the safest paths to good grades. (qtd. in Milner 436)

Fueled by their desires for good grades, students rush through their writing, focusing their efforts on just finishing their written works instead of how to effectively present their argument or thoughts on paper. And most high school students have no reason to do otherwise. Because teachers consistently emphasize grammatical concerns in their assessment of students' papers, providing only a few to no comments regarding the actual content of these papers, students adapt their writing to fit how the teacher grades. Since most teachers, as a result of product-oriented instruction, do not focus their efforts on critiquing the content of their students' paper, neither do the students. After students rush through their writing, all they have to do is read over their papers for any grammatical and mechanical errors, correct them, and the "A" is theirs. Though most high school students may instinctively adopt this grade-driven mindset on their own, the influence of a product-oriented approach to writing instruction most certainly does not deter them from rectifying this attitude.

High-stakes testing also affects students' developing effective writing skills as it can inhibit students from making structural connections with the writing material taught in class. As a result of high-stakes testing and its product-oriented instruction, teachers stencil grammatical concepts, vocabulary, and formatting principles on their students' minds, rarely displaying to their students how they should apply this knowledge to their written assignments. Piazza states the following: "As with direct instruction of grammar, where no connection is made to reading and writing, instruction in how to write may have become simply an exercise in preparing for a test, leaving students with little or no understanding of writing's connection or relevancy to their lives" (292). Au further

supports this statement, claiming that through high-stakes testing, "[c]ontent is increasingly taught in isolated pieces and often learned only within the context of the tests themselves" (263). Therefore, without the context of a test, students cannot effectively connect the standardized knowledge their product-driven teachers have given them with their written composition. As a result, the writing process becomes like trying to swim without the life guard giving any direction or instruction in how to do so. Teachers throw their students into the menacing waves of writing. Although teachers give these students floatation devices of subject-verb agreement and other grammatical procedures, the students have no idea how to use them for their writing survival; their teachers have simply taught them test knowledge and assumed that they would figure out the rest. As a result, students thrash against the current of sentence structure and sink into the white-washed surf of countless pages, their written works inevitably being immersed in a sea of red marks and minuses. Being taught only what they need to learn in order to pass a test, students are unable to connect the writing instruction discussed in class with their own writing assignments—they may be able to identify a noun and verb within a sentence on an exam, but when asked to actually apply this knowledge to their own written works, subject-verb disagreement litters the pages.

Furthermore, high-stakes testing affects student engagement. Students' personally engaging in their written works is essential in the writing process. In their book *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom*, John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas discuss the importance of students personally engaging in literature, attributing adolescent illiteracy to teachers' heavy incorporation of classical literature in their

classrooms as they fail to provide students literature with which they can personally relate and connect (3). Though Bushman and Haas's assessment focuses primarily on literature, the same concept—the importance of emotionally engaging students— applies to writing. In order for students to apply themselves fully in the writing process, teachers must incite their students' personal interests within their instruction and writing assignments. In her article "The Importance of Choice," Penny Kittle gives evidence for this statement, claiming, "Writers can be completely detached in writing about literature, just stacking sentences into a structure created by the teacher. . . .[Teachers] need rigor in process, not just products, and that requires an emotional investment from their students" (210). In order to produce effective writing, students must be personally invested in their written works.

Creative writing effectively achieves this needed student engagement in the writing process. Creatively-driven writing assignments enable students to invest themselves emotionally in the writing process, engaging their interests and initiative through allowing them a new vehicle of expression through the written word. A research study conducted by Fader and McNeil asserts this statement, revealing that journaling within the high school classroom "resulted in students' becoming freer about expressing themselves, discovering that they had much to say, and developing confidence in their ability to do so" (qtd. in Milner 183). Creative writing thus develops students' commitment to their writing, an accomplishment that Bushman and Haas claims "is difficult to achieve when working through a sterile writing assignment that has not come out of the writer's own desire to write" (90). As creative writing piques students' interest

and incites their motivation, students are more likely to dive willingly into the writing process.

Despite the student engagement that results from creative writing, high-stakes testing urges teachers to refrain from implementing creative writing in their classrooms and devote their attention to more tested forms of writing. Nancy Rankie Shelton, co-author of the article "Creating Space for Teaching and Test Preparation," alludes to this claim, stating that "[t]est-driven curriculum dominates instruction and leaves little space for authenticity, *creativity* [emphasis mine], or individuality of teachers and students" (120). Piazza gives evidence that high-stakes standards remove creative writing in high school classrooms. In her research, Piazza reveals that the most frequent kind of writing projects that teachers assign high school students are literature responses, with persuasive, summaries, and expository essays following a close second and comparison/contrast essays closing in on third. Much to the students' disappointment, teachers rarely used creative writing assignments such as poetry and short stories (282). In analyzing this research, Piazza later ties this absence of creative writing within the high school classroom with instructors favoring more tested forms of writing (292). As a result of high-stakes testing standards, students eliminate creative writing from the high school classroom in order to focus their efforts on developing students' standardized success.

Through eliminating creative forms of writing from the classroom in order to focus on tested materials, teachers tasked by high-stakes testing inhibit students from taking an interest in writing, thus marring their ability and desire to personally connect

with and appreciate written expression. Polling students regarding the absence of creativity in the writing classroom, Piazza quotes one student saying: “I never had the chance to write essays, poetry, or any other such creative work. Instead we got to write about symbols and structure . . . They [my teachers] have turned art into math and science" (287). Yet another student claims that the lack of creative writing assignments caused him and his classmates to never feel connected with the literary works covered in the class (286). Although instructors could easily encourage students to take creative approaches to their traditional essays, most students are rarely given the chance to emerge from the depths of restricted style, structure, and content forced upon them by their product-oriented instructors. Teachers remove creative writing from the classroom in favor of product-oriented instruction, thus contributing to students losing interest in writing and inevitably receiving poor grades on their written works.

High-stakes testing further affects student writing self-efficacy—students’ beliefs about their abilities to perform certain writing tasks. As students approach writing assignments, most of their writing performance depends upon their confidence level in their writing capabilities. In his article “Sources of Writing Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Elementary, Middle, and High School Students,” Frank Pajares claims that “students' beliefs about their own writing competence are instrumental to their ultimate success as writers” (n. pag.). Therefore, teacher input and encouragement is often crucial for students’ success in the writing process. Pajares supports this statement, claiming that “only by understanding the genesis of self-beliefs can educators engage in practices and create interventions aimed at nurturing adaptive self-conceptions or eradicating

maladaptive ones" (n. pag.). Through high-stakes testing and its resulting product-oriented instruction, however, many teachers often focus solely on their students' standardized achievement, and consequently bombard their students with countless writing concepts, pushing them through the writing process in hopes to cover these standards in the timetable allotted. As a result, Johnson states that little occasion remains for teachers to interact with their students and encourage them in their writing endeavors, causing many students to disconnect from learning how to write and slowly adopt the belief that they are not good enough to succeed in their English classes (n. pag.). Through high-stakes testing, teachers can be inhibited from giving the amount of interaction and encouragement their students need, thus causing many students to form a low self-efficacy regarding their writing abilities.

Righting Writing: Methods

In light of the essential role writing plays in developing students' educational growth and the current decline of students' writing skills resulting from high-stakes testing, teachers must incorporate a *process-oriented approach* to writing instruction that simultaneously meets high-stakes standards.

The Writing Workshop

The writing workshop is a process-oriented approach to writing in which the teacher and students alike work side by side with each other to plan, write, and revise their written works within a classroom setting. Miller quotes Atwell's description of the writing workshop, claiming that "[t]he components of Writing Workshop are mini-lessons, status of the class report, writing and conferring, and group sharing" (126). Therefore, whereas

Murray's three stages of prewriting, writing, and rewriting generally keep the writer within isolation, the writing workshop method requires composition to take place in group participation and practice between both the students and teachers. A process-driven approach to writing instruction, the writing workshop requires students to collaborate together in the composition process as their teachers work alongside them to plan, draft, revise, and edit their papers within the classroom setting.

The writing workshop method occurs in five different stages that the teacher enforces within the classroom: planning, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing. Teachers first introduce the writing workshop through demonstrating the writing task they wish their students to accomplish. In her book *The Writing-Rich High School Classroom: Engaging Students in the Writing Workshop*, Jennifer Berne defines these demonstrations as mini-lessons, stating that a mini-lesson "is a short piece of whole-group instruction that can introduce a strategy or behavior [the teacher] wants to cultivate" (17). Once teachers perform these mini-lessons, students divide into groups to brainstorm for ideas regarding their papers. As students establish a firm direction for their papers, they then begin outlining and drafting their written works, eventually forming groups in which students revise and edit each other's papers. While students consult each other in these writing groups within the classroom, teachers meet individually with each student at their desks in order to further provide students with one-on-one instruction and concentrated guidance. Once students have completed their papers, teachers give them the opportunity to share their writing with the classroom through oral presentations and publication. Teachers can implement this writing workshop within their instruction

regardless of the subject they teach, and can either have this process take place in a single class period or can extend it over several periods if they so desire. Teachers using the writing workshop method therefore guide their students in the five stages of planning, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing, and this guidance takes place entirely in a classroom setting.

Through its process-oriented approach, the writing workshop amends the negative effects of high-stakes testing on writing instruction. Through writing workshops, teachers become more invested in their students' writing education, giving their students the attention and guidance needed throughout the writing process. Cooper and Kiger define the writing workshop as "a flexible plan that places students and teacher in a partnership for learning" (qtd. in Miller 126). Through this method, teachers step down from their judging pedestal and join their students in their writing endeavors, assisting them along their composition as they themselves model and demonstrate the writing process to their students. This instruction predominately takes place in the feedback students receive from their instructors during their writing conferences—one-on-one meetings between students and their teachers regarding editing and revision of their papers. Berne claims that writing conferences are essential in students' writing development not only because students receive much needed feedback regarding their papers, but also that this feedback comes from an experienced teacher who can give students expert advice on how they can improve their written works (103-104). Therefore, as a result of the writing conferences established by the writing workshop method, teachers give their students the direction, concentrated instruction, and resulting confidence that students need in order to write

effectively.

The writing workshop method also provides students with ownership of their writings as they choose their individual writing topics. Although teachers using the writing workshop method may give their students a particular style—persuasive or informative, for example— to incorporate in their writing, they require their students to form a topic of their own choosing within that style. As a result, teachers accomplish the stimulation of student interest necessary in order for students to invest themselves in the writing process. Berne states that "to be authors, students must have authority over their own work" and that "[t]his authority should start with control over content whenever possible" (3). Daisey expounds on this statement, claiming that students are more motivated when teachers allow them to write about issues important to them and to an audience of their choosing (169). In choosing their own topic, students therefore have more ownership and freedom in the writing process without their engaging in solely creative assignments such as writing poetry or fiction. Consequently, Miller states that students are more likely to enjoy and invest themselves in the writing process (126)—a result that reflects in a richer quality of students' written works compared to their papers written from a prompt. Kittle supports this statement, claiming that "words that resonate with readers come from the heart of the writer" (211). Through the writing workshop method, students form ownership over their written works as their teachers require students to choose their own topic.

The writing workshop method furthermore provides students with the time necessary for the effective development and revision of their written works. In order to

adequately gauge the coherency and clarity of their papers, students need time away from their composition as they glean from the reactions of people editing their pieces. Berne claims that "[w]riting fluently and fast and then stepping back and giving the writing time to sit and/or getting feedback from others teaches writers about the effect of their writing on an audience" (3). In order for an author's writing to be effective, the audience of his choice must come away from a written work with a clear understanding of the message and argument that he intended to communicate. Therefore, in order to produce this quality of writing, students must have an extended amount of time to not only plan and draft their papers, but also to consider the effect their writing might have on their audience and whether this effect satisfactorily fulfills the determined goal for their piece. The writing workshop method provides students with this time as teachers devote single or several class periods to students composing, revising, and editing their papers within the classroom. As a result, students do not rush through the writing process, thereby avoiding confusion in their written works as their fellow students and teachers carefully dissect their papers. Through implementing the writing workshop method, teachers give their students the time they need in order to effectively develop their written communication.

Through the writing workshop method, students also become more developed writers as they gain experience in writing according to multiple genres. According to Berne, "the best writing classrooms offer students and teachers a range of writing experiences" (8). Miller supports this statement as she states that "instruction should include teaching students to write to a variety of genres" (126), and she later claims that

the writing workshop method accomplishes this necessity in writing instruction (126). Through the writing workshop method, teachers do not force a predetermined structure of writing composition onto their students, requiring them to only write according to prompts or essay format. Instead, teachers incorporate various genres of writing within the writing workshop, allowing their students to choose the particular format in which they believe they can best present their message. Consequently, through the writing workshop method, students become versed in the field of writing as they gain experience in composing works according to various genres, thereby becoming well-rounded, developed writers.

Despite the writing workshop being a time-tasking, process-oriented approach to writing instruction, this method effectively fulfills high-stakes testing standards. Although research regarding the effect of the writing workshop on students' test scores is lacking, the limited research conducted reveals that the process-oriented method of the writing workshop increases students' test scores. In their research study investigating the effectiveness of a yearlong writing process program, Shelton and Fu claims that "[participants'] test results showed that the teacher's class average was higher than the state average, and 13 out of 27 students scored 4 or above out of a possible score of 5" (qtd. in Miller 126). Manzo's research expands this finding as he claims that "[s]tudents who have good literacy instruction based on authentic experiences score better on tests than their peers who receive only skill instruction based on skills assessed on a test (qtd. in Miller 126). Therefore, as a result of the workshop writing method, students' success on high-stakes testing is more likely to increase than decrease.

The Writing Portfolio

Although the writing workshop method proves to be a valuable tool in the writing classroom, another method that has great potential in redirecting and correcting current high school writing instruction is the writing portfolio. Though it incorporates the process approach of community prewriting, editing, revising, and teacher-student conferences, the writing portfolio requires students to be independently driven and emphasizes student self-reflection. In their article "What Makes a Portfolio a Portfolio?", F. Leon Paulson, Pearl R. Paulson, and Carol A. Meyer define a writing portfolio as the following:

> A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection. (60)

Although Paulson wrote this definition in 1991, Steven P. Smith supports Paulson's description of the writing portfolio in his article "Why Use Portfolios? One Teacher's Response," claiming that the writing portfolio method is a student-driven process of collection, reflection, and selection (277). In the beginning of the semester, students create a working folder that contains writing criteria collectively determined by the students and teachers. Students' then place their completed writing assignments inside these working folders, along with any prewriting, revisions, peer reviews, or observational sketches they have compiled pertaining to these specific written works. Throughout the semester, teachers not only provide various mini-lessons pertaining to the

set criteria, but also conference with the students regarding the development of their portfolios and writing abilities. Every six weeks, students choose one to three of their writing assignments within their working folder that they feel best fulfills the criteria they established at the beginning of the semester, placing these written works and their corresponding drafts in their portfolios and providing a self-reflection regarding their personal development as a writer thus far. At the end of the semester, students write a cover letter for their finished portfolio that provides identification of the set writing criteria they were to accomplish, an explanation and demonstration of these criteria, and an evaluation of their performance in using these criteria in their writing throughout the semester. As they personally compile their own writing portfolios and reflect on their written performance, students consequently engage in a more independently-driven and reflective mode of writing education.

Writing portfolios counteract the negative effects of high-stakes testing in that they provide a significant amount of flexibility in instruction and student learning. Through the writing portfolio method, students and teachers collaborate together to develop their own criteria for effective writing instead of strictly abiding by state standards, catering and assessing their writing throughout the semester according to these self-determined criteria. Smith defines these criteria as "community based standards" that he claims are "more valid and more in tune with [the students'] particular interests and abilities" (279). Therefore, through this flexibility in the development of writing criteria, teachers using writing portfolios not only engage their students' interest, but also have more freedom to cater their instruction to the specific, various writing strengths and

weaknesses that their students may possess. However, this students-teacher development of writing criteria does not abandon state standards. Smith claims that state standards "are broad enough to serve as an umbrella under which specific criteria that students generate can fit" (279). As a result, the flexibility of writing portfolios allows students to help develop their own individualized writing education that specifically pertains to their unique writing abilities and interests while still fulfilling state standards for high school writing development.

Through the flexibility of writing portfolios, students also obtain ownership in the writing process. The writing portfolio intensifies students' authority over their writing through allowing them to choose the criteria for their writing, the topics and genres of their works, and the specific writing assignments they wish to place permanently within their individual writing portfolios. Smith states that through the writing portfolio method, "[g]enres vary from student to student, as do their topics, their purposes, and their audiences," therefore causing "the writing in their portfolios [to] take many different forms" (280). Consequently, students can develop a much greater sense of independency and direction in their writing than if teachers restricted their freedom in writing assignments. Paulson gives evidence for this claim when he states that "the portfolio is something done *by* the student, not *to* the student," and is therefore a "powerful educational [tool] for encouraging students to take charge of their own learning" (61). Smith supports this statement, claiming that "[s]tudents are more likely to accept the necessity of writing well when they have played a vital role in determining how high the bar is going to be set and what it is going to be made of" (279). Through determining

their own writing standards, topics, genres, and pieces within their portfolio, students compiling their writing portfolios consequently develop a greater independency and authority in their writing abilities.

The writing portfolio method also combats the grade-driven mindset that students can develop through the high-stakes testing environment. Through its emphasis on constant evaluation, reflection and revision of students' written works, the writing portfolio allows students to approach writing as a skill to develop rather than a means to a desirable grade. Smith alludes to this statement when he claims that "the more [students] look at the qualities of effective writing and the more they read and reread their own writing, the more internalized the criteria are likely to become" (280). Here, Smith reveals that as students continuously evaluate their written works, they begin to understand the art of writing, perceiving it as a unique vehicle comprised of various criteria instead of meaningless words on paper that a teacher smothers with red ink. As they reflect on their writing progress, students thus are constantly working to progress and develop their writing abilities rather than achieve a specific grade. The writing portfolio further disbands a grade-driven mindset as teachers allow their students to return to and revise their writing assignments well after the day they are due. Smith supports this claim, stating that "[i]f they wish, students can revisit in the last six weeks a piece that was completed in the first six weeks" (280). As a result, writing ceases to exist to students as a tightly-sealed, graded product completed directly after the day an assignment is due; instead, writing transforms into a constant process always in need of refining and retuning. The writing portfolio therefore fosters a healthy student mindset of

writing as a form of personal development instead of standardized achievement.

Conclusion

Although writing significantly develops students' educational growth, students today severely lack effective writing abilities—an effect that stems from high-stakes testing and necessitates a change in current teachers' methodology. Through its implementation of all the levels in Bloom's taxonomy and its stimulation of all learning styles, writing targets and cultivates students' cognitive skills. Despite this significance, the majority of high school students cannot write above a basic writing level. High-stakes testing contributes significantly to this student difficulty with writing as teachers tasked by standards avoid teaching the process of composition and instead fill their instruction with methods that cater to test knowledge. In order for students to profit from the many educational benefits writing offers, teachers must incorporate a process-oriented approach to their writing instruction that simultaneously meet high-stakes testing standards—a task that they can accomplish through using the writing workshop method. Through hard work and determination to combat the effects of high-stakes testing on their instruction, teachers using the writing workshop method can eventually amend writing in the high school classroom—a task that students will hopefully join in accomplishing as they learn to compose written works not catered to standards, but rather charged with their own words, their own thoughts, and their own individual vision.

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