

The Writing Revolution

For years, nothing seemed capable of turning around New Dorp High School's dismal performance—not firing bad teachers, not flashy education technology, not after-school programs. So, faced with closure, the school's principal went all-in on a very specific curriculum reform, placing an overwhelming focus on teaching the basics of analytic writing, every day, in virtually every class. What followed was an extraordinary blossoming of student potential, across nearly every subject—one that has made New Dorp a model for educational reform.

By [Peg Tyre](#)

In 2009, when Monica DiBella entered New Dorp, a notorious public high school on Staten Island, her academic future was cloudy. Monica had struggled to read in early childhood, and had repeated first grade. During her elementary-school years, she got more than 100 hours of tutoring, but by fourth grade, she'd fallen behind her classmates again. In the years that followed, Monica became comfortable with math and learned to read passably well, but never seemed able to express her thoughts in writing. During her freshman year at New Dorp, a '70s-style brick behemoth near a grimy beach, her history teacher asked her to write an essay on Alexander the Great. At a loss, she jotted down her opinion of the Macedonian ruler: "I think Alexander the Great was one of the best military leaders." An essay? "Basically, that wasn't going to happen," she says, sweeping her blunt-cut brown hair from her brown eyes. "It was like, well, I got a sentence down. What now?" Monica's mother, Santa, looked over her daughter's answer—six simple sentences, one of which didn't make sense—with a mixture of fear and frustration. Even a coherent, well-turned paragraph seemed beyond her daughter's ability. An essay? "It just didn't seem like something Monica could ever do."

For decades, no one at New Dorp seemed to know how to help low-performing students like Monica, and unfortunately, this troubled population made up most of the school, which caters primarily to students from poor and working-class families. In 2006, 82 percent of freshmen entered the school reading below grade level. Students routinely scored poorly on the English and history Regents exams, a New York State graduation requirement: the essay questions were just too difficult. Many would simply write a sentence or two and shut the test booklet. In the spring of 2007, when administrators calculated graduation rates, they found that four out of 10 students who had started New Dorp as freshmen had dropped out, making it one of the 2,000 or so lowest-performing high schools in the nation. City officials, who had been closing comprehensive high schools all over New York and opening smaller, specialized ones in their stead, signaled that New Dorp was in the crosshairs.

And so the school's principal, Deirdre DeAngelis, began a detailed investigation into why, ultimately, New Dorp's students were failing. By 2008, she and her faculty had come to a singular answer: bad writing. Students' inability to translate thoughts into coherent, well-argued sentences, paragraphs, and essays was severely impeding intellectual growth in many subjects. Consistently, one of the largest differences between failing and successful students was that only the latter could express their thoughts on the page. If nothing else, DeAngelis and her teachers decided, beginning in the fall of 2009, New Dorp students would learn to write well. "When they told me about the writing program," Monica says, "well, I was skeptical." With disarming candor, sharp-edged humor, and a shy smile, Monica occupies the middle ground between child and adult—she can be both naive and knowing. "On the other hand, it wasn't like I had a choice. I go to high school. I figured I'd give it a try."

New Dorp's Writing Revolution, which placed an intense focus, across nearly every academic subject, on teaching the skills that underlie good analytical writing, was a dramatic departure from what most American students—especially low performers—are taught in high school. The program challenged long-held assumptions about the students and bitterly divided the staff. It also yielded extraordinary results. By the time they were sophomores, the students who had begun receiving the writing instruction as freshmen were already scoring higher on exams than any previous New Dorp class. Pass rates for the English Regents, for

example, bounced from 67% in June 2009 to 89% in 2011; for the global-history exam, pass rates rose from 64 to 75%. The school reduced its Regents-repeater classes—cram courses designed to help struggling students collect a graduation requirement—from five classes of 35 students to two classes of 20 students.

The number of kids enrolling in a program that allows them to **take college-level classes shot up from 148 students in 2006 to 412 students last year (>178% increase!!)**. Most important, although the makeup of the school has remained about the same—roughly 40 percent of students are poor, a third are Hispanic, and 12 percent are black—a greater proportion of students who enter as freshmen leave wearing a cap and gown. This spring, the graduation rate is expected to hit 80 percent, a staggering improvement over the 63 percent figure that prevailed before the Writing Revolution began. New Dorp, once the black sheep of the borough, is being held up as a model of successful school turnaround. **“To be able to think critically and express that thinking, it’s where we are going,”** says Dennis Walcott, New York City’s schools chancellor. “We are thrilled with what has happened there.”

In the coming months, the conversation about the importance of formal writing instruction and its place in a public-school curriculum—the conversation that was central to changing the culture at New Dorp—will spread throughout the nation. Over the next two school years, 46 states will align themselves with the Common Core State Standards. For the first time, elementary-school students—who today mostly learn writing by constructing personal narratives, memoirs, and small works of fiction—will be required to write informative and persuasive essays. **By high school, students will be expected to produce mature and thoughtful essays, not just in English class but in history and science classes as well.**

Common Core’s architect, David Coleman, says the **new writing standards are meant to reverse a pedagogical pendulum that has swung too far, favoring self-expression and emotion over lucid communication.** “As you grow up in this world, you realize people really don’t give a s\$@* about what you feel or what you think,” he famously told a group of educators last year in New York. Early accounts suggest that the new writing standards will deliver a high-voltage shock to the American public. Last spring, Florida school officials administered a writing test that, **for the first time, required 10th-graders to produce an expository essay aligned with Common Core goals.** The pass rate on the exam plummeted from 80 percent in 2011 to 38 percent this year.

According to the Nation’s Report Card, in 2007, the latest year for which this data is available, **only 1 percent of all 12th-graders nationwide could write a sophisticated, well-organized essay.** Other research has shown that 70 to 75 percent of students in grades four through 12 write poorly. Over the past 30 years, as knowledge-based work has come to dominate the economy, American high schools have raised achievement rates in mathematics by providing more-extensive and higher-level instruction. But high schools are still graduating large numbers of students whose writing skills better equip them to work on farms or in factories than in offices; for decades, achievement rates in writing have remained low.

Although New Dorp teachers had observed students failing for years, they never connected that failure to specific flaws in their own teaching. They watched passively as Deirdre DeAngelis got rid of the bad apples on the staff; won foundation money to break the school into smaller, more personalized learning communities; and wooed corporate partners to support after-school programs. Nothing seemed to move the dial.

Her decision in 2008 to focus on how teachers supported writing inside each classroom was not popular. “Most teachers,” said Nell Scharff, an instructional expert DeAngelis hired, “entered into the process with a strongly negative attitude.” They were doing their job, they told her hotly. New Dorp students were simply not smart enough to write at the high-school level. **You just had to listen to the way the students talked, one teacher pointed out—they rarely communicated in full sentences, much less expressed complex thoughts. “It was my view that these kids didn’t want to engage their brains,” Fran Simmons, who teaches freshman English, told me. “They were lazy.”...That would be an interpretation (based on feelings, beliefs, & emotions), not an observation (based on facts).** This relates to one of the top problems college professors stated about students...

their inability to distinguish fact from opinion. Just because a student does not get excited about what excites us, or is not motivated by the same things we are motivated by, or were not raised in a culture with the same values as us, does not indicate they cannot be taught, trained, and motivated. The more students write, the more we learn about what and how they think.

Maybe the struggling students just couldn't read, suggested one teacher. A few teachers administered informal diagnostic tests the following week and reported back. Every quiz, every unit test, every homework assignment became a new data point. The students who couldn't write well seemed capable, at the very least, of decoding simple sentences. A history teacher got more granular. He pointed out that the students' sentences were short and disjointed. What words, Scharff asked, did kids who wrote solid paragraphs use that the poor writers didn't? Good essay writers, the history teacher noted, used coordinating conjunctions to link and expand on simple ideas—words like *for*, *and*, *nor*, *but*, *or*, *yet*, and *so*. Another teacher devised a quick quiz that required students to use those conjunctions. To the astonishment of the staff, she reported that a sizable group of students could not use those simple words effectively. The harder they looked, the teachers began to realize, the harder it was to determine whether the students were smart or not—the tools they had to express their thoughts were so limited that such a judgment was nearly impossible.

The exploration continued. One teacher noted that the best-written paragraphs contained complex sentences that relied on dependent clauses like *although* and *despite*, which signal a shifting idea within the same sentence. Curious, Fran Simmons devised a little test of her own. She asked her freshman English students to read *Of Mice and Men* and, using information from the novel, answer the following prompt in a single sentence:

“Although George ...”

She was looking for a sentence like: *Although George worked very hard, he could not attain the American Dream.*

Some of Simmons's students wrote a solid sentence, but many were stumped. More than a few wrote the following: “Although George and Lenny were friends.”

A lightbulb, says Simmons, went on in her head. These 14- and 15-year-olds didn't know how to use some basic parts of speech. With such grammatical gaps, it was a wonder they learned as much as they did. “Yes, they could read simple sentences,” but works like the Gettysburg Address were beyond them—not because they were too lazy to look up words they didn't know, but because “they were missing a crucial understanding of how language works. They didn't understand that the key information in a sentence doesn't always come at the beginning of that sentence.”

Some teachers wanted to know how this could happen. “We spent a lot of time wondering how our students had been taught,” said [English teacher](#) Stevie D'Arbanville. “How could they get passed along and end up in high school without understanding how to use the word *although*?”

But the truth is, the problems affecting New Dorp students are common to a large subset of students nationally. Fifty years ago, elementary-school teachers taught [the general](#) rules of spelling and the structure of sentences. Later instruction focused on building solid paragraphs into full-blown essays. Some kids mastered it, but many did not. About 25 years ago, in an effort to enliven instruction and get more kids writing, schools of education began promoting a different approach. The popular thinking was that writing should be “*caught*, not *taught*,” explains Steven Graham, a professor of education instruction at Arizona State University. Roughly, it was supposed to work like this: Give students interesting creative-writing assignments; put that writing in a fun, social context in which kids share their work. Kids, the theory goes, will “catch” what they need in order to be successful writers. Formal lessons in grammar, sentence structure, and essay-writing took a back seat to creative expression.

The catch method works for some kids, to a point. “Research tells us some students catch quite a bit, but not everything,” Graham says. And some kids don’t catch much at all. Kids who come from poverty, who had weak early instruction, or who have learning difficulties, he explains, “can’t catch anywhere near what they need” to write an essay. (refer these students to the writing lab) For most of the 1990s, elementary- and middle-school children kept journals in which they wrote personal narratives, poetry, and memoirs and engaged in “peer editing,” without much attention to formal composition. Middle- and high-school teachers were supposed to provide the expository- and persuasive-writing instruction.

Then, in 2001, came No Child Left Behind. The program’s federally mandated tests assess two subjects—math and reading—and the familiar adage “What gets tested gets taught” has turned out to be true. Literacy, which once consisted of the ability to read for knowledge, write coherently, and express complex thoughts about the written word, has become synonymous with reading. Formal writing instruction has become even more of an afterthought.

Back on Staten Island, more New Dorp teachers were growing uncomfortably aware of their students’ profound deficiencies—and their own. “At teachers college, you read a lot of theory, like Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but don’t learn how to teach writing,” said Fran Simmons. How could the staff backfill the absent foundational skills their students needed in order to learn to write?

Seeking out ideas, DeAngelis took a handful of teachers to visit the Windward School, a small private school for first-through-ninth-graders located in a leafy section of White Plains, a suburb of New York City. To be accepted there, children have to possess at least average intelligence, have a language-based learning disability, and have parents who can afford the \$45,000 yearly tuition. Students attend Windward for two or three years before reentering mainstream schools, and because so many affluent children move in and out of Windward, the writing program there, which was developed by the former Windward head Judith Hochman, has become something of a legend among private-school administrators. “Occasionally, we’d have a student attend Windward. And they’d come back and we’d find that that student had writing down,” says Scott Nelson, the headmaster at Rye Country Day, an exclusive independent school in Westchester County. Nelson figured that Rye Country Day kids could benefit en masse from the Windward expository-writing program. Three years ago, Nelson sent his entire middle-school English and social-studies staff to be trained by Hochman.

“Writing as a way to study, to learn, or to construct new knowledge or generate new networks of understanding,” says Applebee, “has become increasingly rare.”

The Hochman Program, as it is sometimes called, would not be unfamiliar to nuns who taught in Catholic schools circa 1950. Children do not have to “catch” a single thing. They are explicitly taught how to turn ideas into simple sentences, and how to construct complex sentences from simple ones by **supplying the answer to three prompts—but, because, and so**. They are instructed on how to use appositive clauses to vary the way their sentences begin. Later on, they are taught how to **recognize sentence fragments**, how to pull the main idea from a paragraph, and how to form a main idea on their own. It is, at least initially, a rigid, unswerving formula. “I prefer *recipe*,” Hochman says, “but *formula*? Yes! Okay!”

Hochman, 75, has chin-length blond hair and big features. Her voice, usually gentle, rises almost to a shout when she talks about poor writing instruction. “The thing is, kids need a formula, at least at first, because what we are asking them to do is very difficult. So God, let’s stop acting like they should just know how to do it. Give them a formula! Later, when they understand the rules of good writing, they can figure out how to break them.” Because the tenets of good writing are difficult to teach in the abstract, the writing program at Windward involves a large variety of assignments, by teachers of nearly every subject. After DeAngelis visited the school, she says, “I had one question and one question only: How can we steal this and bring it back to New Dorp?”

For her part, Hochman was intrigued by the challenge New Dorp presented. **Research has shown that thinking, speaking, and reading comprehension are interconnected and reinforced through good writing**

instruction. If the research was correct, Hochman told DeAngelis, a good writing program at New Dorp should lead to significant student improvement all around.

Within months, Hochman became a frequent visitor to Staten Island. Under her supervision, the teachers at New Dorp began revamping their curriculum. By fall 2009, **nearly every instructional hour except for math class was dedicated to teaching essay writing along with a particular subject.** So in chemistry class in the winter of 2010, Monica DiBella’s lesson on the properties of hydrogen and oxygen was followed by a worksheet that required her to describe the elements with subordinating clauses—for instance, **she had to begin one sentence with the word *although*.**

Although ... “hydrogen is explosive and oxygen supports combustion,” Monica wrote, “a compound of them puts out fires.”

Unless ... “hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they are explosive and dangerous.”

If ... This was a hard one. Finally, she figured out a way to finish the sentence. *If* ... “hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they lose their original properties of being explosive and supporting combustion.”

As her understanding of the parts of speech grew, Monica’s reading comprehension improved dramatically. “Before, I could read, sure. But it was like a sea of words,” she says. “The more writing instruction I got, the more I understood which words were important.”

Classroom discussion became an opportunity to push Monica and her classmates to listen to each other, think more carefully, and speak more precisely, in ways they could then echo in persuasive writing. When speaking, they were **required to use specific prompts outlined on a poster** at the front of each class. **Great idea for your engaging classroom discussions.**

“I agree/disagree with ___ because ...”

“I have a different opinion ...”

“I have something to add ...”

“Can you explain your answer?”

The structured speaking was a success during Monica’s fifth-period-English discussion of the opening scene of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. “What is Willie Loman’s state of mind? Is he tired? If he is tired, why would he be so tired?” asked the teacher, Angelo Caterina. “Willie Loman seems tired because he is getting old,” ventured a curly-haired girl who usually sat in the front. “Can you explain your answer?,” Monica called out. The curly-haired girl bit her lip while her eyes searched the book in front of her. “The stage direction says he’s 63. That’s old!” Other hands shot up. Reading from the prompt poster made the students sound as if they’d spent the previous period in the House of Lords instead of the school cafeteria. “I agree that his age is listed in the stage direction,” said John Feliciano. “But I disagree with your conclusion. I think he is tired because his job is very hard and he has to travel a lot.”

Robert Fawcett, a loose-limbed boy in a white T-shirt, got his turn. Robert had been **making money** working alongside the school’s janitors. “I disagree with those conclusions,” he said, glancing at the prompts. “The way Willie Loman describes his job suggests that the kind of work he does is making him tired. It is repetitive. It can feel pointless. It can make you feel exhausted.” **The class was respectfully silent for a moment, acknowledging that Robert had analyzed the scene and derived a fresh idea from his own experience.**

By sophomore year, Monica’s class was learning how to map out an introductory paragraph, then how to form body paragraphs. “There are phrases—*specifically, for instance, for example*—that help you add detail to a

paragraph,” Monica explains. She reflects for a moment. “Who could have known that, unless someone taught them?” Homework got a lot harder. Teachers stopped giving fluffy assignments such as “Write a postcard to a friend describing life in the trenches of World War I” and instead demanded that students fashion an expository essay describing three major causes of the conflict.

Some writing experts caution that championing expository and analytic writing at the expense of creative expression is shortsighted. “**The secret weapon of our economy is that we foster creativity,**” says Kelly Gallagher, a high-school writing teacher who has written several books on adolescent literacy. And formulaic instruction will cause some students to tune out, cautions Lucy Calkins, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College. While she welcomes a bigger dose of expository writing in schools, she says lockstep instruction won’t accelerate learning. “Kids need to see their work reach other readers ... They need to have choices in the questions they write about, and a way to find their voice.”

To be sure, the writing program hasn’t solved all of New Dorp’s problems. The high rate of poverty makes the students vulnerable to drug abuse and violence. And in some subjects, scores on the Regents exams this year showed less growth than the teachers had hoped for. Still, word of the dramatic turnaround has spread: principals and administrators from other failing high schools as far away as Chicago have been touring New Dorp. As other schools around New York City and the nation scramble to change their curriculum to suit the Common Core standards, New Dorp teachers say they’re ready.

In a profoundly hopeful irony, New Dorp’s reemergence as a viable institution has hinged not on a radical new innovation but on an old idea done better. **As is true for most things in education...always back to basics.** The school’s success suggests that perhaps certain instructional fundamentals—fundamentals that schools have devalued or forgotten—need to be rediscovered, updated, and reintroduced. And if that can be done correctly, traditional instruction delivered by the teachers already in classrooms may turn out to be the most powerful lever we have for improving school performance after all.

As for Monica DiBella, her prospects have also improved. She expresses more complex and detailed ideas when she raises her hand. Whereas she once read far below grade level, this year she earned a 77 on her English Regents exam (a 75 or above signals that a student is on track to engage in college-level coursework) and a 91 in American history (“Yep, you heard that right,” Monica tells me). Although many of her classmates can now bang out an essay with ease, she admits she still struggles with writing. She hurried through the essay on her global-history exam, and the results fell far short of a masterpiece. The first paragraph reads:

Throughout history, societies have developed significant technological innovations. The technological innovations have had both positive and negative effect on the society of humankind. Two major technological advances were factory systems and chemical pesticides.

But Dina Zoleo, who taught Monica as a junior, points out that the six-paragraph essay shows Monica’s newfound ability to write solid, logically ordered paragraphs about what she’s learned, citing examples and using transitions between ideas. Together with her answers in the multiple-choice section of the test, it was enough to earn Monica an 84. She’s now begun the process of applying to college. “I always wanted to go to college, but I never had the confidence that I could say and write the things I know.” She smiles and sweeps the bangs from her eyes. “Then someone showed me how.”

Peg Tyre is the director of strategy at the Edwin Gould Foundation and the author of *The Good School: How Smart Parents Get Their Kids the Education They Deserve*.