



# How can I teach my students to be better writers and speakers?

## Sub-questions

- *How are these two skills related?*
- *Do race and class differences have an effect on improving writing?*
- *Are there assessments that motivate students to improve writing and speaking? If so, what kinds?*
- *What room set up is most conducive to good classroom discussions and how many people should be involved in these discussions?*
- *Why are these skills important for high school juniors and seniors?*

## How are these two skills related?

### **My Understandings after Completing the Inquiry:**

*Students write better papers after spending significant class time having detailed discussions on the paper topic.*

#### **Evidence:**

Bill of Rights Unit – initial notes, small group discussions, whole class editing, partner defenses

*Students have similar problems when defending their points in writing and in defending their points when speaking. Focusing on using evidence for one task, generally leads students to use evidence for the other task.*

#### **Evidence:**

Socratic Seminars, Classroom discussions explaining arguments, Student papers on Amendments

*Students write and discuss better when the task has clear questions and considerable structure.*

#### **Evidence:**

Final Essays using quotes, Outline for Amendments paper, Questions for class discussions

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## Do race and class differences have an effect on improving writing?

### My Understandings after Completing the Inquiry:

*Students responded well to learning about code-switching when I defined it as 'academic voice'. They began to write differently when they understood that they cannot use the same language they use at home to write academic essays.*

#### Evidence:

Academic Voice notes, test, essays before and after academic voice lessons, first term inventory, final evaluations

*Students noticed and easily articulated differences between my schooling experience and their experience especially when asked to write papers or have classroom discussions.*

#### Evidence:

Student comments during class discussions and in response to assignments

*Language differences made helping students improve their writing difficult, but teaching students about academic voice gave students who are not native English speakers clear steps to take to improve writing.*

#### Evidence:

Amendment papers from two non-native English speakers, Comments on inventory and evaluations from these students

## Are there assessments that motivate students to improve writing and speaking? If so, what kinds?

### My Understandings after Completing the Inquiry:

*Assessments that specifically asked students about whether they have improved writing and speaking produced reflective comments from students.*

#### Evidence:

First Term Inventory, Comments responding to first term grades

*Correcting students' grammatical errors all at once is not the best strategy to use, but students do need to be taught how to recognize errors. Students did demonstrate improvement when I focused on using conventional writing.*

#### Evidence:

Amendment papers, later papers that demonstrated some improvement

*Asking students to evaluate themselves for participation credit did create better classroom discussions. Small group discussions were better when students had written questions to complete and turn in for a grade.*

#### Evidence:

Participation sheets, classroom discussion notes and responses

## What room set-up is most conducive to class discussions and how many people should be involved in these discussions?

### My Understandings after Completing the Inquiry:

*Some students do not feel responsible for participating in class discussions when they are sitting behind other students. They are also more likely to participate when sitting closer to the teacher and to the rest of the class. Semi-circles or circles work better for discussions, with me sitting down and participating in them.*

#### Evidence:

Class observations during discussions

*I am able to assess student understanding better when students discuss in small groups. During whole class discussions, it's harder to know whether students understand the content being discussed*

#### Evidence:

Discussion question sheets, observations during group discussions

*Students are able to write better papers when they've participated in a small group discussion first.*

#### Evidence:

Bill of Rights papers

## Why are these skills important for high school juniors and seniors?

*During this point in their lives when making decisions about after-graduation plans, I found that my students were nervous about their ability to compete with students from other schools when they arrived in college. They have a lot of anxiety when it comes to writing. Creating a classroom where we could speak about these issues openly and honestly became an important tool for allowing students to focus on improving these skills. Students became less embarrassed about their writing and more open to help from me and from other classmates when they knew that most students faced the same issues.*

## When I begin teaching again, I will...

- Create situations that make writing and discussing have real audiences
- Model writing and discussing techniques for students more
- Use clearer rubrics for writing papers
- More group writing projects
- Begin the year by finding out about students' writing styles and what skills they need to work on
- Develop more strategies for teaching students to correct their own writing

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# Annotated Bibliography

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Delpit, Lisa, Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict In The Classroom 1995: p.11-69 (part one)

Part one of Lisa Delpit's book was very helpful in identifying many of the issues to answer my question of how race and class differences play into teaching students how to write and discuss openly in class. She offers many suggestions for creating a classroom designed for students of color from working class families. Her honest take on the problems associated with white teachers instructing black students helped me become aware of what many of my students may struggle with in my classroom.

Ellis, Robert, "Learning Through Discussions," Higher Education Research and Development, Volume 23: 1 (February 2004)

Ellis' article explains how students learn through discussions and why this learning is more authentic than learning directly from the teacher. It was interesting to read about how this learning happens, but Ellis spends most of his research explaining how online discussions contribute to learning in college classrooms. Since Central does not have the technology to provide online discussions, this article was not very helpful.

Fox, Thomas, "Repositioning the Profession: Teaching Writing to African American Students," JAC Journal 12.2 (1992)

Thomas Fox's article was very interesting but not that helpful when developing strategies to use in my own classroom. He discussed many of the problems African American students associated with literacy and makes a clear point that writing teachers need to use African American literature as a part of their curriculum. While the comments from his students were insightful, they mostly focused on the problems associated with teaching literacy in high school and not solutions for teachers to help solve these problems.

Tatum, Alfred, Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males 2005: p 109-120 (Chapter 8: Discussing Texts)

Chapter 8 of Alfred Tatum's book explains different strategies to use when asking black male students to discuss texts in the classroom. Although his book was designed for English teachers or teachers who might use text such as Richard Wright or Langston Hughes, the methods he offers for teaching these texts are ones that I used in my classroom for discussing academic texts. I particularly appreciated his opinion about what kind of text to teach to students of color and how you get them motivated to read it.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel, Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? 1997

Tatum's book discusses the tendency of students of color to find comfort in same-race social groups. Her book offers the motivation behind this and strategies teachers can use to confront these issues. I found her book very helpful for my project in that she, like Delpit explains these issues openly and offers suggestions for teachers to use to help make their classes more inclusive.