

A Veteran Teacher's Lessons: Teaching Informational Writing

As social science teachers, we like to assign writing, but too often we avoid teaching writing. When we don't instruct our students in the writing process, we are frequently frustrated by what they turn in to us.

Good writing instruction begins with an honest evaluation of our students' skills. Our lessons should develop from that assessment

To learn about my sophomore's writing abilities, I assigned a [formative writing assessment on the rise of democracy](#), the unit we had just completed. This informational essay was evaluated, but not graded. Students wrote without any instruction from me. I evaluated their efforts on an [informational writing rubric](#). The results were not pretty. The average writing score was 65%. Only 24% of my students were proficient, three quarters were not. After circling their rubrics, I wrote each student a note with specific suggestions to improve their writing.

The next day in Room 122 we began our three-week journey to Britain, immersing ourselves in the Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The summative assessment would be an informational essay. [The prompt](#) read: "Write an essay in which you explain the positive and negative impact of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Support your discussion with evidence from the five sources provided."

Helping students with good writing means giving them something to write about. We started with inventions. Students worked in teams of four, sorting 20 images into 10 pairs. As they figured out the pattern, students placed an illustration of an old-fashioned spinning wheel next to a photo of a textile factory; an image of a team of horses pulling a wagon lay next to a photo of a locomotive. Each pair showed how preindustrial methods gave way to modern inventions, transforming our way of life.

Along with traditional textbook readings and classroom notes, we analyzed photos of children working in English coal mines, reading their primary source testimony to the English Parliament. Students annotated an article on the medical breakthroughs that stopped the spread of cholera in 19th century English cities. And we set up our own factory, making paper airplanes, to simulate the new division of labor in the factory system.

During the unit, I gave students lots of writing practice, with feedback on their writing. They used their Chromebooks to do [Internet research on child labor](#). Using these details students wrote a paragraph. I showed them [how to integrate visual information](#) into their writing with a political cartoon by a 19th century British reformer. We did an activity on [how to write with text evidence](#). I reminded students [how to do in-text citations](#) of their sources by taking the key information from the left of the source, reinforcing the skill with the Beyoncé lyric, "To the left, to the left."

The week of the essay I focused on lessons about informational writing, by handing out the [informational writing rubric](#). Students prepared for the essay by brainstorming and [listing the positive and negative impacts of the Industrial Revolution in Britain](#).

The day of the essay I proudly looked across the room at my forty-one rambunctious sophomores. They were huddled over their prompt and sources, writing for an entire period. Their efforts paid off. When I scored each essay on the rubric, the average class score climbed from 65% to 78%. My students had not only learned a lot about the Industrial Revolution, but another important lesson as well: while writing is hard, they could do it. Their practice and effort paid off.

When you teach informational writing, do a formative or pre-assessment of your students' writing abilities. Use a rubric to assess student efforts. Give students something to write about by teaching a rich series of lessons on the prompt topic. Don't forget to teach the writing steps and help students understand the rubric so they can be successful in the assignment, becoming better writers along the way.