Mining for Gold: Reimagining the Role of Curricular Texts in Writing Instruction

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MINING FOR GOLD: REIMAGINING THE ROLE OF CURRICULAR TEXTS IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

by

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Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with UNIVERSITY HONORS with a major in English Teaching in the Department of English

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Abstract
Secondary schools in northern Utah frequently combine literature and composition studies into a single English Language Arts course, limiting the time English teachers have to teach the skills and content important to both. Literature and reading often overshadow writing instruction in this situation, leading to concentrated writing instruction dependent on pre-made writing curriculum and texts. The way curricular materials used during writing instruction in ELA courses present the purpose of writing, the process of writing, and the identity of writers can impact student learning and academic identity in the short- and long-term. A rhetorical analysis, looking specifically at the writing process, the purpose of writing, the identity of writers, types of writing tasks, discourse community created, and presentation of information, of They Say I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing, Collections 11, and Ideas & Aims for College Writing was undertaken to determine what curricular materials are teaching students about why they write, how they write, and who a writer is. The analysis revealed writing is framed in these texts as an academic activity done to showcase knowledge, completed in a sequential, step-by-step process, by novice student writers who study, but don’t become, “real writers.” The implication of these findings is that teachers must mine curricular texts for usable material to supplement writing instruction that is tailored to their students’ needs, rather than rely on the texts to present the content. Because these texts can impact student views of writing, teachers must vet their materials and ask important questions of what they use in their classroom.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the classroom teachers who shared the titles, hard copies, and online logins for curricular materials used in their classrooms and districts, and I’m thankful for their willingness to aid my research.

I’m grateful for all I’ve learned under the tutelage of Utah State University’s Department of English in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

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Introduction

During my first observation of an English classroom as a pre-service teacher, I discovered something surprising about how teachers teaching English Language Arts (ELA) classes handle covering both reading and writing in the course of the school year. The ninth-grade class I observed was discussing the short story they had just finished reading. The classroom was buzzing, and the teacher wandered over to me after checking in on each of the groups.

“What do you think so far?” she queried with a smile.

“I’m impressed with how engaged your students are! I haven’t seen any phones out or heard any lunch plans being made while they’ve been working in groups. Are they always this focused on learning?”

She looked up at the ceiling and laughed for a while before answering. “To be honest, you’ve caught us on a good day. It’s a constant battle to keep students’ minds in the classroom. I’ve learned over the years that a really good story tends to make that battle a little easier, though.”

“I guess diving into a good piece of literature is hard to resist,” I agreed. “How do you keep students engaged during writing instruction?”

“Oh, well…” her voice faltered. “With all the standards we have to meet tied to reading and literature, most of our class time is dedicated to reading and responding to texts. I try hard to have students write every day during the bell ringer or in their journals, but it’s hard to find the time to focus on writing—especially with the amount of time writing workshops eat up.”
I wasn’t surprised to hear this, considering my own high school English experience had centered on literature, and my only real writing instruction occurred in my Advanced Placement (AP) classes. “Do other teachers have the same tight schedule as you?” I asked.

“All 9th grade English teachers at this school follow the same curriculum map,” she explained. “Most teachers I’ve worked with at my school and at other schools include both reading and writing in class, but when crunch time hits, it’s more important for our essential standards and our test scores that students are good readers than that they’re amazing writers.”

This conversation led me to understand that in secondary schools in northern Utah with combined ELA courses, reading and literacy oftentimes overshadow writing instruction since the ability to read at grade-level is considered more important than being able to write well. Reading gains are also much easier to assess and quantify. Standardized tests wield hefty influence over what teachers teach, so the lack of writing assessment often results in a limited or lack of writing instruction in class. When extended writing time is slim in most classes, the curricular materials used during that short time are of utmost importance. The way these texts represent writing to secondary students can shape their perspectives on the purposes and process of writing.

Classroom texts used for literature study are vetted and justified. Most teachers and administrators have rationales for why students read the novels or texts that are assigned; in contrast, texts used for writing instruction are not viewed in the same way. Because these texts can shape students’ perspectives on writing, we need to ask important questions of these texts. For example, are the texts used to teach writing in Utah’s secondary schools in line with current composition theories? How do the texts consider students as writers? What message do students receive about why writing occurs and how it should happen?
For this reason, I conducted an in-depth study of common texts used in Cache County School District, Logan City School District, Weber School District, and Davis School District. In what follows, I describe the literature that has shaped my rhetorical analysis and the findings from my analysis, ultimately arguing that we need to reimagine the role of curricular texts in writing instruction.

Literature Review

My enlightening conversation with my clinical teacher is a specific example of a broad theme that has presented itself in my English Education courses and my observations of secondary schools in northern Utah: the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing seem to naturally occur together but one tends to overpower the other—leaving students with an incomplete English Language Arts experience. As I’ve searched for answers about how to create an equal partnership in the marriage of literature and writing instruction, I’ve grounded myself in the “Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing” released by the National Council of teachers of English in February of 2016. One of these principles is “writing and reading are related” and teachers must understand “the psychological and social processes reading and writing have in common” (“Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing”). This idea assuaged my fear of combined ELA classrooms in general but left my question about how to balance the two to help students achieve their full potentials unanswered. Therefore, I designed my research to explore how curricular materials used for writing instruction in ELA courses can affect student learning and their identities as writers. The concepts I found in my preliminary research that shaped my project included the relationship between reading and writing, the lack of time teachers have with each student (and, in turn, how much time they have to teach writing),
the various places writing needs to be taking place, the tenets of good writing pedagogy, and the weighty repercussions of assigned writing tasks for student writing growth.

Most curricular units in ELA classes integrate both reading and writing as tools for understanding each other. This idea is supported by research conducted by Walmsley and Walp after they created an ELA curriculum that integrated composition and literature. The guiding principles of their integrated curriculum were that genuine reading and writing should occupy the largest portion of the ELA curriculum; students should learn skills through application, rather than focus on discrete skills; reading and writing should naturally be taught together; curriculum should be connected across grade levels; and remedial students should be reading and writing the same things as other students, with a focus on holistic improvement rather than skills improvement. Based upon this research, I decided to select texts that address both reading and writing skills (although their main focus is the teaching of writing) to better understand how students in ELA courses view the relationship between the two.

Over the course of my public-school career, I had over a dozen teachers whose class included at least one unit dedicated to writing instruction. However, each of these teachers taught writing differently and spent varying amounts of time providing personalized feedback on my efforts. I also wrote the often-assigned argumentative essay about school uniforms three separate times in junior high. One challenge inherent in writing instruction in the United States is lack of time and cohesion within classes and across disciplines and grades. Kim Marshall examined exactly how much time students spend with each individual teacher in a typical K-12 education in the United States and found that students often leave school with gaps in important knowledge due to the constraints of time and lack of organization among teachers and administrators in planning instruction and curriculum. The fact that students could potentially have 66 teachers
from kindergarten to high school graduation means that, without consensus on how and what to teach, many will “emerge from high school with Swiss cheese holes in their knowledge and skills” (Marshall 43). With limited time for writing instruction and no criteria common among teachers, classes, and grades, the content of that writing instruction in each teacher’s class becomes even more important. Classroom teachers’ distinct writing philosophies and materials result in certain knowledge and certain attitudes about writing in their students. By pinning down curricular materials common among several schools and districts in northern Utah, I aimed to find some type of general curriculum presented to students and determine how much and what type of writing instruction is available—and what improvements can be made to balance ELA classrooms.

If students learn writing from a buffet of teachers and teaching philosophies, and therefore receive “Swiss cheese” writing instruction, I wondered what effect the way these teachers’ definition of the context of writing would have on student learning and academic identity. In my review of the literature, a clear dichotomy occurred in how teachers (and composition theorists) view the purpose of and place for writing: one perspective argues for teaching the writing of the “real world” where writing takes place at home, at work, and online; the other perspective sees writing as a purely academic activity done at places like schools and research institutions. The first approach prepares students for life after graduation and focuses on writers beyond those typically included in the literary canon. The academic approach sees good writing as art and a status symbol. However, both approaches ignore the context of writing. When Chris M. Anson identified this dichotomy in composition theory in 1987, a new focus on discourse communities in the discipline was found. Anson argues that the most effective approach to teaching composition is “writing across the curriculum.” In this program, students
"are required to write in any and every one of their classes—both to become more proficient writers simply by writing more often, and to use writing as a way to understand and learn about the subject matter at hand" (10). Essentially, Anson argues for a decentralization of writing in composition courses in the hope of making students competent writers in all contexts, disciplines, and situations. I have seen the interplay between what students consider the purpose of writing and where they do that writing as a tutor at the on-campus writing center. Many students enrolled in English 1010 or English 2010 (introductory writing classes) are used to writing in English class for their English teacher, so any audience or context beyond that causes them to question everything they know about writing and shakes their confidence in their identities as writers. Anson’s research on why we write and where we write, combined with the panicked faces of my students at the writing center, shaped my commitment to studying how each text presents the purpose of writing—including the contexts it happens.

Over the course of my teacher preparation program, I have discovered an intimidating chasm between my experience with writing instruction as a secondary student and the sound pedagogy I have been told to use as a future teacher. In high school, I wrote exclusively for my teachers (in the form of final papers or essay exams) and I did almost all my writing at home on my own. However, in my writing instruction courses, I have been taught to model writing in front of students, to provide time for the writing process and writing workshops, and to allow students to write for authentic audiences. In this context, “authentic audiences” means any audience for writing that is naturally interested in the subject and that has some stake in the matter; for example, an authentic audience for a proposal about high school beginning later in the morning might be a school principal or district superintendent. In their research, Denise A. Morgan and Kristine E. Pytash have noted that teachers implementing these best practices “were
better able to engage students in meaningful writing experiences" (25). National research from the 1980s and 1990s echoes their findings: writing workshops, modeling in front of the class, sharing the process of real writers, thinking aloud in front of students, and assigning writing portfolios did more to help students develop as writers than anything else. In examining texts used in writing instruction in northern Utah's secondary schools, I decided to look for what type of pedagogy was included in the materials. I assumed I would find concepts Sharon Zumbrunn and Keegan Krause articulated after speaking with seven leaders in the field of writing instruction. These themes of sound writing pedagogy include:

- Effective writing instructors realize the impact of their own writing beliefs, experiences, and practices;” “effective writing instruction encourages student motivation and engagement;” effective writing instruction begins with clear and deliberate planning, but is also flexible;” effective writing instruction and practice happens every day;” and “effective writing instruction is a scaffolded collaboration between teachers and students.

(Zumbrunn and Krause 347)

These principles focus on a process approach and demand reflective, educated teachers and consistent practice. These concepts of good writing pedagogy should be present in the texts used during writing instruction, so I decided to look at how each of my selected texts presented the process of writing to students.

The context and process of writing was frequently mentioned in the literature I read, but the topic most discussed was the importance of writing tasks. The general consensus among the researchers was that students made real gains when the significance of assigned writing tasks was improved rather than a simple increase in time spent writing. For example, Judith Langer's study provides suggested reforms for writing instruction, and this information guided my
evaluation of writing tasks in the selected texts. Langer's study was conducted in five states and used Arthur Applebee's 1979 study as a point of comparison. She found that the amount of extended writing happening in schools is very limited, with most writing assignments being one page or less; overall, students today are

writing more in all subjects, but that writing is short, not providing students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth or breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues. (Applebee & Langer 16)

Sharlene A. Kiuhara, Leanne S. Hawken, and Steve Graham had similar results in their national survey of language arts, social studies, and science teachers across the nation. They found most teachers surveyed did not assign even one multi-paragraph writing task per month, and common assignments required very little analysis and/or interpretation. Short, trivial tasks may frame writing as work completed for teachers to earn grades and nothing else, so my analysis included tracking the length and depth of the texts' writing assignments. Learning how to write in contexts outside the classroom adds to students' writing acumen and boosts their identities as writers, so I decided to hone in on the writing tasks found in each text in order to better understand how writing is presented to students using those texts.

Short tasks are frequently tied to high-stakes testing as well; ultimately, these tasks take time away from the teaching of authentic writing for authentic audiences, but they also provide an impetus for dedicating time to writing instruction amid a packed curriculum. AP, IB, and state tests often dictate the style of writing tasks teachers assign in the ELA classroom, and Miles McCrimmon found in his examination of the effects of Virginia's SOL Test on writing instruction in the state's 11th grade classrooms that "standardized testing has directly
encroached” upon teachers’ abilities to create meaningful writing opportunities (252). Other secondary education teachers stated that it’s nearly impossible to show students that “writing is important for reasons beyond testing” when their instruction is focused on responding to practice prompts, writing one draft for assessment, and learning rigid rules of composition to do well on tests (Fanetti et al. 80). I wanted to see if my selected texts assign extended writing tasks like research projects despite the culture of standardized test prep rampant in 11th and 12th grade. Additionally, I paid special attention to the quantity and quality of technology integration in each text’s writing assignments.

Finally, I decided to examine how choice and genre in writing tasks may influence students’ academic identity in the selected texts. As a student, having the power to control the subject and form of my writing increases my motivation and effort. Unfortunately, as Langer explains, in contemporary classrooms writing “remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in the missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher’s presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing for the particular information the teacher is seeking” (Applebee & Langer 26). In conjunction with control over composition, I have seen in my practicums that students are more likely to write (and write well) once they find a genre they like. A student I worked with at a middle school had refused to turn in any drafts of an argumentative paper because he felt incapable of writing anything of worth; after showing him that arguments are often made in poetry or song, this student ended up writing the most compelling argument in his class. This experience, combined with Kiuhara, Hawken, and Graham’s research that showed language arts
teachers generally assigned more personal or imaginative writing tasks, led me to design my research to include a differentiation between academic and creative writing tasks (155).

Research from the fields of composition studies and education informed my decisions to rhetorically analyze texts used in ELA classrooms in northern Utah to teach writing. As I worked to understand, through texts, what writing instruction currently looks like and what reform is needed, I have focused my analysis on the interplay between reading and writing, the minimal time teachers have to individualize writing instruction for each student, the places and purposes of writing, good writing pedagogy, and the consequences of the type of writing tasks assigned. Doing so helps educators better understand how the purposes, processes, and writing tasks found within the texts can influence student learning and academic identity.

Methodology

I conducted an in-depth rhetorical analysis of the curricular materials used in writing instruction in four school districts in northern Utah. Texts used by teachers in Cache County School District, Logan City School District, Weber School District, and Davis School District were included in this research. The textual analysis was completed to discover how writing is represented to students in public high schools in northern Utah. My educational career and professional training have occurred in this area and in these school districts, meaning I have a personal tie to the area. I will be student teaching (and most likely working) in one of these school districts starting next semester, so I wanted to generate findings about curricular materials that would be relevant to myself and my colleagues as we grapple with teaching students how to write and why we write.

In preparation for this research, I conducted a literature review to build foundational knowledge of composition theory and current writing instruction practices. This research
provided context about the teaching of writing. Five themes common among the sources created a background for my findings. These are listed below:

1. Reading and writing are inextricably linked and should be paired during instruction (NCTE; Walmsley & Walp; Zumbrunn & Krause). The literature emphasized that students, when taught how to read like writers and how to write like readers, make significant gains in both their reading and writing skills when the two are taught in unison with one another. This important relationship was taken into consideration during my project—in fact, the reason I focused on texts is because having students read about writing is a research-backed instructional method (and time constraints often cause teachers to depend on texts as curriculum).

2. Writing should be framed as a tool for communication rather than an exclusively scholarly activity or "real world" device (Anson; Gallagher; Langer; Kiuhara et al.; Morgan & Pytash). Because the purpose of writing drives all other aspects of writing, this key concept shaped the focus of my analysis; each texts' view of the purpose of writing is the first thing I looked over while working with the texts.

3. Effective writing instruction occurs every day (NCTE; Langer; Kiuhara et al.; McCrimmon; Zumbrunn & Krause). While the texts I examined didn't necessarily explain what tasks are used each day in class, the amount of writing tasks included the amount of time dedicated to learning and practicing each new concept in the text was recorded during my analysis.

4. Effective instruction asks students to write for authentic audiences in genuine ways. Filling in the blanks or formulaic essay templates don't truly teach students how to write (NCTE; Langer; Fanetti; Farnan et al.; Morgan & Pytash; Zumbrunn & Krause). This
concept led me to record the instructions for each writing task in all three texts; who students were writing for, why they were writing, and what the consequences were for their writing was considered during my research to determine if the texts used in northern Utah ask students to write authentically and for purposes outside the classroom.

5. Extended writing is essential for improvement (NCTE; Langer; Kiuhara et al.; Henk et al.; Urbanski; Zumbrunn & Krause). This theme spoke to the heart of my project: teachers of ELA classes must cover an immense amount of content in a limited timeframe, meaning one of the choices they must make is about time spent on writing tasks. This theme drove home the point that the tasks included in the selected texts have an enormous amount of influence on student learning and academic identity.

Locating significant texts was accomplished by contacting both district curriculum leaders and classroom teachers in each of these districts. To begin, I contacted each of the ELA Curriculum Directors listed on the districts’ websites. Only one director replied; Davis School District endorses and utilizes Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston’s Collections series for grades 9-12. Next, I emailed classroom teachers I had worked with previously or who were recommended to me by Dr. Rivera-Mueller of Utah State University. All four districts under examination used HRW’s Collections series, and two other titles were repeated in educators’ responses: They Say / I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein and Ideas & Aims for College Writing by Linda Copeland and Tim Taylor. Because each of these texts were used in multiple districts, I selected them for my textual analysis. Taylor & Copeland’s work, as well as Graff’s and Birkenstein’s, cater to older high students. To keep the research consistent, I decided to analyze Collections 11 to ensure the intended audience for all curricular texts was similar in age and development.
Ultimately, three criteria determined which texts were selected from district leaders’ and teachers’ responses:

- Text is used in grades 11-12 ELA classrooms
- Text is used in two more of the four target school districts
- Students see and use the text; it is not written exclusively for instructors

Below is a table illustrating which texts are used in which school districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><em>They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing</em></th>
<th><em>Collections 11</em></th>
<th><em>Ideas &amp; Aims for College Writing</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cache County</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logan City</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>School District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weber School</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>District</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis School</td>
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<td>District</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The heuristic for my textual analysis consisted of six elements: process/approach to writing, purpose of writing, identity of writer, writing tasks, discourse community, and presentation. These elements were selected in combination with my experiences as a student and student teacher in northern Utah, as well as the information uncovered during my literature
review. Both sources led me to focus on the texts’ influence on student learning and academic identity and eventually organize my analytical findings to explain three essential concepts of good writing pedagogy (as discussed by Langer, Belanoff, Kiuhara et al., NCTE, and Zumbrunn & Krause): the purpose of writing, the process of writing, and the identity of student writers. Because the texts selected are used by secondary students, the way the information is presented through organization, rhetoric, and graphics in each text influences student perception, which was taken into consideration during analysis.

Each text was analyzed one at a time, and textual data was recorded and organized in a spreadsheet throughout the process. Direct quotes, paraphrases, summaries, and analysis were all included in this spreadsheet. Analysis was conducted on the assumption that teachers use the texts exactly as they were written. Once the reading was complete, summaries of each section were written in preparation to begin drafting the findings. In what follows, I share the key findings from my analysis.

Research Results

The writing tasks students are required to do in class are integral to communicating the process of writing, the purpose of writing, and the identity of writers. Short drills focused on grammar and vocabulary suggest that good writing is free of mechanical errors—but content is insignificant. A constant barrage of argument papers implies that writing is done to persuade readers to a certain viewpoint, ignoring the creative and reflective modes of writing. Repeated imitations of model texts indicate that students are amateurs that must mimic the moves of “real” writers. Looking at the writing students do in class is more important than measuring the amount of time they write or the grades they earn on that writing, for task exposes teachers’ (and texts’) writing philosophies.
In a comparison of the tasks included in the three texts under scrutiny, a common theme materialized: the most common type of writing task students are assigned are short writing drills designed to cement vocabulary, grammar, and writing “moves” into students’ minds prior to applying these concepts to extended writing tasks. In *They Say / I Say*, students complete templates to practice discrete writing skills. Rewriting paragraphs with colloquial language or adding transition words to sentences are the drills students should complete to improve their writing; no extended writing tasks are present in the book. *Collections 11* and *Ideas & Aims for College Writing* contain some extended writing tasks, but start students off with similar exercises. *Collections 11* contains short responses that are formatted in the hierarchy of Bloom’s Taxonomy and help readers unpack texts. Students are asked to explain the texts they just read, identify important language and devices, and interpret the meaning of these moves. Small “performance tasks” at the end of each text also ask students to respond and/or analyze the reading in a paragraph or less. *Ideas & Aims for College Writing* present students with exercises that facilitate immediate practice of concepts that were just explained. For example, after the text covers the difference between opinions and facts, students must mark what each of ten sentences are—opinions or facts (62). This focus on decontextualized writing exercises teaches students that writing has more to do with textual comprehension and rote memorization than process, expression, or audience.

The following results from this research showcase how texts and their writing tasks frame writing as something achieved by professionals and academics by reading academic texts and utilizing established “moves” that ensure high-quality writing. This presentation seems to contradict the concept of writing that is present in the field—begging readers to consider the role
curricular materials play in the ELA classroom if they impress upon students undesirable ideas about the purpose of writing, process of writing, and doers of writing.

Purpose

The purpose drives all other aspects of writing; students engage with the work of writing in different ways depending on the reasoning behind the task. The professional and philosophical discussion about the purpose of writing spans time and topic, but a clear dichotomy emerges in the literature: writing as an academic skill and writing as a tool for the “real world.” Anson argues that these competing ideologies about the purpose of writing either prepare students to be involved in academic discourse communities during their time as students or for life after graduation—but not both. This tension is present in each of the three examined texts. Two of the three texts eventually become categorized under one philosophy. They Say / I Say and Collections 11 present to students that the purpose of writing is to enter academic conversations, fill holes in disciplinary research, and grapple with difficult intellectual ideas. In contrast, Ideas & Aims states that writing is both an important “academic tool and a career-enhancing skill” (Taylor & Copeland xvi). While the premise of this text is that students in introductory literature courses need help navigating college and college writing, it delves into writing for employment and personal enjoyment as well—yet even this text does not posit that writing is used in the “real world” more than in academia. A closer look at how the two competing ideas about the purpose of writing appear (or disappear) in the texts reveals a fundamental weakness in writing instruction in many secondary ELA classrooms: students learn that, generally, writing is to be done in class when required for a grade.

All three texts justify their existence by helping students succeed in secondary schools and universities. The subtitle of They Say / I Say is “The Moves that Matter in Academic
Writing,” notifying readers that the text is focusing only one type of writing (among many).

However, the text begins by stating that writing helps students become “active participants in the important conversations of the academic world and the wider public sphere” (Graff & Birkenstein x). Therefore, before the pages of the book begin Arabic pagination, students internalize that the purpose of writing is to insert themselves into intellectual discussions. While there are small acknowledgements that writing can be used for work outside of school, there is no explicit articulation that writing is a meaning-making activity or a form of self-expression.

While Collections 11 never explicitly states the purpose of writing as bluntly, the text begins with an essay by Carol Jago entitled “Navigating Complex Texts in the 21st Century.” This piece tells students that “reading complex literature and nonfiction doesn’t need to be painful” and is immediately followed by several pages listing and explaining the ELA Core Standards for Utah (Beers et al. xxx). Right from the start, academic readings are highlighted and framed as inaccessible to students, suggesting that reading and writing are part of an exclusive academic world. Another consequence of this essay is students are taught that writing is to be done in response to literature. Reading is prioritized over writing in this opening piece, signifying that people only engage in writing during or after reading—a practice typically observed in school.

The lengthy overview of standards at the beginning of the book solidifies the idea that writing is a purely academic activity, completed for teachers’ ferocious red pens. Ideas & Aims states near the beginning of the book page on 56, “in college, you will find writing is both a way of learning and a means of understanding what you have learned” (Graff & Birkenstein 56). Here, writing is included in college not just as a form of assessment, but also as a thinking mechanism—especially when it comes to coping with difficult ideas or challenging texts.
Most teachers would agree that reading and writing are activities that naturally occur together in school. The authors of *They Say / I Say* and *Collections II* hold the same belief; both texts link writing to reading so closely that students would have a difficult time separating the two. Another main purpose of writing, according to these texts, is to grapple with assigned reading. *They Say / I Say* presents readers with the idea that good writing involves expressing ideas in response to what others have said, demanding students research, read, and understand before they ever begin to write (Graff & Birkenstein xix). Again, *Collections II* presents a similarly dependent relationship between reading and writing. Because the textbook is organized into six text sets with short writing tasks at the end of each one, the majority of space and attention is given to the literature. Students will understand this as a rule of thumb: writing is done to understand, analyze, and respond to texts. Both texts suggest that learning how to write will also improve reading skills; as students learn the "moves" of writing, they will be able to identify and understand these moves in the texts they read in class. *Ideas & Aims* includes texts, but uses these texts as models rather than as fodder for writing. This use of literature in writing instruction challenges the other two texts and insinuates that reading can improve writing, rather than the other way around. Ultimately, all three texts marry reading and writing in instruction.

The premise that writing is an exclusively academic activity begs the question of what role grades play in writing. If writing is an academic endeavor, then the measure of good writing is how well it meets requirements set by educators and academics. *Collections II* is the most explicit in referencing grades and standards. Each writing task is labeled with a specific standard, and the three modes of writing the standards allow (argumentative writing, informational writing, and analytical writing) are the genres focused on. This implies that writing is done to master standards and earn good grades. It is made clear by the presence of the name of a standard near
each writing task that writing (and reading) must adhere to standards created by those in power for reasons not to be questioned. A main purpose of writing is to check off requirements on the path to graduation according to Collections 11. While They Say / I Say doesn’t address grades specifically, the text suggests that the best writing builds upon research in the social sciences (Graff & Birkenstein 166). In this case, good writing is measured by how well it follows the templates provided in the book and the conventions of the social sciences—clearly marking writing as a clearly academic pursuit. Ideas & Aims explains that writing is a way to show what students know, indirectly connecting grades and writing. However, the last section of the book, on pages 414 to 507, the focus is singularly on grammar and mechanics because these are how writing is measured by instructors. The authors verbalize this idea by introducing the section with “as a writer, you have all kinds of good ideas, but you need to make sure your sentences are properly constructed and punctuated” (Taylor & Copeland 414). While this text never makes reference to grades or standards, it does teach students that content is not the only gauge of good writing because the academic world has certain rules in place that all must follow.

Although these texts present the main purpose of writing to be succeeding in and contributing to academia, there are some instances where writing for the “real world” is acknowledged as a valid reason for putting pen to paper. A common thread of tension throughout all three texts is the idea of writing as communication—in all arenas. The text that most often pushes against the overwhelming message that writing is scholarly Ideas & Aims. The focus in this text is on communication—both inside and outside school. The six “aims” of writing the text highlights are to describe, reflect, inform, analyze, evaluate, and persuade. Examples of these types of writing include both school assignments and models for “real world” writing, such as a description on a website of a piece of real estate on the market (Taylor & Copeland 182). In this
instance, students are shown that the purpose of writing isn’t necessarily wrapped up in school assignments because the most important part of writing is effective communication. *They Say / I Say* also addresses the idea of writing as effective communication in any setting at the end of the book, providing nuance to the overarching purpose of writing presented to students. The last few chapters of the book touch on oral discussions and online debates, and although these are typically associated with school, the turn does move towards applying writing skills beyond academic argumentative papers. *Collections 11* does little to encourage students to view the purpose of writing as anything besides school achievement; however, the selection of texts in the book indirectly present students with examples of how writing can work beyond school. For example, on page 295 Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments” reveals to students that writing can create change in society, not just in English class—although this hidden message about the purpose of writing could easily be overlooked by most students.

The ability to write well on the job is a frequently-cited justification for teaching writing in schools. Students are supposed to learn writing skills that can be transferred and applied to their future employment; statistics about employers in search of workers with adequate communication skills are released constantly. However, only one of the three texts addresses this outside-of-school purpose of writing: *Ideas & Aims*. Many of the writing tasks in the book relate directly to future careers: on page 216, students are to write a piece as if they are a folklorist reflecting on a food tradition, and page 347 asks students to write a job/internship application letter for a job they’d like to have in the future (Taylor & Copeland). These examples showcase how a dual purpose for writing (success in school and communication in the “real world”) is present in *Ideas & Aims*. In contrast, neither *They Say / I Say* or *Collections 11* show students
that writing occurs outside of class—except Taylor & Graff do suggest students eventually become social scientists and use their writing skills in that capacity.

Finally, writing as a form of thinking is present in two of the three texts; because producing and organizing ideas is a process necessary both inside and outside of school, this "real world" purpose for writing contests the scholarly approach to writing. Thinking out loud on paper can be applied at school, but also at work and home. Ideas & Aims and Collections 11 both assign tasks that encourage students to use writing not just as a performance, but also as a process. On page 198 of Ideas & Aims asks readers to plan a reflective piece about late work policies in schools (Graff & Birkenstein). Students brainstorm and outline their thoughts about late work using the IDEAS template utilized throughout the book. This acronym asks students to think through how to interest readers, include important details, explain those details, tailor the writing to a target audience, and use the appropriate style essential for the writing task, ultimately providing a guide to help students through their thought process. Although this task is still a school assignment, it spotlights brainstorming and outlining as a process within itself. Collections 11 demonstrates writing as thinking as well with the short answers students are required to complete after each text. These questions ask students to work through the difficult syntax and ideas in the text they just read by analyzing, inferring, and interpreting selected passages. An example of this can be found on page 70; students are asked to work through the themes and character development from selections of The Tempest by writing out answers to questions (Beers et al.). Unlike these two texts, They Say / I Say sees reading, rather than writing, as a way to produce and organize new thoughts. Reading up on current discourse in academic fields is how students determine their thoughts about ideas and move from summarizing others' arguments to creating their own.
The overarching message from these texts is that writing is done at school, for members of the school community (usually teachers). There is no greater purpose for writing beyond mastering standards, earning grades, and participating in class. This presented purpose shortchanges the far-reaching purposes for writing and contradicts good writing pedagogy. The curricular materials used for the teaching of writing in northern Utah secondary schools overwhelmingly tell students that writing is only for students and scholars—meaning these texts and their views on the purpose of writing should not guide writing instruction.

Process

Disciplinary discussions surrounding the process of writing are not as dichotomous as those centered on the purpose of writing. Most scholars and professionals agree that writing is a multi-step procedure and the first words written on a page should not be left as the final product. However, the length of the process, the steps included in the process, and the nature of the process are debated; a few of the various viewpoints on process are manifested in the three examined texts. Although all three texts acknowledge prewriting, drafting, revising, and polishing as essential elements of the writing process, each text treats these steps differently. Both They Say / I Say and Collections 11 present prewriting as the most important and time-consuming step in the process, while Ideas & Aims places equal emphasis on prewriting and polishing. All three texts touch to varying degrees on “revision,” and drafting is basically skipped over in each text. These nuances are significant in classrooms because the steps highlighted as most essential to good writing will influence what writing practices students adopt for their own writing processes—ultimately influencing their final drafts.

“Prewriting” is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of activities. The purpose of prewriting activities is to create and organize the thoughts that will be communicated through the
final draft. All three of the target texts see reading as an indispensable prewriting activity. *They Say / I Say* presents pre-writing reading as the first step for every writing task because what has already been written on the subject guides what writers can contribute to the scholarly conversation. Since the purpose of writing, according to Graff & Birkenstein, is to enter academic conversations, the first step in creating a piece of writing is learning about what others think about the chosen topic of discussion. For students using *They Say / I Say* there is no writing without reading, therefore writers must begin by reading texts on topics they'd like to engage with (XV). *Collections 11* exhibits a similar idea to "prewriting:" reading is still integral, but students are reading to find fodder for their writing rather than to find openings to join the conversation. Because writing tasks in *Collections 11* are responses to texts formatted to fit the three types of writing found in state standards, the reading that occurs before drafting provides content for students to explain, analyze, or argue. *Ideas & Aims* also views reading as inseparable from writing, but only because writers can use mentor texts to learn effective writing moves; the text explains to students that "one of the ways you can learn to make your own writing more coherent is to analyze the techniques used by other writers" (123).

Reading is the only prewriting activity mentioned in *They Say / I Say*, but *Collections 11* and *Ideas & Aims* teach pre-drafting planning strategies after reading occurs. *Collections 11* teaches these organization strategies through the vehicle of Collection Performance Tasks. Students are told exactly what evidence to gather and what needs to be included in their outline. For example, Collection 1’s Performance Task has three steps under the “Plan” segment: “Analyze the Text,” “Gather Evidence,” and “Get Organized” (103-104). In this instance, students are taught that the prewriting process leaves little room for creativity or flexibility and has prescribed steps to follow—negating the idea of a messy, recursive process. However, this
presentation does emphasize to students that planning must occur before drafting in order to create a coherent piece of writing.

*Ideas & Aims* also takes a prescriptive approach to planning writing, but asks students to use their writing task to contextualize their planning process. An outlining framework named “IDEAS” is used for each extended writing task in the text. The acronym stands for Ideas, Details, Explanations, Audience, and Style and asks students to brainstorm and categorize how they will address each of these writing elements in their piece. While using this acronym for every writing task limits creativity like the *Collections 11* “Plan” steps, it also demands critical thinking during the writing process. Students are asked to assess the subject, purpose, audience, and genre of their piece before beginning to write, ensuring writers truly plan for their paper by taking into consideration the unique characteristics of the task at hand (56). Something unique about this text’s prewriting process is that worrying is listed as an essential step; students are encouraged to simply contemplate what they think about their topic, explicitly categorizing writing as a cognitive exercise (70). All three texts value prewriting to varying degrees, with *They Say / I Say* providing the least amount of structure and *Ideas & Aims* requiring the most thought and analysis during this stage.

Drafting follows prewriting activities for all three texts. In *They Say / I Say* students are told that drafting means filling in templates and stock phrases; the act of producing a piece of writing means relying “on a stock of established moves that are crucial for communicating sophisticated ideas” (1). These moves guide students as they summarize what they’ve read, articulate their thoughts about the topic, and add quotes and meta-commentary to guide readers through their writing. Students draft their work by summarizing the larger conversation, or “start with what others are saying,” and then introducing their own ideas as a response (20). In
Collections 11, drafting is also dictated by a predetermined structure; however, the outline created during prewriting is what directs drafting, rather than the “summary plus response” format. The writing process put forth by Beers et al. includes such thorough prewriting that the drafting stage allows students some autonomy—students are told to simply “produce.” For example, the “Produce” section of Collection 1 Performance Task instructs students to “Draft Your Essay: Use your outline to draft an essay that persuades readers that your opinion or belief is correct” (104). Students rely on their brainstorm and outline to successfully draft a piece. The drafting stage of the writing process is heavily dependent on thorough prewriting activities in both They Say / I Say and Collections 11, but does so in different ways. Ideas & Aims also uses the outline as a springboard for drafting, but (because this outline is more of a brainstorm than a template for writing) students start drafting by determining their thesis (61). From there, writers create paragraphs with controlling ideas. A neat, sequential drafting process is presented by the text, contradicting the idea that writing is a “messy, recursive process,” one the authors explicitly state (70). Drafting is the stage in the writing process Ideas & Aims dedicates the least amount of time and attention to, encouraging students to simply get some type of thesis and a few paragraphs on paper so revision can begin. Drafting can be the most intimidating step of the writing process, for many students struggle to sit down and get their ideas on paper. The solution to this fear proposed by all three texts is in-depth prewriting activities, rather than a focus on the act of drafting itself. Students who feel comfortable with prewriting and revision but still need help with creating first drafts will not find much instruction in any of the three texts.

Once a first draft has been generated, students move on to the revision stage of the writing process. In contrast to the brief treatment of drafting, all three texts spend a substantial amount of time discussing the purpose of revision and strategies for effective revision. They Say /
*I Say* and *Collections 11* focus on what content needs to be revised, while *Ideas & Aims* looks at the procedures inherent in good revision. *They Say/I Say* considers improving evidence included in a paper as the most important role of revision. Students are directed to frame their quotes and provide explanations and/or analysis of them to make main ideas clear to readers. The recursive nature of the writing process is made most clear at this point in the text; the authors explain that “given the evolving and messy nature of writing, you may sometimes think that you’ve found the perfect quotation to support your argument, only to discover later on, as your text develops, that your focus has changed and that quotation no longer works” (44). For this text, revision involves combing over a piece and refining the evidence there. This text also extols the importance of creating coherence during revision; the authors direct students to review their drafts and revise to “help [readers] grasp what you really mean” (131).

*Collections 11* has revision as a step in the writing process; however, revision is a group effort that typically involves teacher guidance. After reading a text, planning, and producing a piece of writing, students are then asked to learn a new writing skill to implement during revision. These “learn as you go” moments make revision a classroom activity, not something that can be done independently. On page 96, a one-page mini-lesson on using colons in writing is followed by the prompt “look back at the evaluation you wrote... revise your writing to include at least two sentences that use colons” (Beers et al.) This example showcases how revision is part of instruction in this text, as well as how structured and guided revision is in *Collections 11*. For the Collection Performance Tasks, students are instructed to “have a partner or group of peers review” first drafts using a rubric tailored to each writing task (Beers et al. 105). This rubric has questions and tips for peers ask as they read and revision techniques students can utilize once they get their paper back. One row on Collection 1 Performance Task’s revision rubric asks
students to wonder, “Does the introduction clearly state my claim and capture the reader’s attention?” with the tip to “underline your claim” and “highlight your engaging opener” (Beers et al. 105). The suggested revision technique for these writing elements are “clarify your position or replace your claim with a stronger one,” and “add an attention-getting quotation or anecdote” (Beers et al. 105). This text endorses the concept that revision is a highly-structured, collective learning activity that students cannot execute on their own—but is an essential part of the writing process.

*Ideas & Aims* has a much less-structured revision process for students to follow. Taylor & Copeland see levels of revision: deep, middle, and surface (82). Surface-level revision falls under what the other texts view as polishing/editing work, while deep- and middle-level revision focuses on content and organization. Deep-level revision demands students add and cut substantial sections, rearrange the order of ideas, and/or find new ideas. Middle-level revision looks at things like transitions and word choice. Both these levels of revision allow students to independently identify what needs to be fixed in the piece and construct strategies for addressing those shortcomings; revision in *Ideas & Aims* creates much more autonomous writers than in either of the other two texts.

The final stage of the writing process is polishing, but *Ideas & Aims* calls it surface-level revision. For Taylor & Copeland, this means combing a piece for any grammatical and/or mechanical usage errors. The entire last section of the book is dedicated to grammar and mechanics rules for students to reference as they polish their writing, indicating that polishing work is perhaps the most important step in the writing process—no other step is given as much space in this book, and neither of the other two books focuses on grammar and usage like *Ideas & Aims* does. *Collections 11* also sees polishing work as the endpoint of revision; the last row of
the revision rubric for Collection 1 Performance Task asks students to consider “do I maintain a formal style and an objective, unbiased tone?” (Beers et al. 105). The focus here is on style, rather than grammatical correctness, but the idea is the same: students’ final drafts need to have diction, formatting, and style appropriate to the writing task. However, presenting, not polishing, is the final step in Collections 11’s writing process. Every Collection Performance Task ends with either exchanging papers with a neighbor, presenting to the entire class, or sharing with a small group. This suggests that writing is only created to be shared and evaluated (especially by a classmate or teacher), making the process a pathway to a good grade more so than for a good piece of writing. They Say / I Say endorses adding meta-commentary as the best way to polish a piece of writing. Graff & Birkenstein declare “no matter how straightforward you are, readers still need you to help them grasp what you really mean,” suggesting these small explanations and clarifications will guide clueless readers and help students reach required page counts (131). In this instance, polishing means adding more content rather than changing what is already written, suggesting that a first draft or a revised draft has few errors/weaknesses and simply needs clarifications. The entire concept of a messy writing process is challenged by this text’s lack of finish work; global revisions are presented as enough to create a finished piece.

The examined texts all claim that writing happens in a non-linear, recursive process that students must complete to produce good writing. However, a closer investigation of these texts reveals that the iterations of the writing process modeled in each are limited in scope and student agency. While prewriting, drafting, revising, and polishing are steps each text leads students through, these stages have strict rules and orders. All three texts see reading as the most important prewriting activity, followed closely by creating some type of outline. Next, drafting occurs in sequential order and relies heavily on that outline. From there, students should be done
thinking and move on to revising; two of the three texts even prescribe what students should be revising for. Finally, the polishing stage ranges from presenting a piece to adding a few more explanations to reach an assignment’s required word count. Students will learn to say their writing is a process, and they may even write more than one draft before determining a piece finished, but the processes outlined in these classroom texts do not convince readers that writing is truly a recursive, nonlinear, disorganized process—highlighting the shortcoming of text-led writing curriculum.

Identity

Adolescent students in secondary classrooms are working through questions of identity; this search for identity bleeds into how students view themselves as academics and writers. The texts teachers use during writing instruction can impact how students view “real writers” and whether they themselves fit into that category. What makes somebody a writer? Are students writing in school settings writers? What are the differences between “student writers” and “writers”? The implicit and explicit answers to these questions buried within curricular texts set the stage for students as they develop their academic and writing identity. This is important because student learning can be negatively affected by students’ low efficacy concerning their academic identity.

The three texts under examination all treat students’ identity as writers in similar ways, with slight nuances in meanings and associations that has rippling effects for the way students engage in the work of composition. *They Say / I Say* views students as “writers in training,” meaning that they have the potential to write and speak academically but simply need to be groomed. *Collections 11* sees students as “student writers,” essentially limiting the scope and importance of their writing to the classroom for a grade. *Ideas & Aims* works to “coach new
writers” to the level of thinking, reading, and writing necessary for success in life after high
school. These terms encapsulate both the ways these texts present writing to students and how
these texts influence students’ academic identity.

The premise of They Say / I Say is that academics are the people who write, while
students are newcomers in the “daunting conversations of academia” (Graff & Birkenstein xvi).
This means that students, if they wish to write well and with a relevant purpose, must enter
academia and learn the topics, conventions, and moves used within that discourse community—
they are “writers in training.” The idea expressed in the title that students should summarize what
experts say about a topic and then insert their own ideas afterwards places published writers in
any disciplinary field on a pedestal as “real writers” and “academics,” distancing students from
those identities. Students must alter their interests, verbiage, and identity to create written work
that meets the standards presented in the text. One example of the text instilling the idea that
students must change to meet writing expectations is articulated in a defense of the sentence
templates included in the text: “But following the maxim that you need to learn the basic moves
of argument before you can deliberately depart from them, we advise you not to forgo explicit
transition terms until you’ve mastered their use” (Graff & Birkenstein 112). This quotation
reveals how students must unlearn their own patterns of speech and writing to learn the “correct”
way to write in academia. Simply put, “real writers” instinctually do what students need
templates to achieve. Students lived experience and background knowledge are not viewed as
valuable assets to writing.

However, this is not to say that students can never achieve the status of “real writers.”
Rather, once students have mastered the jargon, moves, and topics relevant in academic fields,
they will become “real writers.” Writing instruction, therefore, is to train students to read the
“right” way, think the “right” way, and write the “right” way. There is hope, however, for students; the text admits that “none of us is born knowing these moves,” resulting in the need for the book (Graff & Birkenstein 10). Highlighting the fact that students are outsiders in academia will only alienate them further from feeling comfortable and welcome in the writing classroom. Although the text promises to help students move from “writers in training” to “real writers,” that process is long and only ends with published success—something out of reach (and beyond the interest) of most students.

*Collections 11* cages students into the “student writer” category, limiting their learning and identity. From the explanation of state standards in the preface of the book to the rubric-accompanied writing tasks at the end of each collection, this text reiterates that readers are students first and foremost. Everything students write is for the school context—they complete activities in class with a classmate, they follow the rubric as they write, and then their teacher grades their writing to determine how well they mastered the specified standard. The skills students gain during this writing instruction makes them better students, not necessarily better writers. This text emphasizes readers’ identity as “student writers” by assuming their unfamiliarity with intellectual activities; it’s assumed students are extremely unfamiliar with texts and must be taught how to comprehend new material. On page 97, students are told “as you read, look for clues that reveal what New Orleans means to the speaker. Write down any questions you generate during reading” (Beers et al.). In this instance, the text tells students that they are not capable of reading a text without support, and they’re definitely not ready to write about it for any reason more important than because their teacher has required it of them. Beyond reading and understanding the text, these high school students are also considered to know nothing about writing craft. The mini-lesson littered throughout the text on topics such as free
verse, themes, genre, tone, and point of view drive home the point that students are empty vessels with little knowledge to bring to the writing task. Unlike *They Say / I Say*, the audience in this text has no hope to one day move from “student writers” to “real writers.” There are no assignments or mini-lessons that encourage students to write like the texts they’re using as fodder for writing tasks; students are never expected to or told they can write pieces that can change the world. Because the texts in each collection are designed to be responded to rather than modelled, students are never told they have the potential to become more than “student writers.” The implication for this presented identity is that once students complete the text and earned the grade, they won’t (and can’t) write again; without lots of help and predetermined material to respond to, writing is out of reach for “student writers.”

*Ideas & Aims* differs from the other two texts because it simultaneously affirms students’ academic and personal identities, rather than privileging one over the other or dismissing them both entirely. The target audience for this text is people enrolled in beginning-level college courses; specifically, readers are assumed to be adult people who are new to college or are unfamiliar with the conventions of that discourse community. This is substantially different from the audience for *Collections 11*, where students are in high school and are supposed to know very little about almost everything. In this text, students’ background knowledge and lived experiences are taken into consideration and are viewed as strengths to their reading, thinking, and writing. Readers of this text are assumed to have access to professors, a college library, and classmates, which still boxes them into the student role—yet students who are also adults with jobs, families, and interests outside academia (Taylor & Copeland 354). They are also not necessarily considered model students, as they need to be explicitly told how to be an active learner, show good character, and think critically (Taylor & Copeland 2). The biggest difference
between this text and the others in how academic identity is presented to readers is that Taylor & Copeland acknowledge that students are autonomous agents, capable of making wise writing decisions. The text teaches writing skills and then asks students to apply those skills and/or pick the best provided option for their writing style and writing task. In this way, students can personalize their writing to fit their preferences and needs. Explicitly explaining this idea, the text says, “as a writer, you have to decide which strategies and patterns work best to help your readers follow and understand your ideas” (108). At each stage of writing, students use their knowledge and preferences to craft writing that works for them, rather than writing that fits within a discipline or meets a standard: students choose if a quotation, question, fact, or other opening is most interesting to readers; students decide if a reflective statement, call to action, or summary of key points concludes a piece most poignantly; students must pick words that best introduce a source (Taylor & Copeland 132; 136; 384). This text does assume that students are unfamiliar with certain aspects of academia, however. Readers are considered novice researchers that must be taught what plagiarism is, how to properly cite courses, and when citations are necessary (Taylor & Copeland 350). Students are also unaware of the rules governing grammar and mechanics, once again marking them as strangers in academia.

The academic identity curricular texts project onto students can affect the amount and type of student learning that occurs in class. When students are demoted from the status of “real writers” to “student writers,” “writers-in-training,” or “new writers” in need of coaching, they may feel unable to perform and produce to their fullest potential. Students’ self-efficacy in the writing classroom plays a large enough role in learning that it cannot be overlooked. Teachers need to vet their materials to ensure the identity of their students is not degraded or belittled.
Dispelling the myth of the stereotypical "real writer" that loves to write and can sit down and produce page after page after page is ultimately harmful to success in writing instruction.

Implications

Curricular materials used in writing instruction may have far-reaching effects on student learning and academic identity. After completing a rhetorical analysis of three commonly used texts in secondary schools in northern Utah, this research found that, while all three texts had valuable sections and important content, none of them was capable of successfully leading writing instruction. Simply put, texts cannot teach writing. Curricular materials must be viewed as caches of content to be mined at teachers' discretion rather than as the principal deliverer of writing instruction. Extending this idea further, this research challenges the teacher-proofed programs popular in contemporary education and demands that professional and prepared educators tailor writing instruction to the needs of their students using research-backed practices—while using curricular materials as appendages. One glaring violation of good writing pedagogy found within all three texts was their refusal to recognize the writing students already do regularly as important and significant to their development as writers; when the type of writing students are familiar with is deemed unimportant and/or juvenile, writing becomes a difficult and intimidating academic practice beyond students' reach.

The three texts under scrutiny were well-written and well-intentioned; all of them presented concepts essential to writing instruction such as the importance of learning to write, the necessity of the writing process, and definitions for writing craft and techniques. Even though these texts contained important content for teaching writing, throughout my analysis I was repeatedly convinced that the nature of a text is inherently incapable of teaching writing. The principal flaw with relying on texts to teach writing is that students new to the world of reading
and writing for academia, which is posited as the reason for these activities to some degree in all three texts, are expected to extrapolate the skills and knowledge for success from the very thing they are learning to decode: academic texts. Students who have difficulty deciphering academic text and responding in kind cannot and should not be expected to learn these skills by reading and responding to academic texts; expecting students to do so is setting them up for failure.

Moreover, the authors of these texts had to make choices about what to include and how to order the content based off students and experiences that do not represent all students and experiences. Essentially, the authors had to guess what knowledge any and every student who could possibly encounter the book would need, as well as when they would need it (i.e., Taylor & Copeland decided students will need to learn the entire writing process and practice writing tasks before reviewing grammar and mechanics rules). These texts are impersonal and not tailored to the needs of the specific students using them. Additionally, extolling the virtues of the messy and recursive writing process in writing may be understood by students, but a published text itself flows sequentially and in an orderly manner; students cannot see and experience the truth of the writing process by reading a polished, published text.

Each of the three texts (in their own language) asks students to assess their purpose, audience, and task before the begin writing. However, students’ using these texts as they learn to write are only familiar with the type of writing contained within the text—which for two of the three, was textbook writing and school assignment examples exclusively. Students cannot learn the depths of writing by reading the writing of one author or set of authors. With the focus on academic writing presented in all three texts, students only practice informative, persuasive, or narrative writing, limiting their skill set and understanding of writing. Furthermore, students can have no practice writing for an authentic audience when their writing tasks come from a
textbook; especially when a rubric or templates are included in the writing task instructions, students will only ever practice writing to their instructor.

The cache of writing resources in each text is impressive, but this firehose of information uses a shotgun approach that is bound to miss some students. These texts have value as tools in writing instruction, but cannot do the heavy lifting on their own—teachers are needed to extract helpful elements of the book to implement in their writing instruction. The wealth of resources, writing tasks, and mini-lessons within curricular materials are an invaluable support to teachers of writing; however, they can only support (not replace) the professional acumen teachers must utilize for effective writing instruction. Teachers must be professional designers by knowing what, when, and how to pull material from texts to create writing instruction curriculum tailored to students’ needs. Only professional educators have the necessary knowledge of teaching and learning to successfully mine these texts for what will be most helpful to students in their development as writers. Only teachers can model the process of writing in real time, provide specific feedback to students, and determine when students are ready for a new concept. Rather than relying on the assumptions made by the authors of the text (such as the assumption that all students are unfamiliar with even the basic tenets of grammar), teachers must wield their expertise on both writing instruction and their student population to determine how much time should be dedicated to, in this example, grammar and usage rules.

This requires changes in teacher preparation programs, professional development programs, and government- and district-endorsed programs that take teacher autonomy out of teaching. Teacher preparation programs must equip teachers with fundamental knowledge on learning theories, instructional strategies, learning activities, and best practices for increasing student learning and students’ identities as writers. This preparation includes both theoretical and
practical learning time; it is not enough for student teachers to read about how students learn to write, but must have experience teaching writing in real classrooms with real students to ascertain what works best. Teacher preparation programs should also provide as many opportunities to practice teaching writing as possible, including peer tutoring to classmates in the program or, for programs on college campuses, for students on the larger campus. Pre-service teachers need as much experience as possible before entering the classroom so they are professional teachers of writing when they enter the classroom. Professional development seminars need to keep teachers up to date on how student needs are evolving when it comes to writing instruction. For example, strategies and research on best practices on transferring students’ ability to write for social media to writing in the classroom will help teachers continue to tailor writing instruction to best fit students’ strengths and weaknesses. Professional development should frequently review what works in writing instruction, as well as what new research in the field says about pedagogical practices. Finally, decision-makers in education must trust teachers as professional designers and allow them to make choices and create curriculum for their writing classrooms; teacher-proof programs that claim miraculous results if followed with perfect fidelity depend completely on the text as a teacher—which my rhetorical analysis reveals is not enough. Teachers must be trained as professionals and then empowered to determine how they want to integrate published texts into their curriculum.

Finally, these texts expose a fatal flaw in writing instruction: ignoring the writing students are doing on their own and outside of the classroom. None of these texts acknowledged the type of writing students are familiar with and do on a regular basis, essentially rejecting the writing skills students bring to the classroom. Teachers of writing must recognize that students
come to class with skills and ideas to offer to writing instruction; tapping into what students already know and do will heighten the rigor and efficiency of writing instruction.

Furthermore, it is important that students learn various types of writing; the formal academic writing these texts focus on is important for student success in school and in some career fields. However, there is so much more to writing than the formal essays found in the texts. Students will be more engaged and will gain more from writing instruction that includes writing that teenagers and adults do more regularly than five-paragraph argumentative essays. For example, many students write captions for social media, online reviews for products, and personal pieces for journals/blogs on a regular basis, and using this writing as a springboard for discussing how writing occurs will bridge the gap between students’ lived experience and what they’re required to do in school. Moving from the familiar (like blogging) to the foreign (like academic writing) will increase student learning by scaffolding the novel moves, vocabulary, and purposes students must take into consideration when writing. Showing students that they already have writing skills is the perfect way to create positive academic identities in the writing classroom. Praising students’ clever turns of phrase and puns in their emails and/or social media posts convinces students that they already having writing skills they can build on—rather than teaching them that they are outsiders to the practice of writing. Increased student self-efficacy will be a boon for students during the ongoing struggle that is developing as a writer. If the texts used in classrooms shifted from exclusively academic writing to include all types of writing, students would more easily recognize that good writing is transferable, allowing them to learn the skills applicable to all writing tasks. Finally, privileging formal academic writing over all other types of writing deters students from learning how to write creatively, stunting their overall growth as writers. Because these texts present an incomplete definition for what writing is,
students will not consider writing that does not fit that mode as “real writing,” and may never have the opportunity to try it out. If we want students to learn to write well and identify as writers, the materials used in classrooms must incorporate the type of writing students use and enjoy on a daily basis.

While this research resulted in various findings significant to my own teaching and pedagogy, I am most committed to implementing a thorough vetting process for texts used in my writing curriculum as a protection for my students and their identities as writers. The tone the texts take toward students and the assumptions made about their background knowledge and skills (or lack thereof) directly contradicts the strategies I want to utilize in my classroom to boost student self-efficacy and confidence with writing. Because I believe teachers have a responsibility to help students develop as writers and people, I prioritize vetting texts to ensure students’ abilities and academic identities are treated with respect. The texts under examination were based on the premise that students are strangers in academia, have little or no knowledge of the foundations of grammar, and are only motivated to write by grades. Because I don’t want my students to internalize these types of messages, I plan to utilize the implications of this research as a tool for vetting texts that enter my classroom.

The findings highlighted in this analysis that are especially significant for writing teachers and curriculum in general bring us back to the first two big ideas about good writing pedagogy manifested in the literature review. These are “1. Reading and writing are inextricably linked and should be paired during instruction” and “2. Writing should be framed as a tool for communication rather than an exclusively scholarly activity or “real world” device.” These two concepts work together with this research to ask teachers and curriculum specialists to reexamine the role texts play in writing instruction. First, while reading and writing work together during
instruction, reading a text should not be the bulk of writing instruction—texts have a place in writing curriculum, but only on the sideline. Second, if teachers are working to frame writing as “a tool for communication,” they need to ask students to write for authentic and varied audiences; writing to a teacher for a grade does not impress upon students that writing is more about communication than schoolwork. Although there are valuable elements of writing materials, writing tasks created for contrived audiences should not be what teachers mine and implement in their own curriculum.

Curricular materials used to teach writing in secondary school classrooms cannot mold students into effective writers; the role these materials must play in the ELA classroom is as a support to teachers and their writing instruction. The way these texts are structured, as well as how they treat teachers and students, leads to an incomplete view of why we write, how we write, and who writes—demanding that teachers both vet the texts available in their classrooms and implement only those elements that truly add to their writing curriculum. Yet the conversation I had with a 9th-grade ELA teacher that kick-started this research contains caveats for my findings: ELA teachers still have strict time constraints, high-pressure standardized tests, and limited budgets. These obstacles teachers face will not be solved by reimagining the role of curricular materials in writing instruction; however, ineffective and teacher-proofed writing instruction can be addressed by my findings. The constraints on writing teachers can be made less burdensome by viewing and utilizing texts and materials as supplements and resources to add to lessons; realizing that texts should not overpower teachers but rather provide ready-made tools for differentiation, mini-lessons, and reviews to be used at teachers’ discretion may alleviate some of the stress and dissatisfaction many feel toward their writing curriculum.

Writing instruction texts should function as supports to writing instruction, rather than make up
the bulk of the teaching, if we want students to feel confident in their academic identities and if we want to leverage students' experiences to increase their learning.
Reflection

My Honors Capstone Project bridges my work as an undergraduate student at Utah State University with my future career as an English teacher; my work with curricular texts and the process of completing that work showcases what I’ve learned and how I’ve grown as an English student, a pre-service teacher, and as a researcher during my time as a student. My weekly meetings with my mentor, Dr. Jessica Rivera-Mueller, over the course of this project has resulted in an important professional relationship; as a former secondary English teacher and a current English professor, she is an invaluable person to have in my corner as I enter the teaching profession. Not only can she provide advice and guidance when I encounter difficulties in the classroom, words of recommendation from her are weighty as I apply for jobs and graduate programs. The experience I gained with formal, academic writing as I completed this thesis has prepared me for the writing required for writing projects I will complete as an English teacher—including writing grants and adding to professional development literature. The professional networking that took place as I reached out to district leaders and classroom teachers to select texts for analysis has introduced me to people important for my career—both potential employers and future colleagues. Because I analyzed texts used in northern Utah high schools, my findings have direct implications for my local community; this focus on community in my final project is a natural conclusion to the community engagement that has enriched my time at USU. This project combined the two disciplines I have studied over the past four years; my English training made my rhetorical analysis possible, while my teacher training provided the necessary background and interest to apply my findings to secondary writing instruction—making this the ultimate culmination of my career as an undergrad.
My research project stretched me in uncomfortable (and, at times, frustrating) ways. I had originally planned to research how decisions about writing instruction are made at different levels of the hierarchy found within schools and districts; I wanted to interview members of the Utah State Board of Education, district leaders, and administrators at my selected schools, as well as survey English teachers in those schools to determine how and why decisions about writing instruction and English Language Arts course structures are made. I completed a literature review, designed interview and survey questions, and had nearly completed the IRB process before learning that my chosen school districts denied my request to include their employees in my research. This was difficult to understand, as my research would benefit those involved, but I had no choice but to redesign my project. With the help of my mentor, I quickly determined what was most important to my research and created a new project that centered on the curricular materials used in writing instruction. Even though the format of my project changed, I was still able to keep my focus consistent: writing instruction in secondary schools in northern Utah.

Although having to completely revamp my project was the biggest obstacle to my research, other challenges made completing my research difficult. Foremost of these challenges was the time constraint; I redesigned my project with only 4 months left to complete it. This time crunch required me to dedicate a large chunk of time (that I hadn’t originally planned for) to my project each week. Beyond the time constraints, accumulating a list of materials to analyze proved challenging because I was dependent on the charity of classroom teachers and district leaders to answer my emails and queries about what texts are used in their classrooms and districts; luckily, a high proportion of those I reached out to were responsive and helpful, making it possible for me to find relevant texts to analyze. The rhetorical analysis went smoothly, but the
writing process for this thesis proved to be one of the hardest writing tasks I’ve ever confronted. Because I have never conducted research in composition studies before, I had no clue how the discipline formatted and framed literature reviews, methodology sections, and research findings. With the help of Dr. Rivera-Mueller, I outlined, drafted, and revised each section of my thesis multiple times to ensure it followed the conventions of the field. My writing has improved as a result of this project.

Fortunately, the triumphs far outnumbered the complications of this project. There ended up being a large amount of overlap in the texts used within my target school districts; in fact, there was one text that every single district used. This ensured my rhetorical analysis of three texts resulted in relevant implications for all 4 school districts. I was lucky enough to present my research to Dr. Rivera-Mueller’s graduate composition studies class, and every student in the class was (at the time of my presentation) either a graduate instructor for ENGL 1010/ENGL 2010 or a high school English teacher—meaning they were personally invested and interested in my project. Their questions and insights about my research guided my revisions as I completed my thesis. Both the audience’s participation and my own preparation made the presentation a success.

My experience completing an Honors Capstone Project taught me more than what’s found in my thesis, and I have a few words of advice for future students. I cannot express how essential it is to find a passionate, enthusiastic, knowledgeable mentor to guide the process. Dr. Rivera-Mueller was tireless in helping me design and complete this project; her flexibility and know-how were essential to my success—especially when I had to rethink my project halfway through the process. The importance of starting the process early is something else I learned. It is never too early to start finding a mentor, conducting a literature review, and gaining approval
from necessary entities. Finally, I urge future students to choose a research topic that directly connects to what they plan to do after graduation. While completing this project makes it possible to graduate from Honors, a great Capstone Project will have purpose after the Medallion Ceremony. I am excited to use my own research as a resource in my future career, and I feel better prepared to enter the classroom after thinking critically about writing instruction and curricular materials.

During this project, I have grown as a writer, networked with future employers and colleagues, selected texts to use in my own writing instruction, and forged a relationship with an amazing mentor. My Capstone Project displays what I have learned about rhetorical analysis, academic writing, and writing pedagogy during my undergraduate career and is propelling me towards what's next: entering the classroom.
Works Cited


Professional Author Bio

Carrigan Price is a senior studying English Teaching with a minor in History Teaching. Beyond being an active member of Utah State University’s Honors Program, she is a poetry editor for *Sink Hollow*, the on-campus literary magazine. She has ties with her local and global community as a teacher of English as a second language within Cache Valley and in Mexico. Her experience as a writing tutor—including at the USU Writing Center, the Honors Program, and as a Writing Fellow— informs much of her work. Her other research work, published in USU Digital Commons, is comprised of the Tutor’s Column “Professionalism in the Writing Center: Combining Compassion and Composition;” “The Women’s Movement in Utah” digital exhibit; and student folklore fieldwork. Carrigan is excited to teach English in secondary schools and help students develop academically and personally. Eventually, she plans to earn a master’s degree in curriculum and assessment design and work at the state level to create inclusive, rigorous curriculum.