Write To Succeed

A Guide for Parents and Guardians of 8th Graders
Dear Parents/Guardians,

Over the last several years, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has been making many successful changes to help students and schools improve. But many students entering high school still do not have the writing skills they need to succeed. Results on the ISAT show that almost half of our 8th graders do not even meet the writing standards (see chart).

Writing is a crucial skill for students in high school and beyond. Writing well means more than using correct grammar and punctuation. Writing helps students develop and use problem-solving skills, enhance their creativity, organize thoughts, and prioritize ideas. When students revise and rewrite their papers, they take ownership of their ideas. In our classrooms, they also work collaboratively and build on others’ input — skills that are vital for success in the workplace.

Starting with the 2008–09 school year, CPS has a new writing policy for 8th graders to ensure that they are ready for the increased writing expectations in high school and have the foundation they need to write and communicate effectively in college and the workplace.

Having a new policy is just the first step. Teaching writing is an ongoing process that requires educators and parents/guardians to work together. In this guide, you will find out more about:

- the CPS 8th grade writing curriculum;
- the new 8th grade writing promotion policy and criteria;
- examples of good 9th grade student writing; and
- what you can do to help your child succeed.

We hope this information will be useful and that you will join us in helping your child develop this crucial skill.

Sincerely,

Arne Duncan
Chief Executive Officer, Chicago Public Schools

**WRITING WELL IS IMPORTANT IN SCHOOL AND BEYOND**

Examples of student writing in school:

- creating papers in English and research papers in social studies classes;
- explaining the results of a science experiment or math problem;
- answering essay questions on college admissions exams; and
- filling out applications for college.

Examples of writing needed to get — and keep — a job:

- filling out a job application;
- creating a resume;
- writing e-mails, memos, and reports; and
- communicating information to customers, colleagues, and supervisors.
Developing Good Writers
The CPS 8th Grade Writing Curriculum

Good writers are not born with the ability to put their thoughts into written words; they develop this skill over time, just as athletes and musicians learn and practice to be successful. As students advance in grades K–8, the CPS writing curriculum teaches a process that helps them write with a purpose and learn to enjoy writing, which motivates them to become better at it.

Eighth grade is a critical time for students. By the end of this year, students need to be able to write and communicate well so they are prepared to meet the writing expectations they will face in high school. To master these skills, CPS 8th graders are expected to write daily through the writing workshop. Their writing takes many forms: essays, book reports, poems, short stories, and more.

As part of the writing workshop, students come up with ideas for topics, shape and draft their ideas, revise and rewrite to clarify and improve their writing, and edit and proofread their work. Students share drafts with each other and with the teacher one on one, in small groups, or as a class. Teachers provide feedback and track student progress.

Students write their original drafts in their writer’s notebooks but are encouraged to use computers to revise, edit, and publish their final pieces. Using both methods encourages students to master grammar, spelling, and punctuation skills as part of the writing process. They learn without relying on automatic word processing checks but also use the tools they will need for success in high school, college, and beyond.

Beyond the writing workshop, students are expected to write as scientists, historians, mathematicians, and literary critics in their other classes. Writing in different formats helps them master and communicate complex concepts in all these subjects.

In high school, students will be expected to use the skills they have learned in grades K–8. On pages 6–9, you will see samples of the types of writing students will be expected to do as freshmen. Teachers’ notes describe the strengths and weaknesses in each piece and suggest what students can do to improve it.
8th Graders Must Get at Least a C or Pass the District Test in Writing To Advance to High School

Starting in 2008–09, all 8th graders must show proficiency in writing to move on to high school. Students can show proficiency by earning a final grade of C or better in writing or by earning a score of 21 or higher on the Districtwide Writing Assessment (DWWA), which is administered in the spring.

In addition to meeting the writing requirements, students also must:

- meet the requirements in math and reading;
- pass the Constitution test; and
- have no more than nine unexcused absences for the year.

For more information, visit www.oism.cps.k12.il.us.

WHAT IF MY CHILD DOES NOT MEET THE WRITING PROMOTION CRITERIA?

Students who do not meet the writing promotion criteria must attend a summer writing workshop.

- If students complete the workshop satisfactorily, they can move on to 9th grade.
- If they do not complete the workshop satisfactorily and have not been retained in 7th grade, they will remain in 8th grade.
- If they do not complete the workshop satisfactorily and have been retained in 7th grade, they will be promoted to an Achievement Academy or other appropriate placement, which will be determined by the Office of Elementary Areas and Schools. The curriculum of the Achievement Academies helps students catch up to grade level while earning high school credit. After two years, students will leave the Achievement Academies and move to high school.

WHAT HAPPENS IF MY CHILD HAS AN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN (IEP)?

Unless the IEP includes modified promotion criteria, students who have an IEP and receive special education services are expected to meet the same promotion criteria as all other students.

WHAT ARE THE WRITING PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS IF MY CHILD IS AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER (ELL)?

The writing promotion requirement does not apply to ELL students. They may be promoted to high school if they meet the requirements in math and reading, pass the Constitution test, and have no more than nine unexcused absences for the year. Students who do not meet these criteria will be required to satisfactorily complete summer school with appropriate ELL support.
Writing That Makes the Grade in High School

When CPS students move on to high school, they will face increased writing expectations. Writing is a process that involves many steps and skills that teachers teach, but parents/guardians play a vital role.

The following section shows samples of student writing. It is designed to help you understand what level of writing is considered satisfactory in 9th grade. There are four samples — one in each core subject. Each sample includes teacher’s notes about its strengths and weaknesses as well as how it can be improved.

Teachers use specific guidelines to grade writing. The guidelines measure whether the student’s writing:

- is focused on the key ideas;
- is well organized;
- is coherent and makes sense;
- has enough details and examples to back up the main points; and
- uses appropriate punctuation and grammar.

The samples in this guide show actual examples of good 9th grade student writing in different subjects. Samples are labeled “Strong” if they are outstanding or “Satisfactory” if they show solid work that meets expectations. The samples were collected early in the school year to show you the type of writing that is expected as students enter their freshman year.

**TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD’S TEACHER**

As you read the samples, think about whether your child can produce this type of writing. Following are questions you can ask teachers about your child’s writing.

1. How can I help strengthen my child’s writing?
2. How can we (parent and teacher) work together to improve my child’s writing?
3. What is the process for my child to revise writing assignments? What should my child be doing when he or she is completing a writing assignment for your class?
4. Is the writing for this class done mostly in or outside of class?
5. Is there a writing center or tutoring available for my child? Do you think it would be helpful? What do I need to do to sign my child up?
6. What can I read so that I can help my child better understand classwork or writing?
7. What should I be focusing on when I read my child’s writing or talk to my child about his or her writing?
"Shut Up and Dance"

Last winter was one of the worst seasons of my life. Everything around me, with me and in me was an absolute mess. It was like I had melted and had been poured onto a buttery pan and the fire beneath me and all the sizzling made it impossible for me to put myself together. I was hazed by all my problems in school, home and with friends and I just could not see ahead. The only thing that I was absolutely excited about was the coming spring, the blooming of new life, that brought with it the concert that would surely be my break. My Chemical Romance, one of my favorite bands, was coming and I was not missing their show. Their music was practically part of me already, and it always helped me cope with problems I faced.

A close friend of mine had almost died in January and it was hard to keep optimism as a priority. My head was submerged in depressive thoughts and since I never dared to share my feelings with anyone but my head, all the fights I had with my family and myself just created a huge wall that left me trapped living inside my head. The only thing that made me get up in the morning and helped me smile was my music. Music helped me get feelings that I had bottled up inside out and MyChem’s music meant exactly what and how I felt inside. They helped me hope and laugh at life while doing a good job of saving mine. They just helped me breathe. Their loud aggressiveness injected itself into my bloodstream and contaminated every inch of my body with violent energy and gave me a hunger for life.

TEACHER’S NOTES

The student has a strong control of language. Her rich description and choice of words let the reader feel what she felt. In the first sentence, she helps the reader identify with the experience ("worst season of my life"). She expands on that with clear images and comparisons. The reader can hear the student’s voice in the piece. And by the end of the first paragraph, the reader has already begun to experience the student’s feelings.

NEXT STEPS

This piece is finished. With the exception of a few very small problems with one or two word choices later in the piece, there is nothing more the teacher would ask the student to do.
In order to find the answer to this problem, first you have to draw the chart that shows the values for x and y.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(The x values were already given so I plugged them in)

The equation is: $y = 2x + 3$, so therefore I have to substitute the x variable with the 1st x value:

$2(-2) + 3 = -4 + 3 = -1$

so $y = -1$

Then I plugged that answer in the chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Next I have to use the same equation but use the next x value when substituting the variable which is -1.

$2(-1) + 3 = -2 + 3 = 1$

so $y = 1$

Then I plugged that in the chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Then plug the next value for x into the equation:

$2(0) + 3 = 0 + 3 = 3$

So $y = 3$

Then plug that into the value chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then I plugged that in the values chart in the y section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then do the same thing, which is substitute the next value of x in the equation:

$2(1) + 3 = 2 + 3 = 5$

So $y = 5$

Then plug that answer in the chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>x</th>
<th>-2</th>
<th>-1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>y</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Why Geography" Summary

This article was written by Dr. Charles F. Gritzner, a professor of geography. Throughout his article, he constantly says that America isn't taking geography seriously, believing that it is very vital to learn. He constantly uses the term 'geographic illiterates' to describe the Americans who do not know much about geography. The professor implies that schools should put emphasis on geography to students in 'kindergarten through college.' He also implies that having more Americans with strong knowledge in geography will help with understanding in cultures and natural resources.

TEACHER’S NOTES

The student shows a clear understanding of the assignment. The student includes the title of the article and the author’s name and credentials in the title and opening sentence of the paragraph. The student identifies most of the central ideas in Gritzner’s article. The student demonstrates that he is developing an awareness of academic language and organization.

NEXT STEPS

There are several instances where the student repeats words. Students should use different words to strengthen their writing. There are three or four words that the student should consider changing. “Constantly” is used twice in rapid succession. When editing, the second occurrence of the word “constantly” could be revised. The word “implies” is used in quick succession as well. The two points described as “implications” more likely are statements by the author. In the closing sentence, the student uses the word “understandment” when she means “understanding.” And because this is an on-demand piece of writing and the student did not have the opportunity to edit or revise, there are errors in spelling and grammar that need to be corrected.
Conclusion

If a disk soaked in catalase is dropped into 1.5% hydrogen peroxide, then a disk soaked in 100% catalase will rise faster to the top.

In this experiment, my data supported my hypothesis. The disk that had been soaked in 100% catalase rose faster to the top than the other concentrations of catalase.

The disk soaked in 100% catalase rose in 85 seconds at a rate of 0.035 sec. The disk in 75% catalase rose in 95 seconds at a rate of 0.025 seconds. The disk with 50% catalase rose in 158 seconds, and with a rate of 0.02 seconds. The disk in 25% catalase rose in 180 seconds with a rate of 0.001 seconds. The 0% catalase soaked disk had no reaction.

Catalase is a specialized protein, or enzyme made by most organisms, including humans. Catalase is produced to break down hydrogen peroxide — toxic waste product created in cells. The job of catalase is to break down hydrogen peroxide into water and oxygen. For example, when hydrogen peroxide is placed on a wound, catalase which is found throughout your body in your bloodstream and cells go to the wound, come in contact with the hydrogen peroxide and begin to break it down. This is why a wound bubbles in these circumstances. Water and oxygen are being brought getting bacteria out. Now when you have more enzymes you have a speedier reaction. In effect, this is why the 100% catalase soaked disks rose faster — there were more enzymes. As the catalase increases, the reaction takes less time and happens at a faster rate.

I think that my data had errors because as the concentration of catalase increased, so was the rate of the time the disks took to rise. Our data was not solid like the class averages. To fix this, I would soak the disks in their catalase longer.

TEACHER’S NOTES

The student has followed the directions for the assignment carefully. All of the elements of the assignment are present in the student’s work. In places, the results are very thorough (description of rates of rise for all concentration levels). The writing is organized and on topic. The student understands the basics of scientific writing and how the conclusion should be organized. The student also may have some misconceptions or problems with her methodology that need to be clarified. Specifically, in the final paragraph on errors and next steps, it is not clear whether the student had problems determining rate of rise or whether there were problems with her preparation of materials. Therefore, her proposed solution may not be successful.

NEXT STEPS

This is only the second lab writeup of the year. The teacher is focused on improving students’ abilities to write conclusions based on the scientific method of inquiry. It is evident that this student understands the basics of writing up an experiment and conclusions. In the next assignment, the teacher could focus on increasing the level of accuracy and detail as well as the presentation and discussion of relevant data — for example, the way the different rates of rising are explained and presented. Because this is an on-demand piece, there are minor errors in spelling and grammar that could be corrected if the piece were being revised.
How You Can Help Your Child Succeed in Writing

Understand the Policies and Expectations:
- Encourage your child to ask his or her teacher questions.
- Talk with your child’s teacher regularly about writing. (See page 5 for some questions you can ask to start the conversation.)
- Make sure you understand the CPS writing policy and the level of writing your child is expected to do (see samples in this guide).

Be Available and Teach by Example:
- Check in with your child while he or she writes to offer help or ask questions.
- Encourage your child to share his or her writing. Ask him or her to read it aloud. Help your child talk through ideas or decide what he or she wants to say.
- Provide a lot of encouragement and positive feedback.
- Let your child see you write often and talk about the kinds of writing you do: sending an e-mail to a friend, filling out a job application, making a "to-do" list, etc. Read aloud what you have written and ask your child for input. If it’s not perfect, so much the better.
- Work on developing your own writing skills — attend workshops or classes for parents/guardians.

Inspire a Love of Writing:
- Talk to your child about what he or she wants to do after high school graduation — college, work, etc. — and discuss why writing is important for meeting those goals.
- Encourage your child to write about what he or she knows or wants and why.
- Provide a good place for your child to write, e.g., a desk or table with a smooth, flat surface and good lighting.
- Provide plenty of paper and things to write with, including pencils, pens, and markers.

“Writing is important for your future. If you want a good job, or even an OK job, you have to be able to write. My dad says that people decide a lot about you from your writing before they even meet you.”

— CPS student
Language is power. And whether he or she is reading, writing, or talking, words are one of the most important ways your child meets and lives in the world. The more words children have, the more powerful they are. And every time you and your child read, write, or have a great conversation, you’re working together to help him or her live and thrive in our world.

- Look for opportunities for your child to practice writing:
  - On trips or outings, encourage your child to describe in writing what he or she saw.
  - Encourage your child to write letters or e-mails to loved ones or a pen pal.
  - Ask your child to write a story about your family as a gift for a family member.
  - Put together a photo album and ask your child to write entries about the photos.
  - Encourage your child to write a song or poem.
  - Have your child write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or elected official.
  - Encourage your child to keep a journal or diary. He or she can write about things that happen at home and school, things to remember, or things he or she wants to do. Especially encourage your child to write about personal feelings — pleasures as well as disappointments.

- Compliment your child’s writing. Tell him or her something you liked or wanted to know more about.

Use Other Methods To Develop Your Child’s Writing Skills:

- Talk with your child as much as possible about what he or she knows and likes. Ask questions and encourage your child to describe people and events to you.

- Encourage your child to read at home. Reading books, newspapers, and magazines makes children better writers. Talk about what he or she is reading.

- Listen to books on tape together and discuss them.

- If you use e-mail or have a texting plan on your phone, text or e-mail your child. It’s part of the many ways he or she communicates with the world.

- Play games and do puzzles with your child that will help increase vocabulary, e.g., crossword puzzles, word games, and anagrams.

Acknowledgments

This guide would not be possible without the help of the highly competent, committed teachers and talented students at the following Chicago public high schools:

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- King College Preparatory High School
- Northside College Preparatory High School
- Prosser Career Academy
- Richard Yates Elementary
- Walter Payton College Preparatory High School

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- Office of Literacy
- Office of High School Teaching and Learning

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