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WHITE PAPER

# Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

How Instructors Can Artfully Manage Written Assignments While Building a Learning Community



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# 1.0 Summary

To say that we live in exciting times of technological and social change is a gross understatement. Today's global changes directly impact the workload of those who teach history, social studies, science and technical subjects in part because these are the very same teachers who are educating students about this new and changing world. There is added pressure on all educators to teach students how to become better writers so that they develop critical thinking skills and effectively communicate what they have learned.

As educators struggle to cope with these pressures, they are increasingly turning to technology solutions to alleviate some of the resulting burden. Online tools that help teachers manage their classroom processes yet are flexible enough to easily integrate into an existing structure are gaining momentum with educators in every discipline. Additionally, teachers are realizing that these tools can be leveraged in a myriad of ways to:

- Save teachers time so they can maintain a focus on substantive issues, such as core content and developing critical thinking skills
- Meet the Common Core State Standards
- Support non-English departments to integrate writing instruction into their curriculum by automating conventions
- Facilitate school-wide collaboration and professional development.

As students, faculty and administrators work together to understand our ever changing world, technology solutions like Turnitin are playing a pivotal role.

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## 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 THE NEED FOR WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The growing interest in promoting writing in subjects such as history, social studies, science and technical studies originates from social and institutional influences. The increased use of technology has resulted in a demand for people who are able to communicate in writing about that technology. Science and technical subjects deal specifically with the dynamic changes transforming our world, so students who study these transformative subjects need to be able to write about them. Established educational models that put writing firmly in the domain of the English department no longer address the needs of a world where effective writing on numerous topics is a necessity. Anthony Colucci, a National Board-certified gifted teacher in Central Florida, applies this idea saying, “It’s not the nature of knowledge to be divided up into little boxes called subjects. In reality, no subject is an island. Aspects of each can be found in others. Subjects are a curricular convenience, an organizing tool—not the exclusive turf of particular teachers or class periods—and they must not be treated that way.” The implication is that writing needs to be taught in more than just English classrooms.

Institutionally, the increase in writing across the curriculum is being driven by the Common Core State Standards which have been adopted by over 40 states. These Standards are impacting text books, high stakes tests and, ultimately, the expectations placed on teachers (Common Core State Standards). The Standards require that specific writing skills be addressed in all U.S. history, social studies, science and technical studies classrooms. Simultaneously, expectations on teachers are increasing, and are magnified by our current economic climate. Given these social, institutional, and economic pressures, teachers need affordable and effective time-saving tools. Turnitin provides a digital environment with powerful support tools that save time, integrate instruction and effectively engage students in the learning process.

## 2.2 THE STRUGGLE TO INTEGRATE WRITING INSTRUCTION ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Teaching writing across the curriculum has long been a goal of schools and has given rise to a search for strategies that integrate writing instruction with the traditional classroom content of history, social studies, science and technical studies. The value of writing across the curriculum was emphasized by the National Commission on Writing when it stated, “If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write.” (National Commission on Writing, 2003)

For teachers, however, writing assignments create time-intensive work. It is common for teachers to spend 4 to 8 minutes assessing each piece of student writing. Whether a teacher has 80 students or 120 students, the prospect of commenting on a class set of written work is daunting. So daunting, in fact, that a study of social studies teachers revealed that over 92% of them believe research projects are very important, but fewer than 40% of them actually assign significant research papers (Fitzhugh). For many teachers the lack of student writing skills is becoming more evident as states begin to enforce the Common Core State Standards. The Standards call for “short as well as more sustained research projects” in history, social studies, science and technical studies (Common Core State Standards).

Increasing the number of written assignments across the curriculum needs to balance with the amount of time that teachers spend managing these assignments. Attaining both of these goals is made possible using the digital environment of Turnitin. The tools of this online system save teachers time by integrating writing instruction with their existing classroom processes and procedures.

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## 3.0 Turnitin: Changing the Focus to Substantive Issues

### 3.1 TURNITIN SUPPORTS THE 6-TRAITS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING

Combining the Turnitin tools with a model of writing instruction like the 6-Traits of Effective Writing can result in writing lessons that support a teacher's content lessons. Turnitin allows teachers to integrate a model for writing instruction into their assignments, comments, and ongoing assessments. The 6-Traits of Effective Writing is a writing model that is especially suited for the Turnitin digital environment and, when properly implemented, can save educators countless hours of work.

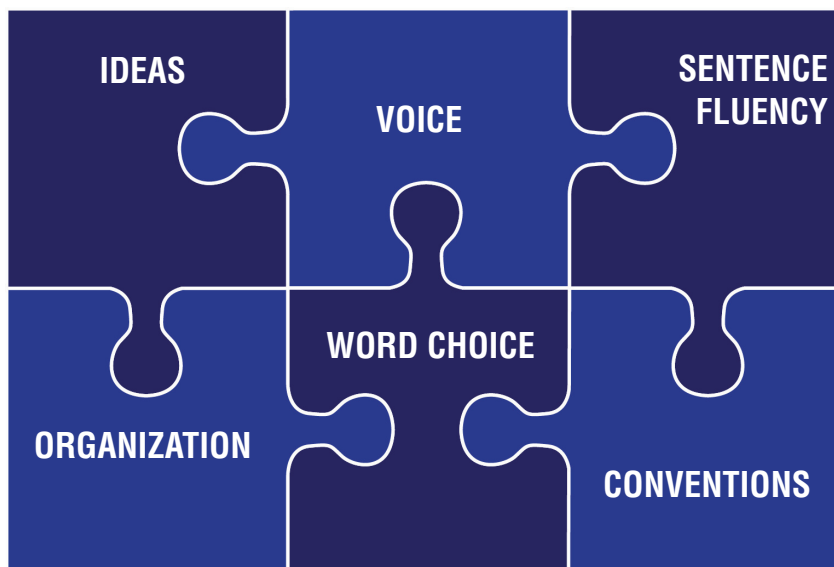


FIGURE 1 | The Six Traits of Effective Writing

Three of the 6-Traits of Effective Writing are a proficiency in English conventions, an ability to write sentences that flow smoothly, and the ability to make appropriate word choices. The ETS *e-rater* technology in Turnitin's GradeMark tool fully automates comments on these three aspects, allowing teachers to focus their comments on issues more closely related to the course content. The *e-rater* tool saves instructors an extraordinary amount of time, especially for teachers of lower grades, classes with large ELL (English Language Learners) populations or schools with many non-standard English speakers.

GradeMark also has pre-written comments that teachers can drag-and-drop to address multiple issues, from the sentence fluency of student prose to the logical construction of student arguments. In addition, teachers can create and save their own comments and include tips for help and outside resources. This allows for more of the 6-Traits to be addressed, such as organization, idea development, and presentation. Comments become more instructive and less time consuming than the traditional paper system used in many classrooms. A paper that used to take 4-8 minutes to correct may take 2-3 minutes using GradeMark.

“PeerMark gives my students more opportunities to write and get feedback. I used to be able to grade only about one good writing assignment a month for my students. Now I give them five or six writing assignments, and their peers grade them. That teaches them how to be good graders, and by becoming good graders they’re actually becoming better writers.”

Gil Rotblum  
History Teacher Brea Olinda High School  
Brea, CA

Within minutes, teachers can combine the *e-rater* tool with Turnitin’s reflection assignments to create a system that engages students in their own learning (see section 3.3.1). This engagement is enhanced when students are assigned the task of editing each other’s work using Turnitin’s PeerMark tool. As students edit each other’s work they are actively practicing English language conventions, rules about sentence flow and guides to quality word choice that are part of the 6-Traits model.

Using comments consistently from paper-to-paper allows for easier assessment. GradeMark generates reports showing the frequency of comments on an assignment or within a class so teachers can quickly assess instructional needs and address those issues as a group, resulting in more efficient class time. This allows teachers to focus on specific content objectives and high level skills such as logical reasoning or analysis in the context of writing instruction.

GradeMark with *e-rater* technology allows educators to seamlessly and efficiently include the 6-Traits of Effective Writing model into their content lessons in an engaging way—without significantly adding to their workload or changing their classroom practices.

### 3.2 HELPING STUDENTS FIND THEIR WRITING VOICE

Teaching students about their unique writing “voice” may be the most foreign aspect of the 6-Traits writing model for instructors outside of the English department. This is ironic because the most used but perhaps under-utilized aspect of Turnitin, the OriginalityCheck tool, is ideal for encouraging students to develop their own writing voice. By allowing students to view their OriginalityCheck reports, students can see the degree to which their writing is unique. This is powerful feedback when developing a writing voice and transforms the plagiarism-centered conversations that typically result from OriginalityCheck reviews into teachable moments. Some educators find it useful to allow students to resubmit their work after viewing the OriginalityCheck report from their first submission. In doing this, educators promote re-writes that contribute to the further development of a student’s written voice.

### 3.3 CREATING A NEW FOCUS WITH RUBRICS

Using rubrics within GradeMark is another way that Turnitin supports teaching the 6-Traits without taking time away from content instruction. Many history, social studies, science and technical studies instructors already use rubrics to grade projects, labs, essays and other student work, so this tool easily fits with current practices. When teachers add elements from the 6-Traits of Effective Writing model to their rubrics, they can manage the grading of written assignments without a significant increase in their time commitment. A rubric that includes assessment of a thesis, supporting evidence, analysis, and writing conventions is useful in evaluating content mastery as well as writing quality in line with the 6-Traits. Because rubrics instruct as well as assess, the use of an integrated rubric increases writing instruction at the same time as it instructs in a content area.

#### 3.3.1 USING RUBRICS WITH REFLECTION ASSIGNMENTS

Using reflection assignments with rubrics expands and deepens student learning and engagement. For rubrics to have an effect on students, they need time to reflect on what the rubrics say. With Turnitin reflective assignments, teachers and students collaborate to set rubric-related writing and content goals. As students complete these assignments they become engaged in their own education. Science students may receive low scores on a rubric that emphasizes word choice because they don't use appropriately descriptive or accurate words when using the Scientific Method. When those students set goals of improving their word choices, they are working on a content standard in science as well as one of the 6-Traits. The normally time consuming endeavor of tracking student goals and reflections is efficiently accomplished with Turnitin because rubrics are saved from one assignment to the next. Turnitin retains all student papers, teacher comments and rubric-centered goals in one digital environment, so teachers and students can easily monitor their progress throughout the year. Once students have mastered elements of a particular rubric they can set new goals. One powerful benefit of this process is the ability for students and teachers to acknowledge and celebrate progress in a very concrete and specific way.

An efficient method for students to communicate their writing goals to teachers is for them to write their goals at the top of each written assignment (McCoy). Teachers can see a student's goals before reading the assignment and provide comments that are tailored to the goals. When students and teachers are focused on specific aspects of assignment rubrics, teacher comments become less time consuming. For example, a student struggling with supporting a thesis in history sets this element of the 6-Traits of Effective Writing as an educational goal. The teacher focuses on providing specific, instructional comments on the stated goal rather than addressing all of the issues that are present in the written assignment. Using this method, students receive more meaningful and manageable comments.



Teachers who have many ELL students or are teaching lower grades often see so many errors in written assignments that addressing everything is not feasible, nor is it conducive to student learning. Numerous comments can become overwhelming for students and, ultimately, are counterproductive to learning. When teachers and student have a shared focus, learning can take place in a more supportive, encouraging environment.

Finally, how many teachers have spent hours writing thoughtful comments on student papers, only to see students glance at the grade and toss the paper into their backpacks? When teachers combine rubric-guided student goals with focused comments and reflective assignments, it not only reduces the amount of time that teachers spend giving comments, but it makes those comments more engaging, personalized and instructional for students.

## Turnitin Correlation to Common Core State Standards

Turnitin provides a chart of the Common Core State Standards (grades 6-12) that can be taught or measured through using Turnitin. The chart corresponds to the College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards and identify those standards that are met as teachers implement OriginalityCheck, PeerMark, and GradeMark.

Visit: <http://pages.turnitin.com/CommonCore.html>

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## 4.0 Promoting a Learning Community

In order to leverage teachers' time, many schools are training their faculties to be more efficient and productive through extensive professional development and collaboration. Turnitin tools help to achieve these goals by contributing to a school's learning community.

For administrators and faculty who are nurturing professional learning communities, Turnitin provides a valuable opportunity. The ability for educators to share their Turnitin rubrics and GradeMark comments is a focal point for teacher collaboration and professional development. In addition, teachers have access to the free Turnitin Academy classes that expands professional development outside the school walls. Schools that strive to foster collaboration between the English, history, social studies, science and technical subject departments will find sharing the Turnitin best practices a natural way to promote interdepartmental consensus on important pedagogy. This type of collaboration standardizes instruction for students while giving teachers additional support when dealing with families and students that might chafe at being assessed on their writing in a non-English classroom.

Turnitin can also engage students in their learning community through the use of discussion boards. These social networking tools take lessons that were once confined to the classroom and expand them throughout a school's learning community. This allows educators to connect with students in a way that avoids the classroom dynamics which stifle questions or limit engagement. Teachers increase their personalization of instruction when they use Discussion Boards to address the needs of individual students and allow students to help each other in a supervised environment.

When teachers, administrators and students use Turnitin tools to promote writing instruction and collaborate with one another they developing a strong, thriving learning community.

“My class learned about creating different kinds of attention-getters in class by submitting their original work on the blog/threaded discussion. It was great because every student could view and comment on every other student's approach in a matter of minutes. What a great learning experience!”

Tina Heller  
Beulah High School, ND

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## 5.0 Conclusion

As educators struggle to cope with added pressures, they are discovering that technology solutions like Turnitin can lighten their burden. Written assignments in every discipline are now required to meet educational standards, and can no longer be avoided. Overwhelmed teachers do not relish the added workload that written assignments require, especially non-English teachers who may not be as comfortable or versed in grading written work as their colleagues.

The Turnitin tools offer teachers the support they need to meet educational requirements for written work while lightening their existing workload. Educators are using Turnitin to streamline the traditional processes associated with written assignments, integrate educational standards across the curriculum, develop better writers through peer review exercises and focused learning, and promote a school-wide learning community.

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# About the Author

## **Dave Keller**

Dave Keller has been using writing as a central component of his high school history and social studies classes for over 15 years. He has taught classes at several institutions, including a large comprehensive inner-city school, a small charter school and a competitive independent school. He first began using Turnitin in 1999, which is also when he began advocating for and implementing the use of technology across the curriculum.

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# About Turnitin and iParadigms, LLC

iParadigms, LLC is the world's leading provider of web-based solutions for plagiarism prevention. The company's products include Turnitin, used by educators worldwide to check students' papers for originality, to enable web-based peer review and for digital grading of student work. The company's solutions check millions of documents each month and are used in over 125 countries. iParadigms is headquartered in Oakland, CA and is backed by Warburg Pincus.

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