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Process-writing Instruction in One Teacher's Classes and Its Impact  
on the Writing of her Seventh Grade Students

by  
Christine M. DiCicco

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
July 23, 2004

Approved by  
Dr. Donna W. Jørgensen

Date Approved July 28, 2004

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## ABSTRACT

Christine M. DiCicco

Process-writing Instruction in One Teacher's Classes and Its Impact  
on the Writing of her Seventh Grade Students

2003/2004

Dr. Donna W. Jorgensen

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of the project was to determine whether process-writing instruction in the classroom was improving one group of seventh grade language arts students' writing. Students in three classes with the same language arts teacher were involved in the study. Over the course of the first three marking periods, writing samples were collected from each of the students involved. Each student's writing was assessed according to criteria on both the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards and the New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric. The teacher was also both observed and interviewed in order to determine what process-writing techniques she implemented into her writing instruction. The goal was to determine how effective process writing instruction was on improving the students' writing over the course of the first three marking periods.

Data from each writing sample was compiled and recorded on graphs and in descriptive qualitative terms. This was helpful in establishing the conclusion that the process-writing instruction implemented by the teacher was beneficial to her students as evidenced by decreased errors and increased sophistication of the writing collected in the study.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The history of writing instruction has come a long way since English, as a study, was introduced into university classrooms in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Moore, 2004). From that introduction until the early 1970s, writing instruction focused primarily on the final product with little concern for how that product was accomplished. In today's language arts classrooms, however, things are different. In today's writing instruction, the focus is on the process of writing, or how it happens, rather than the end result of it alone.

Pioneers of writing education such as Nancie Atwell and Lucy Calkins proposed ways of effectively instructing our middle school students on how to write through a method called process writing. The theory known as process writing is said to take students through the entire process of writing: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Atwell sets the foundation for this theory, or school of thought, which places emphasis on the process rather than the product (1987). According to many theorists and writing teachers, this basic premise has been the mainstay of teaching writing for the last three decades, since the late 1970s. Another key element to teaching writing to middle school students is the writing workshop (Calkins, 1994). In this workshop, students learn to communicate their ideas, share their writing in all of its stages, and use their peers to help fine-tune their work.

Since the 1970s, these methods of instruction have been heralded as effective in improving the writing done by students. In fact, according to the standards set up by the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], students of writing are expected to

know how to use writing in a number of ways, one of them being “to adjust their language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes” (p. 1).

Since the advent of the implementation of process writing into the curriculum, improvements have been made in the course that students take in their journey from an initial idea to a final written product. Innovators like Atwell and Calkins have blazed the path in creating a systematic and effective method to enhance writing instruction. According to the research, this method not only improves writing instruction, but also provides improvement in teaching students how to write, involves them in the process, and helps them to understand the concepts that teachers are striving to help them learn. It is essential that teachers of writing use the most beneficial methods available to them to teach their students.

Writing today is essential to communication in all areas of life, and it is important that students have the most innovative methods of writing instruction available to them. Just as everything else changes with time, so does writing both in and out of the classroom. With this change come different requirements for both students and teachers, if they are to keep up with the times. For this reason alone, it is imperative for us to understand what writing instruction looks like today.

Now, with the pressure of the newly implemented No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act of 2001, instructors of writing have yet another reason to scrutinize how effective their teaching methods are in helping young writers. High-stakes standardized testing and new, high-pressure school accountability are causing politicians and school officials of the US to take a look at how we can best prepare our students to succeed on high-stakes



tests such as the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment [GEPA] in New Jersey. Writing instruction is scrutinized more today than it has been in the past, and it is up to educators to continue to assess the programs used in the classroom.

In order to ensure that process writing is still effective today, we need to determine just what writing looks like in a typical classroom in today's society. By collecting several samples of writing from one group of students, tracking the instruction methods that their instructor is using throughout the course of the school year, and holding the writing products to the standard that the state of New Jersey does (the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric), a clear picture of writing can be established. The purpose of this study is to carefully analyze the writing of one group of seventh grade students and determine what errors they are making in their writing. In the analysis, the focus will be on the errors identified in the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric. Holistic scoring differs from traditional classroom assessment of writing because in it, all parts of a writing assignment are weighed evenly, placing less emphasis on areas such as grammar and spelling than a classroom teacher normally would. Then, it is important to ascertain what efforts the students' instructor is taking to rectify the problems with students' writing, and whether over the course of the school year, her attempts prove fruitful in effectively enabling students to produce work that is organized and relatively free of errors, meeting the acceptable criteria of both classroom and GEPA type assessment.

Following this chapter is a review of literature on the history of writing instruction and its evolution. Also included is information about present writing

instruction in the classroom and how today's educational reform requirements affect writing instruction in schools.

### Statement of problem

Writing instruction is integral to improving students' education and ability to perform in the classroom. Another by-product of improved writing instruction should be higher test scores on high-stakes standardized tests. With the urgency of improving writing education in schools for a variety of reasons, it is important to look carefully at how well our students are now being prepared for the methods by which they are currently being assessed.

The writing instruction gained in school will improve a child's success not only in school on tests and in his classroom, but also outside of the classroom. Writing is an important means of communication both in business and in everyday social interaction. To function successfully in today's rapidly advancing and highly competitive society, it is imperative that children learn the essential writing skills in school and that they are able to utilize them successfully.

### Research questions:

1. Is there less evidence of weakness in areas assessed on GEPA found in the students' writing after three marking periods of writing instruction?
2. What does a typical 7<sup>th</sup> grade writing instruction program in one middle school look like?
3. How does classroom process-writing instruction prepare students for standardized tests, primarily in this case, the GEPA?

4. How does process-writing instruction affect students' writing over the course of a school year?

### *Operational Definitions*

Comma Splice: a sentence erroneously using a comma instead of a semi-colon or comma and conjunction between two independent clauses;

Complex Sentence: a main clause together with a subordinate or dependent clause;

Compound Sentence: two simple sentences joined by a conjunction;

Compound/Complex Sentence: consists of two (or more) independent clauses as well as one (or more) dependent clauses;

Errors in Content and Organization: failure to communicate the intended message to the intended audience, straying from the topic, lack opening and/or closing, unfocused, illogical progression of ideas, lack of transitions, and inappropriate details or information (NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric)

Errors in Mechanics: incorrect spelling, capitalization and/or punctuation (NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric)

Errors in Sentence Construction: lack of a variety of formations, incorrect construction; (NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric)

Errors in Usage: incorrect tense formation, incorrect subject-verb agreement, incorrect pronoun usage/agreement, incorrect word choice/meaning, improper modifiers; (NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric)

Formal Writing Product: any writing assignment that the students submit to the teacher for a grade;

Fragment: an incomplete sentence;

GEPA: (Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment) NJ state standardized test used at the end of the eighth grade school year to assess writing skills through revising and editing, persuasive writing, and open-ended writing assignments

Holistic: concerned with, or relating to the whole rather than breaking into parts; in this case, the piece of writing as a whole;

Instructors: anyone who assists in the instruction of the students' writing (teacher, student teacher, clinical intern teacher);

New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric: accepted guidelines for assessing writing on standardized tests such as the GEPA;

Rubric: an established guide for assessing a writing product with values assigned to each of the predetermined criteria for which the product is assessed;

Simple Sentence: a complete sentence containing one subject and one verb together with modifiers and complements.

## Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

### History of Writing Instruction

Schumacher (1979), in her thesis, identified a major problem in education: Americans are writing less and less. This is not to say that Americans should not be writing; writing is considered an essential method of communication today both in school and in society. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, effective writing skills are important throughout a person's life from early education to future employment. In business, as well as in school, people are required to communicate complex ideas and information in a clear, concise manner. Furthermore, according to information found on the National Writing Project's website, "inadequate writing skills, therefore, could inhibit achievement across the curriculum and in future careers, while proficient writing skills help students convey ideas, deliver instructions, analyze information, and motivate others" (The US Department of Education, *The Condition of Education*, p. 70).

Schumacher asserts that it is crucial for human beings to write. Writing is a form of communication; just as humans imitate what they hear when learning how to speak, they imitate writing at a young age in the form of scribbling. Temple, Nathan, and Burriss (1993) categorize early writing as something that people do by discovery. People seem to have innate strategies that help them to write in a very basic way. This of course does not account for grammar, or for correct spelling, but people do have the potential to learn these skills. Once the imitation and other discovery strategies are used, they must be

modified by an instructor to achieve the desired outcome (Temple et al.). This modification comes when we learn the rules of writing.

The history of what can be referred to as formal writing instruction, or writing instruction as it takes place in the classroom, is relatively brief. Not until 1874 did composition first become an approved course at a university, Harvard. English study, as a discipline, began in public schools in 1958 (Moore, 2004). Writing instruction, while relatively young, has undergone an impressive evolution since its inception.

The theory popular in writing instruction up to the early 1970s was known as product-oriented writing. Product-oriented writing stressed form and correctness of writing assignments. The teacher would give drills on skills and would make many of the major decisions associated with writing, such as topic, form, and length of writing (Cotton, 1988). Not only would the teacher mark up the paper with red pen, giving the student no chance for redemption with a second draft, but also she was often the only person who would read the paper; this limited interaction between students in writing instruction prevents students from helping one another with unique insights that only they would have. According to Cotton, this process would often leave the student feeling disheartened and with no semblance of ownership over her paper. The feeling of discouragement and lack of ownership perpetuated by this writing theory was one reason to explore a new way to teach writing.

Through “The Braddock Report,” written in 1963, it became clear how little understanding was involved in writing instruction using this method of product-oriented writing (as cited in Smith, 2000). In 1971, Emig, while writing her graduate thesis, made a major contribution toward the advancement of process-oriented writing by initiating

and encouraging the examination of “how writers actually wrote” (as cited in Moore, 2004, p. 203). Emig’s inspection of the process of writing is what some consider the beginning of a new era in writing instruction, process-writing instruction.

Quite a different feel comes from the newer, more student-centered approach, called process writing. Beginning in the late 1970s and through the early 1980s, innovative writing teachers developed a new theory of writing instruction that focuses more on the student than the teacher. Process writing consists of a variety of favorable techniques that help students find their voice in their writing.

The basic stages that all process writing uses are: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Although all of the stages are used, each one can be crafted in a number of ways to suit the individual or class to achieve the same goal. Bumgardner (1996) conveys the benefits of the essential stage of prewriting as the one that puts students in the mood to write. According to Bumgardner, setting the stage for writing with prewriting can be done with music, large discussions, and even taking a class trip. Teachers have flexibility to choose the type of prewriting activities that will best suit their students. This flexibility encourages students’ involvement in constructing their writing activities when the teacher sees fit.

The second stage of process writing, drafting, allows students to have a voice of their own by allowing them to find out how they write best. There is no single right way to draft, according to Kane (2003), who makes a point of stating that the drafting procedure can be sloppy and chaotic. This is key to allowing students to work in the way that best suits them. Some may go right to the word processor, and others may work with pen and paper; the choice is up to the author.



Revising, the third stage of the process, occurs after the initial draft is complete. This stage is where the author is able to change her writing in a way that she sees to be more effective. According to Cotton (1988), the revision stage is where the writer focuses on such elements as additions and deletions, changes in syntax, sentence structure, and organization. Editing, the fourth stage of this process, is another part of the approach that can be tailored to suit the class, the teacher, and the writers involved. It is the polishing of the draft, and it includes attention to mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, and handwriting. This stage can be done with peers, with a teacher, or alone. It is an essential stage, and one that is often overlooked if not emphasized by the teacher.

The final stage in the process, publication, has been a factor in enhancing student motivation and achievement (Cotton, 1988). Publication can vary in a number of ways, from the students presenting their work to the class or sending it to a publisher to be formally published.

One key ingredient in process-writing instruction is the writer's workshop. Atwell (1987) refers to this method as an essential component of the writing class. The writing workshop can take up the majority of the class period and is used as time for students to work on their writing in the way that suits them best. According to Smith (2000), students of all ages can benefit from writer's workshop. Especially with young children, a systematic and predictable routine is essential for a productive learning experience. It is also where something referred to by Atwell as "group share" (p. 84) occurs. Group share fulfills two purposes: to close the workshop, and to find out what others in the class are doing. It is important for the writers to feel that they are interacting with one another, and this is one of the benefits of the writer's workshop.

It is important to remember that the process approach is a recursive one, and that there is not much that is linear about writing when it is taught this way. In a sense, this course of writing is often one that professional or career writers use. Although process writing is an in-depth and informative means of writing instruction, Langer & Applebee (1987) and found some major problems with the process approach to writing. They state that although process writing looks more closely at the steps involved with writing, that does not necessarily mean that this teaches writers how to tap into their higher-level thinking (Langer & Applebee). Langer & Applebee's finding implies that perhaps something more is needed, or that maybe the process approach to writing is still not yet fully evolved.

### Essentials in Writing Instruction

Although no writing program is perfect, and it is important that people acknowledge that writing instruction has come a long way from its beginning. The trick to good writing is to use the techniques and strategies that work best when they are appropriate. According to Holbrook's (n.d.) article, some essential qualities to ensure an effective writing program are:

- (a) to provide the opportunity for students to write to many different audiences (including for subjects other than English); and (b) to have a non-threatening evaluation of student writing, teachers modeling writing, and opportunity for students in all grades to write frequently and with as needed grammar instruction. (p. 3)

According to Cotton (1988), there are some other elements that are necessary to focus on to ensure that students get the most out of their writing instruction. These include the following:

(a) sentence combining (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences), (b) peer evaluation/tutoring/editing, (c) high frequency with plenty of opportunity to practice the skills of writing, and (d) sequenced writing, modeling, and writing across the curriculum. (p. 5, 7)

Although most writing instructors tend to agree on the essential components of effective writing instruction, there are some details of instruction that are less agreed upon. The most controversially debated of these factors is that of teaching grammar. It is well documented that when teachers teach grammar in isolation, it is not as effective as when they teach it on an “as needed” basis (Manning & Manning, 1994).

In fact, there are numerous studies that need to be considered. Patterson (2001) cited a Roland Harris 1962 study that supports informal grammar instruction. In Harris’ study, he compared two groups of students in London: one that was taught traditional or formal grammar, and the other that was taught grammar in the context of language use, or embedded grammar. The second group studied grammatical concepts in the embedded or as needed method, and the first group studied grammar within the context of formal writing. Harris found that the results of this study showed that the first group, the group that was taught traditional grammar instruction, showed less understanding of proper grammar technique than the other group, based on sentence complexity and number of errors in their essays (Patterson).

Patterson (2001) even goes on to assert, “The idea that grammar is meaning-based rather than rule-based may harken back to the classical view of grammar, as practiced by the Greeks” (p. 50). The debate over grammar is still alive and well; however, it is essential that whatever method of grammar instruction, it be present in the writing instruction.

### The Connection to Standardized Tests

In the US, writing is an area of education in which many people have high expectations for our students. The expectations that this country has for its students were clearly spelled out by The National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Strickland, Bodino, Buchan, Jones, Nelson, & Rosen 2001). This publication pointed out that not only were we not meeting the goals previously set in education, but also that we needed to change what was happening in schools of this nation.

This negative attention toward the condition of writing brought on by *A Nation at Risk* led President George Bush and members of Congress to establish the National Council on Educational Standards and Testing [NCSTE]. NCSTE then proposed national content standards and a national system of assessment based on these new standards (Strickland et al., 2001).

According to his article in *US News and World Report* (1999), Wildavsky reports that only about one-fourth of the 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders write well enough to meet the proficient achievement level used in the 1998 National Assessment of Education Progress. Close to 6 out of 10 students just reached the “basic level and a large group of students, ranging from 16 % in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, and up to 22 % in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade could

not even meet the basic standard” (p.1). These statistics beg the question that asks, how effective is writing in schools today, just five years later? It is important that we determine what writing looks like today, in the classrooms in our schools, where we teach and where our children learn.

As an attempt at improving the way writing instruction affects student writing, and overall educational reform, the Federal Government has implemented President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Act of 2001. This new act is based on four principles: “stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work” (ED.gov, 2004).

In short, the NCLB requires that each state set curriculum standards for each subject, and these will drive the curriculum. According to the NJ Department of Education’s Core Curriculum Content Standards, specific expectations are set in each subject area for professionals to follow. Core Curriculum Content Standards, such as those designed for Language Arts Literacy, provide specific guidelines for teachers to plan lessons around and to set tangible objectives to direct our students to strive for. These guidelines inform teachers, parents, and students of those skills students at each grade level should have achieved by the end of each respective grade.

These standards have been implemented in schools to help regulate and improve curriculum and education. Such standards, along with those from each state and even subject specialty organizations, like the National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], are the guidelines that teachers are using in their efforts towards creating a solid foundation in education, in this case, writing. According to Chudowsky and Pellegrino

(2003), standards represent an important start toward identifying key elements that should be the focus of assessment; however, they typically fall short of their intentions. A problem with the standards and the assessment of them is that they are often worded so that the knowledge and skills that the students need to demonstrate to express their understanding of each standard is unclear, leaving too much room for error (Chudowsky & Pellegrino). This can be a major concern when so much focus has been placed on meeting the standards.

Another criticism of the NCLB act according to Horn (2003) is that though it claims to leave no child behind, it remains to be seen whether the use of standardized tests will lead to every child being able to learn. This is a key point since the results of these high-stakes standardized tests, like the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment [GEPA] and the High School Proficiency Assessment [HSPA] in New Jersey, are used to determine student diagnosis or placement, student promotion, high school graduation, school and district performance accountability, and program assessment. As if this were not enough pressure for the students, the test results also determine funding for the school (Goertz & Duffy 2003). However, a proponent of the testing, US Secretary of Education, Rod Paige has said, “Anyone who opposes annual testing of children is an apologist for a broken system of education that dismisses certain children and classes of children as unteachable” (ED.gov, 2004).

Assessment is essential to understanding how well we, as teachers, are doing. Assessment in classrooms today can vary a great deal. We know that standardized tests as assessments can be weighed very heavily by the schools and the administrators in charge. Another, and decidedly more important type of assessment in terms of student

knowledge, is that of authentic assessment. In writing classes, teachers have the benefit of using portfolios and other tangible media that are used in their authentic assessment.

Calkins (1994) states that assessment allows teachers to take a “minds-on approach” (p. 314) to all of their teaching. Similar to the term hands on, minds on is the term that describes the process of a teacher diving into her teaching, and mentally focusing on what she can do to maximize the students’ learning experience. This is not to minimize the other types of assessment more commonly used in more traditional classrooms, but Calkins likes portfolios as a means of authentic assessment in her classroom. Portfolios are not to be confused with a collection of prized work, but instead, according to Calkins, they should reflect turning points, the low moments, the ruts, the breakthroughs, and the mountain peaks. It is also common practice, according to Calkins, to have both the child and the teacher reflect on the writing in the portfolio. This collection of work can then be used as a major factor in determining the grade that the student will get.

With all of the pressure now on schools to bring all children to the advanced level on their standardized tests, it is important to look at how the classrooms are affected by the testing. In preparation for standardized tests, there are several steps that educators should teach writers to take (Kern, Andre, Schilke, Barton, James, & McGuire, 2003). First, we as educators must make lots of time for students to write: practice, practice, and more practice. Then, Kern et al., provide five principles that writing instructors should follow. These principles are essentially the basics that come from process writing:

all students have something to say, so let them say it in their writing; give the students input in assignments; vary assignments; have students read so that they

have background information on a variety of topics, thus making it easier to write under the pressure that comes with standardized testing; and model writing as a teacher. (p.2)

As the literature on the topic of writing instruction states, the shift from product to process is happening in schools today, but it is not complete. One of the basic actions that school officials can take to expedite and reinforce this shift, and get the most benefit from it is to fill their teaching positions with educators who know how to continue on with the best-practice, process-approach to writing instruction. If the new teachers coming into schools both favor and utilize the process approach to writing, they can reinforce it in their classrooms. According to writing instructor-turned-principal, Totten (2003), in order to complete the paradigm shift from product to process writing instruction, schools need to do several things. Among these changes are that all schools' goals and objectives must clearly include process writing in all disciplines, not just English or language arts, and that the school as a whole must be geared toward improving writing instruction, from the superintendent to the newly-hired teachers.

Writing instruction is changing, but the metamorphosis is a relatively slow one. There is much that can be done by educators to help students and to continue improving their education in writing. As the research clearly states, this improvement is necessary for so many reasons: high-stakes testing, passing grades, but most importantly to help students to be successful in their lives outside of and beyond the time they spend in the classroom. It is the responsibility of writing instructors and school officials to ensure students the best education that can be provided. It is important that educators and parents



reevaluate the instruction that students receive and make the necessary adjustments so that students gain the most from it.

The following chapter describes the methodology that was used to perform a study of the writing instruction of one group of seventh graders and how their writing was impacted over the course of the school year by their teacher's instruction.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to perform research for this study, this researcher began by determining how answers to the research questions could be found. The literature review gave some direction, and communication with teachers provided even more guidance. The best scenario was to use a class of seventh graders with whom the researcher was familiar and to track their writing over the first three marking periods as their teacher attempted to teach them how to be more effective and more knowledgeable process writers.

#### Participants

The participants in this study were a randomly selected group of 15 students from the three classes of one seventh grade language arts teacher at a middle school in South Jersey, and the language arts teacher herself. These students were selected from a population of convenience. They were students in the classes of this researcher's Clinical Teacher for her Clinic IA experience in Fall 2003. The total number of potential subjects was 68, the number of students in the Clinical Teacher's three classes. The students were selected using the following criteria: a. they were in the chosen teacher's language arts classes; b. they returned consent forms signed by both themselves and a parent or guardian in order to participate in the study; c. they had in their writing portfolio each of the three writing products this researcher chose to analyze for the study. Participants had to meet all three criteria. Once it was determined that a student would be a subject in the study, he/she was assigned a number ranging from 1 to 15. This numbering system was

used to keep the students' work anonymous and confidential while allowing the researcher to remain organized.

The language arts teacher has been teaching for 6 years and has taught seventh grade language arts, including writing, for all of those years. She follows writing curriculum prescribed by the school district that is in alignment with the Grade 7 New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Language Arts Literacy.

### Instruments

For the study, the researcher analyzed 45 writing products using the New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric (see Appendix A) (the same one used for scoring the GEPA), and the Seventh Grade New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. The rubric provided a clear outline of how the students should be able to write for the GEPA, and the standards were used to determine what the students should be able to do by the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. The researcher also created a tracking sheet for each sample (collection of writing products for one marking period) to record the frequency of errors. A set of interview questions (see Appendix B) and the responses to those questions, along with typed observations by the researcher and any other relevant communication between the researcher and the teacher were included.

### Procedures

Before beginning the study, the researcher had to gain approval from Rowan University's Institutional Review Board. Part of the application process for the IRB approval was for the researcher to gain permission from the Board of Education of the district where the middle school is located. The researcher wrote to the Principal of the school and informed him of the intent and details of the study (see Appendix C). Once

permission was granted by both the school and the IRB, consent forms (see Appendix C) were distributed to the students along with an established deadline for them to be returned.

The researcher returned to the school and collected the returned consent slips. The researcher reviewed with the language arts teacher the types of writing assignments that the students had done during the first three marking periods and determined which three writing samples would be suitable for the study. This determination was made based on the length of the product because of time constraints in analysis, and whether all of the students had the same topic to write on. In accordance with New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards, the researcher chose samples that evidenced narrative and descriptive writing done for a variety for purposes and audiences.

The researcher then examined the writing portfolios of the students for whom she had consent slips. The researcher took the writing samples from each folder and made copies of them for herself before returning the originals to the students' portfolios. Once the copies were made, the researcher assigned each student a number ranging from 1 to 15. This number was written in the upper right-hand corner of each of the three copies of the students' work. This numbering system was used to help the researcher stay organized, while maintaining the students' anonymity. Then, this researcher interviewed the teacher to gain an understanding of her style of writing instruction. The interview was conducted via e-mail during the spring of 2004. There were five questions asked of the instructor.

### Data analysis

Because this study was designed to be descriptive of one class but not generalizable, no statistical analysis beyond means will be done. The researcher made three copies of each of the forty-five writing products in order to simplify analysis of the data. Using one copy of each writing product, the researcher went through and counted each of the following mechanical errors individually: punctuation, grammar, spelling, and capitalization. Using another copy of each product, the researcher coded for sentence structure and types: fragments, run-ons, comma splices, and simple, compound, complex, and compound/complex sentences. On the third copy of each product, the researcher went through and made descriptive comments to result in qualitative data in areas that are addressed by the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards for Seventh Grade Language Arts, and the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric. The researcher's comments addressed areas that coincided with the standards and made an impression on the researcher. The totals for each sample were then documented on a Sample Totals tally sheet for the researcher to use for easy reference.

The numerical and descriptive information gained was then reviewed beside the responses the teacher gave in the interview questions to see if there is a match between the things taught during each marking period and the kinds of errors students made and continued to make in spite of instruction or did not continue to make, probably because of writing instruction by the teacher.

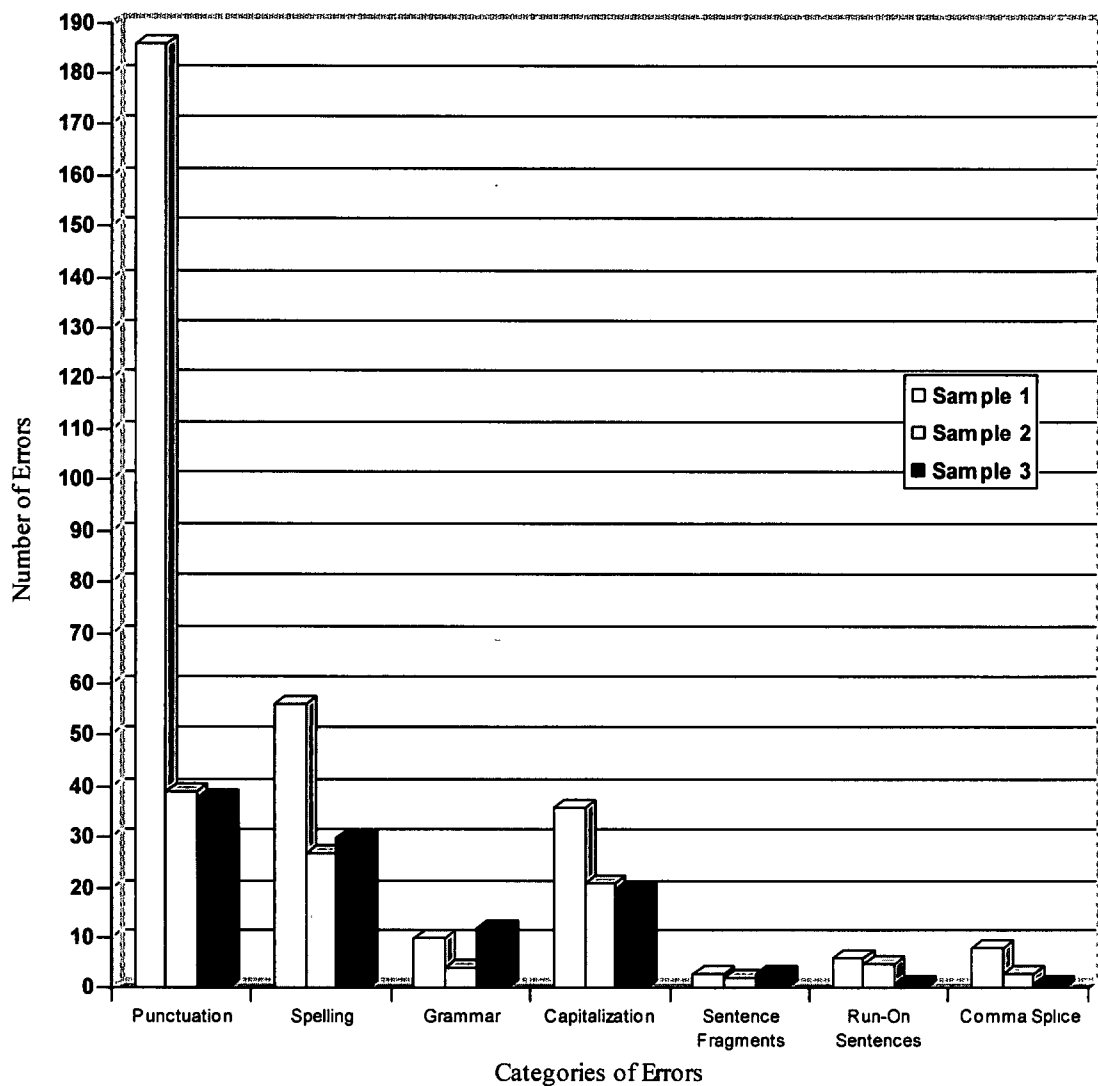
It is hoped that the analysis of this data will show fewer mistakes in student writing product as instruction progresses and that the kinds of errors that are either

eliminated or minimized will be directly connected to the writing instruction in the classroom.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Results

This study was undertaken to assess errors in student writing over the course of the first three marking periods of their seventh grade school year. The determination would then be made whether or not the writing program that the instructor used helped the students both in terms of their classroom writing, and in terms of preparing the students for the New Jersey GEPA standardized test. The New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric, used to assess the GEPA, uses the following criteria: Errors in content and organization, Errors in mechanics, Errors in sentence construction, and Errors in usage. The same assessment of errors will was done on each of the 15 participants' papers.

These 4 categories are in close alignment with chosen Core Curriculum Content Standards in seventh grade Language Arts Literacy set by the New Jersey Department of Education. They are chosen from the following subheadings: A. Writing as a Process; B. Writing as a Product; C. Mechanics, Spelling, and Handwriting; and D. Writing Forms, Audiences, and Purposes (exploring a variety of forms). Coding the errors in these categories revealed total numbers of errors in accordance with the NJ Holistic Scoring Rubric (see Appendix A). In order to have a clear picture of these numbers, a graph is included that shows the distribution of errors over the three marking periods (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Errors that have occurred with some frequency in all three marking periods.*

Is there less evidence of weakness in areas assessed on GEPA found in the students' writing after three marking periods of writing instruction?

In the categories that are assessed on the GEPA standardized test, sample 1 displayed the most errors overall. This was expected because this sample was completed during the first marking period when students had not yet had seventh grade level



writing instruction. In punctuation, there were 186 errors. This category included errors with punctuation such as commas, hyphens, semi-colons, quotation marks, and periods. In the spelling category, this sample yielded 56 errors. Misspellings were typically done on words by leaving one or more letters out, e.g., “skiny” (Student 3), transposing letters, e.g., “mucsle” (Student 3), or adding a letter, e.g., “knose” (Student 6), and “argueing” (Student 4). Errors in grammar totaled 10, and usually entailed errors with pronoun/antecedent agreement, and subject/verb agreement. Errors in the final mechanics category, capitalization, were commonly occurring in dialogue where it is needed, and even in use of proper nouns, e.g., “english” (Student 2), “air force one’s” (Student 2).

Errors in sentence construction: fragments, run-on sentences, and comma slices were also counted, and the results are as follows: sentence fragments-3, run-on sentences-6, and comma splices-8. Many of the errors in sentence structure occurred as a result of a lack of the proper punctuation, or a lack of punctuation altogether. One example of this is the following sentence: “Smokey makes screeching sounds, Smokey lives underwater, and he eats people and drinks blood” (Student 10).

Some of the major characteristics of the papers in sample 1 were the following: there were many errors with pronoun/antecedent agreement, punctuation errors including those with commas, periods, semi-colons, and question marks. The researcher found errors with subject/verb agreement, little success with parallelism, excessive use of slang terminology, and excessive use of pronouns (she, her). Some other qualities that are noteworthy from the first sample of papers were that although it was substantial enough that it should have been two paragraphs in length, only two of the students broke the essay into multiple paragraphs. Many of the papers lacked a logical flow of ideas or an

apparent opening or closing. The papers in this sample were full of rich description and students took some risks with use of dialogue and made attempts at varied sentence structure.

In sample 2, completed during the second marking period after some writing formal process-writing instruction, similar errors were evident. Errors in punctuation, which were the same types as counted in the first sample, came to 36, although one of the errors was the incorrect use of an ellipsis which was something that had not before been noted. Errors in spelling were counted at 27. Although the types of spelling errors were similar and included transposing of letters, letters left out, and added, the spelling errors were a bit more advanced than in the first sample, and now included misspelling of words such as “disconsolat” (Student 6) for disconsolate. Errors in grammar came to a total of 4, and included errors such as verb tense and subject/verb agreement. Errors in capitalization totaled 21, and again included mainly lack of capitalization in proper nouns such as, “Me-mom” (Student 8). One new type of error that had not appeared before was one student using capitalization for letters that appeared after all commas.

Sentence structure errors in sample 2 were categorized again by fragment, run-on, and comma splice. The number of fragments counted was 2, run-on’s totaled 5, and comma splices totaled 3. An example of the run-on’s prevalent in sample 2 is the following: “Its shimmering wood and smiling faces reminds me of good times with family in Orlando, Florida, last year; during Christmas; at the hotel with shimmering wooden bed, and smiling human faces of excitement” (Student 14). This run-on sentence is somewhat different than most encountered in sample 1 because there is an attempt

made by the writer to create a more sophisticated sentence that is characteristic of those that include the semicolon.

Some specific characteristics found in the writing of sample 2 were the following: again, as in the first sample, there were many papers that included inconsistent pronoun use e.g., interchanging “its” with “her” and “its” with “his.” There were some occurrences of awkward diction or word choice, “Bright pink, like the sunset in the sky in the evening, it makes me look luminous and stylish” (Student 1). Again as in the first sample, a common occurrence was writing that consisted of one, long paragraph that should have been broken up into smaller ones, but was not. This connects with the observation that there was no real obvious opening or closing in most of the papers. Instead, most of the papers simply started and stopped abruptly. About half of the papers were organized illogically, or with no real flow and usually lacked interconnectedness, and thus appeared to lack major focus regarding form, purpose, and audience.

Some other, more positive qualities of the papers included the following: about half of the papers were organized logically and coherently and conveyed an orderly thought process. The writing, more manuscript than cursive, was more legible for the most part with only one paper that was very difficult to read. The detail in this sample was very descriptive and rich, for the most part, and although there was some awkward diction, there were several papers in which the diction seemed to have become more sophisticated and stood out from the others e.g., “Jet black, like a fresh new leather coat worn by Shaft, it amazes me with its lightening [*sic*] and thrilling digital sound” (Student 2).

Sample 3, assessed for the same categories as the first two, yielded different results. In the mechanical assessment, there were 38 errors in punctuation. The spelling errors totaled 30. One new type of spelling error that showed up in this sample was the colloquial or slang term “smelt” (Student 7) in place of the word “smelled.” Since this paper was based on sensory perceptions, this term appeared several times and accounted for several of the spelling errors. This misspelling is a common language error. The error can be attributed to the fact that the students most likely pronounce the word this way, and hence they write what they hear. The grammar errors were 12, and again included errors with verb usage, e.g., the word “runned” in the following sentence, “the flour was being runned swiftly across...,” (Student 11) and “I rised the lemon to my mouth” (Student 15) and subject/verb agreement. The capitalization errors came to 20.

Errors in sentence structure were again reduced with sentence fragments totaling 3, run-on sentences 1, and comma splice also 1. Some of the most significant characteristics in the papers in sample were the following: the language was more formal and sophisticated except when in dialogue slang was used; most of the papers were typed and those that were handwritten were all legible and overall, there was effective organization. This organization included apparent openings and closing and effective and suitable detail within the body of the papers. An example of this detail and sophisticated diction is the following, “Right after I told him I would have a taste, I could feel a strong breeze come from the icing, like it wanted to have a conversation before its death” (Student 13), and “Sitting there patiently, I awaited my portion of Heaven, my vanilla icing” (Student 14). Not only are these sentences more sophisticated and complex than in

previous writing products, they are also creative and convey a sense of the author's personality or personal style.

In response to the first research question which questions student progress and improvement in writing over three marking periods, both the qualitative and quantitative data above show an improvement in several aspects of student writing.

What does a typical 7<sup>th</sup> grade writing instruction program in this middle school look like?

The information that addresses this question comes from both what the instructor told the researcher in interviews and what the researcher observed during her internship in this teacher's classroom. The teacher mentions that the initial stage of a writing idea comes from some type of inspiration; whether it is a movie, or a book, it is something that should make the students want to write.

One major component of this teacher's writing program as both discussed by her, and observed by the researcher is prewriting. Prewriting, the first stage of process-writing instruction, is done as a class with the teacher, in pairs, and alone, depending on the topic of the writing. The students are often assisted in their prewriting with semantic maps, brainstorming guides, and lots of class discussion before any actual drafting begins. The teacher believes that prewriting allows the students to explore an infinite number of writing topics, and then eventually the details and aspects that make up the topic.

When the bulk of the prewriting is completed, the teacher believes that modeling writing is an essential component of drafting stage. She always includes her own work and modeling work done by another student or an author when available. This modeling not only shows the students what the teacher is looking for in terms of format, but it also reinforces the idea that teachers, or adults, write, as do students.

The teacher believes that it is best first for the students to do prewriting, and to write a draft, before she implements any mini-lessons. After taking note of the areas that most of the students are having trouble with, or where many errors are occurring, the teacher creates mini-lessons to help the students. This is done so that the students can more efficiently go back and revise and edit their own work. The students need something concrete in front of them that they can apply the lessons to; this is when much of their revising and editing work is done. This type of writer's workshop is beneficial because it allows the students not only to look more closely at their work before it is viewed by a classmate, but also to see errors in areas like mechanics and sentence structure from an unbiased point of view and identify changes that can be made. The workshop is also a place where students working together closely can give suggestions about items that may clarify or improve upon a writing product.

Throughout the writing process, there is a large amount of sharing that goes on with the teacher and among the students, both in groups and in pairs. This sharing is mainly done in the revising and editing stages, and can be categorized as the group share (Atwell p. 84) and writer's workshop that Atwell and Calkins talked about in their books on process writing. The teacher notes that the students love to share their writing, and the process often encourages other students to go back and improve upon their writing. This allows for each student to make improvements on multiple drafts before handing in the final draft to be assessed by the teacher. Allowing and encouraging multiple drafts indirectly encourages students to take risks and try things with their writing that in product-based writing, they might not have done because of fear of losing points on their grade.

Noting the need for relevance, the teacher states, “I also try to relate the writing to some kind of real life career where the type or genre of writing is actually used” (Personal communication with teacher). It is so common for students to find writing to be a boring activity that helping them see the connection to the real world, their world, is very helpful in motivating them. As far as connecting writing to the GEPA, the teacher used a “cliff notes” version, or a version that is worded simply and explained clearly, of the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric and has the students use it to score one another’s papers.

With regards to the writing curriculum of the school, it is, like most NJ curricula, standards-based and aligned closely with what the state has determined should be achieved in Language Arts Literacy by all seventh grade students in New Jersey. The teacher implements lessons from the beginning of the writing process to the end of the process that are standards-based and which focus in on specific skills and objectives. The teacher is extremely conscientious about the fact that the students have only a short time with her when she can help to prepare their writing for not just the GEPA, but also their futures.

How does classroom process-instruction prepare students for standardized tests, primarily in this case, the GEPA?

When considering that the traditional classroom-assessment of writing is different from that of the assessment of writing on the GEPA, some characteristics of process-writing instruction can be used to prepare students for GEPA. One characteristic of process-writing instruction that can prepare students for the GEPA is that it is a trial-and-error type of instruction. The students have an undetermined number of opportunities to

practice the skills that they will need for the GEPA on each draft of each assignment that they are given in the classroom. This flexibility and freedom of process-writing allows students to find their strengths and utilize the methods that work best for them when it comes to the shortened predetermined time that they will have to write on the GEPA.

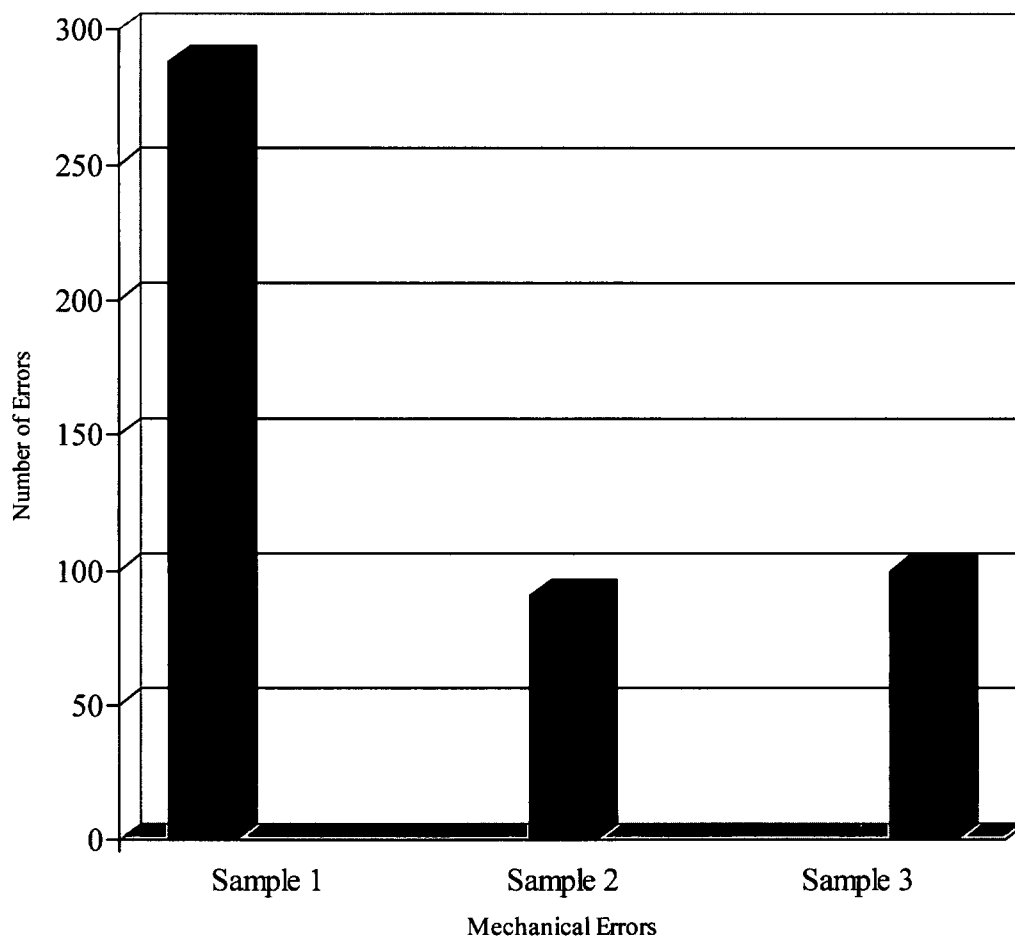
The NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric focuses more on content and organization than on other aspects of writing such as grammar and punctuation. By content and organization, the rubric means: a coherent and well-organized paper with an opening and a closing and logically progressing supporting details in between. It also refers to the writer's ability to convey the intended message to the intended audience. While this is the more heavily weighted part of a paper in the GEPA, classroom teachers tend to focus as much on this as on the mechanics and usage and sentence construction of a paper.

It is important for the teacher to consider which aspects of process writing can help students improve their writing and to become more proficient in those areas more heavily weighed on the GEPA. For example, the teacher in this study focuses on allowing students to workshop their writing and peer-edit with one another so that their editing skills may be fine-tuned. This improvement will ideally translate into each student noticing errors in aspects of his own paper and eliminating them before he is finished. This writer's workshop-type activity is also extremely beneficial to students when they are taking the revise and editing portion of the GEPA. The teacher also prepares her students for the GEPA in other ways, such as handing out individual copies of the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric and reminding the students what certain characteristics of it actually mean.

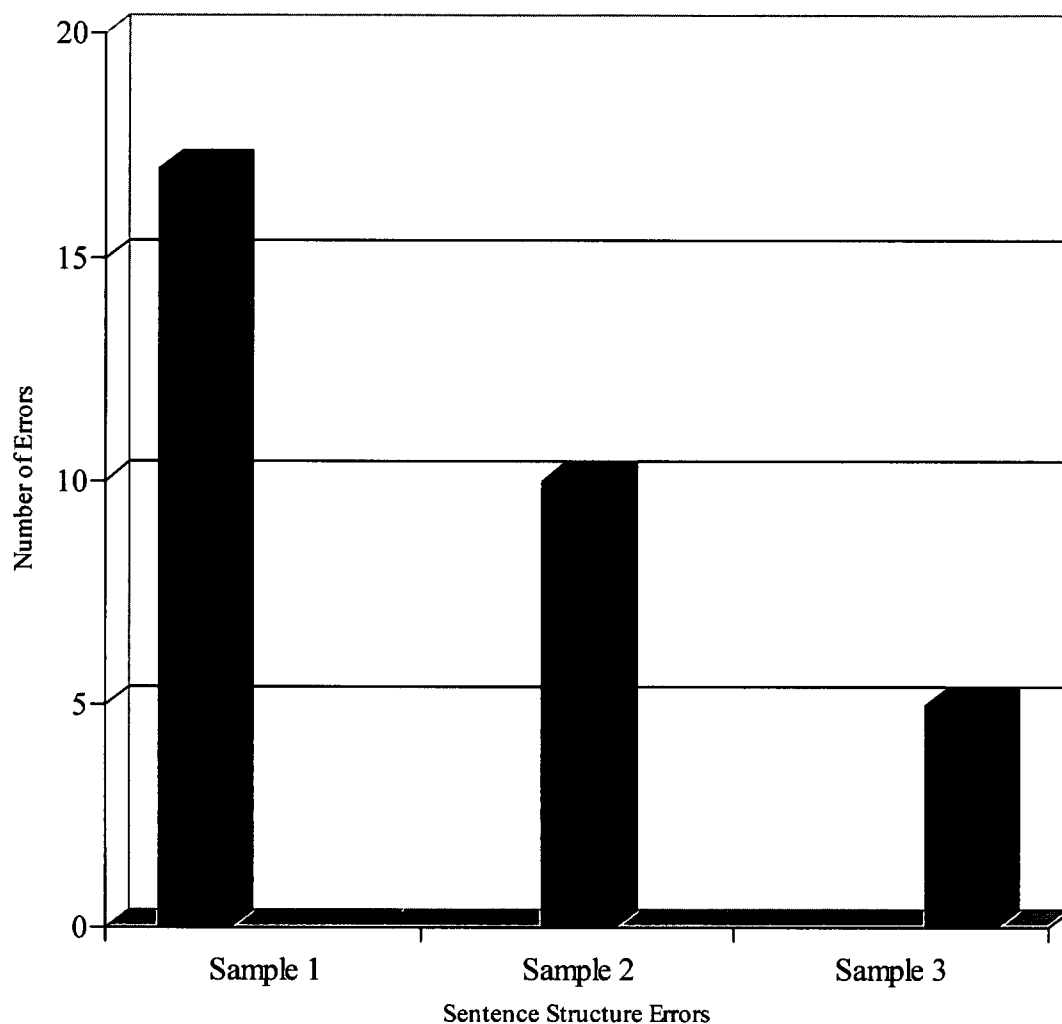


How does process-writing instruction affect students' writing over the course of a school year?

According to this study and the results that have come from it, students' writing has been affected in a number of ways. Students who began the school year making numerous errors in punctuation of all kinds reduced the number of those errors by almost two-thirds by the final writing sample. Although errors in grammar and capitalization were elevated from the second to the third marking periods, it is clear that overall, errors from the first marking period to the third marking period have been reduced. See Figure 2 for mechanical errors and Figure 3 for sentence structure errors.



*Figure 2.* Total number of mechanical errors by marking period



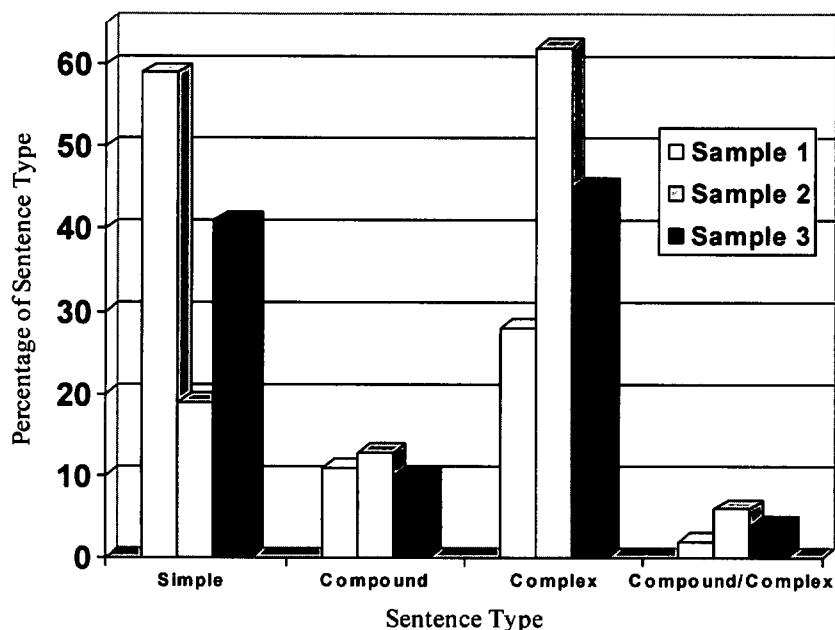
*Figure 3.* Total number of sentence structure errors by marking period.

Not only have the occurrences of errors been reduced from the first to the third marking periods, the number of simple sentences was reduced and those more sophisticated, such as compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, rose.

Initially, in sample 1, 59% of the sentences were simple, 11% compound, 28% complex, and 2% compound/complex. In sample 2, 19% of the sentences were simple, 13% compound, 62% complex, and 6% compound/complex. In sample 3, 41% of the

sentences were simple, 10% compound, 45% complex, and 4% compound/complex.

This information is depicted on a graph in Figure 4.



*Figure 4. Percentage of sentence types by marking period samples*

The figure above depicts the percentage of the occurrence of the four sentence types. It is evident that by the third sample, students were writing with not only sentence variety, but also more compound, complex, and compound/complex sentences than they initially wrote with in sample 1. The use of sentence variety is one criterion looked at on the GEPA, as well as in the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards.

In addition to the increase in more sophisticated sentence structure, the students took more risks as writers. The students used dialogue with slang, descriptive detail, more figurative language in the form of onomatopoeia, metaphors, similes, and humor in their work.

The following chapter will address the researcher's interpretation of the data resulting from the study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The data that resulted from this study is very impressive and certainly supports the theory that process-writing instruction improves students' writing over the course of the year, and will then prepare the students for the GEPA when they take it. The researcher has found the writing from the first marking period to the third to improve in a number of areas, and even to result in a better finished product.

Process-writing instruction allows a student to understand that writing is just that, a process. Many people are under the wrong impression that writing is just something that they are good at or not good at. Initially, in the first sample, the number of errors in both mechanics and sentence structure in the work of the 15 participants was very high, totaling 305 altogether. Then in the second marking period, the number dropped impressively to 101, and finally in the third marking period, the number was just a bit elevated, with 105 errors. This decrease from the first marking period to the third was significant in that the same categories of errors were being counted, but the number of errors that occurred declined. Those errors that were increased or remained somewhat consistent from the beginning of the study to the end of the study certainly increased in sophistication. So even though in the third sample, the total number of errors is still close to that of the second sample, the sophistication of errors tells us that there has been growth.

The counting of the sentence types also reflects an improvement in writing over the course of the three marking periods. In the first marking period, a majority of the

sentences used were simple sentences, with very few of the more sophisticated compound, complex, and, complex, compound/complex sentence. In the second sample, the percentage of sentence types becomes much more evenly distributed among the four, but this can possibly be attributed to the teacher's use template-style of writing instruction in this sample which the researcher explains in detail later in this section. By the third marking period, the percentages are less equal than in the second sample. However, the third sample is much more varied and uses fewer simple sentences than the first sample. This sentence variety indicates the use of a wide of more sophisticated sentence types. Sentence variety is one criterion looked at by both the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards and the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric to assess the GEPA. It should also be noted that although the use of a variety of sentence types occurs more frequently, and the students' sentences are more complex, their punctuation errors remained low. This improvement implies that the students' punctuation skills have increased.

It is clear that the teacher of these students did her job as far as facilitating improvement in students writing in categories such as: mechanics, and sentence structure, both determined to be essential elements of good writing by the NJ Registered Scoring Rubric, and the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards; this is seen by the reduction in errors in those categories. The process-writing instruction that she used encouraged more than just proper mechanics however. Although the improved data in terms of counted errors is impressive, and on its own capable of supporting process-writing instruction, there is more significant data. A greatly improved overall product of writing is the data that conveys that the process-writing instruction taught to these students is effective.

The way a paper is organized is extremely important when it comes to assessment in the classroom, but even more on the GEPA. In this first marking period, the paper just began, with no real obvious introduction and then proceeded with illogical organization and choppy idea after choppy idea that lacked continuity and coherence. By the end of the paper, the reader was most likely lost and confused by the lack of organization and illogical placement of ideas.

By the third marking period, not only does the students' writing have a clear opening and closing, but the ideas in between are also interconnected. Organization and coherence is one major component of a quality piece of writing according to the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric. The way topic sentences are stated and supported by the body of the paper are key elements to be displayed in good writing. The ideas must be in logical order and flow together as seamlessly as possible in order to keep the reader interested. By the end of the third marking period, the students were doing this in their work quite frequently. The improvement in organization and addition of opening and closing sentences into student papers can most likely be attributed to the teacher's instruction in each of these areas. As an observer in the class, the researcher was able to see what the instruction of writing a paragraph included, a good part of that instruction was on openings and closings and the details in between. An important aspect of this instruction focuses on individual paragraphs. In other words, even though none of the writing products consisted on a traditional five-paragraph essay, the teacher still taught the students how to form a well-organized and well-supported essay that would include an opening sentence and a closing sentence.

Diction is another area that the researcher noted. In the first sample, much of the diction was elementary and very safe. Much of the word choice was what would be expected of a typical sixth or seventh grader, with very few instances of the students straying from that path. Beginning with the second marking period and becoming much more evident in the third marking period, the students appeared to take risks as writers and try more sophisticated words like “disconsolate.” This high-level vocabulary word can most likely be attributed to the use of some type of reference material, such as a thesaurus. Use of a thesaurus was not included in the instruction of this particular writing assignment, but according to the teacher, they are used in a variety of assignments. One purpose of the use of the thesaurus in this teacher’s classes is to encourage the students to replace simple and plain vocabulary words with more sophisticated and descriptive ones. This objective has been accomplished in this specific instance, for a student took it upon herself to use the reference material on her own in order to improve her word choice. This is a noteworthy change in the vocabulary and diction of the papers, and rather impressive to see in a majority of the papers in the third sample.

This risk-taking with word choice may have accounted for the increase of errors in spelling and grammar use from the second marking period and could have been alleviated had they used a dictionary, or more mini-lessons geared to these specific errors by the teacher. As a researcher, it is a major improvement to see the expanding vocabulary of the students with only minor increases in other mechanical errors as a result.

The most impressive and significant transformation that occurred in the students’ writing over the course of the three marking periods was that the students became



genuine writers. The students began the first marking period writing in a very structured and safe way, making basic errors that implied a lack of knowledge of basic process-writing. In the second sample, the basic errors in areas such as punctuation, spelling, grammar, and capitalization decreased to convey that the teacher focused her mini-lessons on these basics components of writing. As was previously noted, the increase in spelling errors from the second to the third marking period can be inferred as increased risk-taking in diction, but in regards to increased errors in grammar, the evidence of risk-taking in sentence structure is apparent. It should also be noted that in the second sample, after receiving some mediocre first drafts, the teacher presented the students with a formula to follow. This formula included some sentence patterns and templates into which the students put their own details. The ability to improve upon several aspects of writing in this manner implies that the students find it easy to replicate and therefore can focus on other areas such as organization and word choice. By the third marking period, the mechanical errors were low; there was sentence variety, and now a sense of student voice is present in the majority of the papers.

The main component that shows improvement as a writer is one's ability to embed one's voice into her work. Where this student voice was non-existent in the first sample, and somewhat apparent in the second sample, it was thriving in the third sample. With a grasp on the basics achieved, the students could implement a touch of themselves into their work with sentences like the following: "Right after I told him I would have a taste, I could feel a strong breeze come from the icing, like it wanted to have a conversation before its death," and "Sitting there patiently, I awaited my portion of Heaven, my vanilla icing." Even humorous statements such as, "It felt as though someone

was being whipped in my mouth,” that may require further detail and certainly explanation, gives us, as readers, a sense of who is writing. This newly heard voice is certainly a component that any determined and dedicated teacher can help emerge in her students’ writing.

Writer’s workshops, the revising and editing, peer editing, and teacher conferencing are most likely responsible for this transformation. When a writer feels safe to express herself and has someone to give her feedback, she is more likely to begin taking risks, small at first, and more significant with each assignment. The instructor of these students was willing to provide honest feedback, offer extra help, and model her own writing for the students. All of these methods are productive means that can encourage students to become better writers.

It is impressive and very telling that the students were taking risks, however and it is significant in that it implies they felt safe in their abilities as writers, and also in the environment in which they were writing. The researcher can surmise that the students felt that the writer’s workshops and the classroom as a whole were safe places to take risks and potentially fail, but probably succeed.

Through her process-writing instruction, the teacher touched on all of the areas that need to be addressed as stated by the standards-based school curriculum, the NJ Core Curriculum Content Standards, and the NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric that prepares students for GEPA, and consequently, the students’ writing vastly improved over the course of the three marking periods studied. The improvement in the students’ writing can be attributed to the teacher’s instruction of process writing. With the help of process-writing instruction, students are assured that their first efforts, even if filled with

errors, will not result in a failing grade. It is encouraging as a novice to know that there are multiple opportunities for redemption. This redemption is something that the process-writing instruction offers that product-writing instruction did not. If a student took a risk that the teacher did not like, the paper may have just resulted in a failing grade.

The self-assurance that the students have displayed in their writing as a result of process-writing instruction is one fundamental quality that will help them to succeed in the classroom, as well as on standardized tests. The teacher of the students in this study has done a thorough job of teaching the basics of writing, and then expanding the students' knowledge of those basics through process-writing instruction.

### Limitations

Due to a number of different circumstances, there were several limitations that the researcher encountered during this study. Due to the subjects of the study being from a population of convenience, the study was of limited size and scope. The total possible number of subjects in the study was just 68, and the total subjects actually used were 15. This is a limitation since it means that the researcher will not be able to generalize the finding that resulted from this study to a larger population than the one in the study.

A second limitation of this study was the non-randomness of it. This aspect is a limitation since, again, the subjects chosen came from a sample of convenience. Since this sample is from one particular town, in one particular school, with one particular teacher, it may or may not be telling of other students on a larger scale. Many factors could be confounding elements in the study such as level of parental involvement, classification of students involved, socio-economic status, learning disability, and native language other than English spoken at home.

A third limitation of this study is the small sample size of the study. This is a limitation to the study since the researcher could come up with findings that may be unique to one group of students due to outside factors that include those previously mentioned such as socio-economic status, learning disability, parental involvement, native language other than English, and excessive absence of students.

A final potential limitation of the study may be the amount of time that it was performed in, or the brevity of the study. The brevity of the study could possibly limit any ability to track progress that may affect the overall outcome of the study. Due to the fact that this study spanned the first three marking periods, there may more research that is significant to the outcome of the study found in the fourth marking period.

### Recommendations

Considering the limitations of the study mentioned above, the researcher would like to offer some recommendations for future research. The researcher recommends that when possible, the study span the entire course of the school year. This may not show conflicting data to that reported in this study, but it would show the students' progress from the beginning of the school year to the completion.

A second recommendation that the researcher would offer is that when possible, the GEPA scores of the subjects involved in the study are also used. The test scores of the students would be an important piece of information to convey more precisely how affective process-writing instruction has been in preparing the student for high-stakes standardized tests. This information, studied in unison with the classroom writing would assist the researcher in determining how well the students' process-writing instruction is preparing them for all types of writing in different settings. This information may be

difficult to get since the GEPA is taken in eighth grade and the study was performed in the seventh grade. If it is not possible to get the scores of the subjects, the researcher would recommend that the study be performed with students in the eighth grade.

A final recommendation that the researcher would like to make is a longitudinal study that follows a group of seventh graders through their seventh grade and eighth grade years and looks at their GEPA scores in the context of two years of writing instruction.

Overall, the research can conclude that through the research found, process-writing instruction has improved students' writing in a number of ways. Not only have the basics of writing been improved upon, but the more creative and personal aspects of it have as well. In the samples that the researchers used, the students involved started their writing instruction off with an overall average ability to write. They ended the third marking period with a much more mature and sophisticated understanding of the skills and tools that they could use to improve their writing, as was displayed in their work. It is evident to the researcher that with a well-educated instructor who is capable of utilizing a number of techniques to teach process writing, a great improvement can be made on students' writing that will help to prepare them for both standardized tests and the writing essential for life inside and outside of the classroom.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **NJ Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric**

**New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric - GEPA/HSPA - p. 23**

In Scoring, consider the grid of written language	Inadequate Command	Limited Command	Partial Command	Adequate Command	Strong Command	Superior Command
Score	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Content &amp; Organization</b> (see below)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May lack opening and/or closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May lack opening and/or closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May lack opening and/or closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally has opening and/or closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opening and closing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opening and closing</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimal response to topic; uncertain focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempts to focus</li> <li>May drift or shift focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usually has single focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single focus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single focus</li> <li>Sense of unity and coherence</li> <li>Key ideas developed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single, distinct focus</li> <li>Unified and coherent</li> <li>Well-developed</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No planning evident; disorganized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attempts organization</li> <li>Few, if any, transitions between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some lapses or flaws in organization</li> <li>May lack some transitions between ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ideas loosely connected</li> <li>Transition evident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Logical progression of ideas</li> <li>Moderately fluent</li> <li>Attempts compositional risks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Logical progression of ideas</li> <li>Fluent, cohesive</li> <li>Compositional risks successful</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Details random, inappropriate, or barely apparent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Details lack elaboration, i.e., highlight paper</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Repetitious details</li> <li>Several unelaborated details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uneven development of details</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Details appropriate and varied</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Details effective, vivid, explicit, and/or pertinent</li> </ul>
<b>Usage</b> (see below)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No apparent control</li> <li>Severe/numerous errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numerous errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Errors/patterns of errors may be evident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Few errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very few, if any, errors</li> </ul>

<b>Sentence Construction</b> (see below)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assortment of incomplete and/or incorrect sentences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Excessive monotony/ same structure</li> <li>Numerous errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little variety in syntax</li> <li>Some errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Few errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very few, if any, errors</li> </ul>
<b>Mechanics</b> (see below)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Errors so severe they detract from meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numerous serious errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patterns of errors evident</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No consistent pattern of errors</li> <li>Some errors that do not interfere with meaning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Few errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very few, if any, errors</li> </ul>

<b>Non-Scorable Responses</b>	<b>NR</b> = No Response	Student wrote too little to allow reliable judgement of his/her writing.
	<b>OT</b> = Off Topic/ Off Task	Student did not write on the assigned topic/task, or the student attempted to copy the prompt.
	<b>NE</b> = Not English	Student wrote in a language other than English.
	<b>WF</b> = Wrong Format	Student refused to write on the topic, or the writing task folder was blank.

<b>Content &amp; Organization</b>	<b>Usage</b>	<b>Sentence Construction</b>	<b>Mechanics</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicates intended message to intended audience</li> <li>Relates to topic</li> <li>Opening and closing</li> <li>Focused</li> <li>Logical progression of ideas</li> <li>Transitions</li> <li>Appropriate details and information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tense formation</li> <li>Subject-verb agreement</li> <li>Pronouns usage/agreement</li> <li>Word choice/meaning</li> <li>Proper modifiers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Variety of type, structure, and length</li> <li>Correct construction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spelling</li> <li>Capitalization</li> <li>Punctuation</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX B

### Questions for writing instructor

### Questions for writing instructor

1- What does writing instruction (WI) look like in your classroom?

\*In general (with regards to curriculum)?

\*Specifically-what is your methodology?

2-How do you structure Writing Instruction to assure students that students address the issues raised in assessment according to the Holistic Scoring Rubric used to assess GEPA writing as well as assuring that they can write well for your class and in life?

3-\*How do you incorporate best practice Writing Instruction with preparation for the GEPA

## APPENDIX C

### Permissions

3 March 2004

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to ask your permission to collect research for my Graduate thesis paper in the classroom of one of your language arts teachers, Ms. XXXXX. I observed Ms. XXXXX's seventh grade language arts classes to fulfill the requirements of my Clinical Practicum in the fall of 2003, and would like to use some the work that her students have done as a part of my research.

The thesis that I plan to write will track the progress made in the writing of a group of seventh grade students. The group will consist of any of Ms. XXXXX's sixty-some students whose parents/guardians grant permission for their child's work to be used. I will look at three writing products from each child, one from each of the first three marking period's, and analyze each piece for certain errors in areas such as: capitalization, punctuation, spelling, agreement, word choice, and sentence structure. After I analyze each product, I will tally the number of errors, and keep track of the total for each sample. After all four samples have been analyzed and tallied, I will determine what changes have occurred in the stated areas over the course of the year.

After each sample I collect, I will question Ms. XXXXX about the process that the students went through during its writing. I will not speak with any of the students, just with Ms. XXXXX, and I will only use the writing of students whose parents/guardians have granted permission for their child's writing to be used. Once I

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collect the writing products, I will photocopy each paper with the child's name blocked out to ensure that her/his involvement is confidential and s/he is kept anonymous.

I will enclose my proposal for this paper should you need any more information. I will also enclose a copy of the information and letter of consent that I plan to send home with each child. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Christine M. DiCicco



To Whom It May Concern:

I hereby authorize that my child's writing done in Ms. XXXXX's Language Arts Literacy class may be used in the research project of Ms. DiCicco. I understand that the work will be kept anonymous and confidential. I also understand that at no time will my child nor I be contacted for any reason regarding this thesis project.

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Child's Full Name

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Parent/Guardian Signature

Date