Accuracy in Digital Writing Environments: Read Up, Ask Around, Double-Check

In this issue of *Voices from the Middle*, authors explore a variety of written discourses. Each discourse has distinctive attributes recognized since Aristotle enrolled as a student with Plato. In this article, we explore the idea that these discourses overlap, especially when it comes to accuracy. The digital environments in which our students work can enhance or get in the way of effective and accurate writing.

As illustration, consider Daniel. Daniel sat at the keyboard, furiously typing out a story inspired by his reading of the novel *No More Dead Dogs* (Korman, 2000). He wanted to tell the story of a rescue dog like many his family had adopted or fostered for years, and his canine hero was an amalgamation of several dogs he had known. It was a work of fiction; however, he wrote of the Brittany as a breed originally from England. Daniel’s story was inspiring, and he liked the accolades for it that his peers posted in the threaded discussion groups the class used for peer response purposes. That is, until another student pointed out that Brittanys actually originated in France. At first, Daniel wanted to object—after all, the story was a creative work made up entirely in his head. But later . . .

**Read Up**

Thinking, reading, and writing are often thought of as mirrors of each other; that is, if you can read, you can write. That just isn’t the case, though; writing is not the mirror of reading, cognitively speaking (Berninger & Richards, 2002). Even so, it makes sense that reading and writing processes do share cognitive relationships, even if those interactions are not exactly reciprocal (e.g., Shanahan, 2006). What and how much students read tends to affect their capacities as authors. We can think of this in at least two ways: first, effective writers read all kinds of things, and second, they often read with the purpose of informing their own writing. Daniel, in our opening example, might have read up a bit on his topic before publishing.

**Read Widely**

Writers, whether they are professionals who publish bestsellers or novices who write for school audiences, read. They read widely and often, if they are to be effective composers of written text. Adolescent writers who struggle need many opportunities to actually read (cf. Fisher & Ivey, 2006), and that reading can translate to more effective writing. Schmoker (2007) writes of the expectations at one Arizona school, “The school makes its expectation for abundant amounts of reading, writing, and discussing—as well as assigned texts—clear to students, teachers, and parents” (p. 64).

The premise is very simple: Read much, read widely across genres and disciplines, discuss those readings, and write about them. Time in class spent in this way is rarely wasted. Louis L’Amour (1989) read everything he could, and he attributed his success as an author to the many materials he read. With online sources, e-readers, and links shared via social media, a world of reading awaits any student with an Internet connection.
Read for Specific Information

Writing often demands that students spend time reading specifically to craft well-written products. For example, in composing this article, I read and reread works by authors of fiction and memoir whose careers are founded on writing as a profession and the work of researchers who examine the nature of reading and writing. Reading intended to specifically inform written work is as varied as the purposes for writing; that is, such reading encompasses the world.

Eudora Welty (1984) recounts an episode in which she placed Earth’s moon in the wrong part of the sky in one of her stories. Though a rather insignificant detail in the story, she learned that such details matter because being observant lends credibility to the author and the story itself. A literary critic called her out and reminded her, “Always be sure to get your moon in the right part of the sky” (p. 11). When novice middle-grade writers learn to question all they believe they know, they also learn to read to verify. News organizations call it fact-checking, but the idea also applies to young authors of fiction, informational pieces, and persuasive works.

Teachers frequently guide students to read for purposes beyond simple accumulation of facts. Cognitive skills, such as summarization across many different texts, may help students re-member what they read (e.g., Gil, Bråten, Vidal-Abarca, & Strømsø, 2010). Summarizing what one reads leads to effective argumentation, a skill that relies on evidence to support assertions in informational and persuasive writing. Reading that informs writing may take on these forms:

- reading to find organizational patterns used by other authors;
- reading to identify disconfirming evidence;
- reading to verify or identify details;
- reading multiple sources with the goal of synthesizing the information gained.

Finding sources, especially digital ones, has never been easier for novice writers and professionals alike. The difficulty now lies in finding the best sources, reading as many of those as possible, and critically incorporating them appropriately. Students often use the default search engine in their Internet browsers; however, they can be taught that useful and reliable information is also archived in databases their school may make available. For example, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and GALE maintain databases students may access if the school subscribes to them; the databases contain useful resources that are not generally available to the public (see sidebar). Google Scholar can help students narrow their reading choices to academic works; however, it is a comprehensive database with many works that are intended for professionals.

Ask Around

Perhaps one of the most amazing aspects of learning in the 21st century is not the amount of information writers of any age can access (and all that information is pretty amazing), but that the real value of the Internet lies in its power to bring people together (Buchanan, 2002). Teachers, authors, lawyers, accountants, and automotive mechanics often belong to learning communities or groups online, and they consult those groups for advice and direction when the going is a little sketchy. Another approach Daniel might have taken would have been to submit a draft to his peers or an expert on dogs with a specific request to look for details that were not accurate.

Ask Peers

Students should have access to their peers for advice, response, and direction. When confronted by the challenges of what an audience might expect, the source of a not-quite-verified fact, a word-choice problem, or even a lack of confidence as a writer, an online forum might be the place where middle school writers could turn for guidance from their peers. After all, those peers
have been in that situation, too.

One of the most popular forums for adolescents is Teen Ink; however, there is no reason that teachers can’t set up forums for their own students or school. Blogs (Lapp, Shea, & Wolsey, 2011) and threaded discussion groups (cf. Grisham & Wolsey, 2006) are other effective means for students to share their work and ask for feedback on it as the piece develops.

Ask an Expert

Just as students can use the Internet to obtain feedback from their peers, they can also ask recognized experts for advice. Newspaper reporters, scientists, and young adult authors are increasingly available on the Web. Organization and professional websites often include e-mail addresses or a webform for contact purposes. It’s not at all unusual for students to write to a professional author and receive a response. Skype is increasingly used to connect students and professional authors (e.g., Kerby & Chauncey, n.d.). Students, of course, need their teachers guiding them to realize that every expert cannot respond to the volumes of requests that flood in by e-mail. Some just don’t respond—it’s painful when that occurs, but it’s not personal. Nevertheless, when students keep their inquiries short and succinct, they often do receive responses from the experts they consult.

Double-Check

Throughout their writing, middle-grades writers need to double-check what they have written. This is more than proofreading, though that is important, too. In double-checking, students take a look at the accuracy of their work one additional time. Daniel might have noticed the error about Brittanys during double-checking.

Reread

Hitting submit is the easiest thing to do in digital environments, until the realization comes that once submitted, the piece can’t be easily retrieved. The incorrectly cited work—on its way to the teacher. The harsh feedback to a peer about her written work—too late to revise. The too-general example—visible to the public. One bit of advice for the student author of digital content that has not changed since the invention of the quill and inkwell is to give writing a cooling-off period. When it really matters, compose it, save it as a draft, review it a day or two later, revise if needed, then submit. Of course, editing functions found in blogs, wikis, and webpages permit writers to go back and change the work, but it’s better to get it right before the writing is made public. Slow writing (slow writing is a term I purloined from Newkirk, 2012, who advocates the idea of slow reading—that is, taking time with the words, sentences, and chapters, especially

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK**

**Wikis, Writing, and Protest Songs: An Effective Mix**

There are several steps in the writing process described by this article. The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “A Collaboration of Sites and Sounds: Using Wikis to Catalog Protest Songs” makes a connection to popular culture by asking students to work in pairs to research and analyze contemporary and historic protest songs. After learning about wikis, each pair posts their analysis of the protest songs to a class wiki, adding graphics, photos, and hyperlinks as desired. The class then works together to organize the entries. Finally, students listen to all of the protest songs and add information and comments to each other’s pages.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/collaboration-sites-sounds-using-979.html

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when longer texts are involved) is sometimes the best writing.

**Citing Sources**

Teaching students to cite their sources in persuasive and informational writing is a challenge—just ask any student or teacher. The effort seems superficial, at times. Who cares if the title is in italics or not? Misspelling an author’s name is no big deal, right? However, students learn to be accurate when they correctly cite sources using the format specified by the teacher or school. For example, those italics convey information—in APA (2009) format, italics indicate the source as a book, journal, or magazine instantly. Moreover, the learning that occurs as a result of the writing is further deepened when the student knows how that knowledge was constructed and where its roots are. See the sidebar for resources that help students and teachers with citation, copyright, and fair use.

**Conclusion**

Reading up, asking around, and double-checking are all tools students can use throughout their own writing processes (e.g., Emig, 1971). When teachers help students understand why accuracy matters in digital writing environments—whether the writing is persuasive, informational, or narrative—middle-grades writers are not just better at writing, they are better at thinking and understanding the content they write about.

**References**


**Literature Cited**


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