The Risks and Rewards of Personal Writing in the High School Classroom

Dannette L. Williamson

Eastern Illinois University

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The Risks and Rewards of Personal Writing

in the High School Classroom

(TITLE)

BY

Dannette L. Williamson

THESIS

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CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2014

YEAR

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Abstract

In light of the Common Core State Standards, more research is needed on the importance and transfer value of personal writing high school classrooms. These standards have brought a more rigorous focus to student learning. With a stronger emphasis on argument and source-based writing, high school educators need to reexamine if or how personal writing should fit into curricula. For this study, approximately thirty students from each grade at Effingham High School were surveyed. The entire English department, as well as staff members from other disciplines at Effingham High School, were also surveyed. Prominent findings of the data show that English teachers, as well as teachers in other disciplines, use personal writing on a regular basis. The data supports the assumption that most teachers consider personal writing assignments to be any writing that draws on students' experiences or opinions. The data also supports the assumption that teachers are using personal writing assignments to lead students to larger-scale assignments. The Common Core State Standards require students to focus on academic and analytical writing both in English and non-English courses. The nature of the standards require teachers to design assignments that promote deeper learning as well as prompt higher-level thinking skills. All teachers need to work closely with colleagues to ensure that a focus is being placed on writing in other disciplines and writing assignments that demand higher-level critical thinking. Although previous research questions the efficacy of personal writing and personal narratives, writing assignments that use personal experience can be used for writing-to-learn activities and for scaffolding for more demanding and rigorous writing tasks.
Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to complete my thesis without the help, guidance, and support of my director, committee members, friends and family. I would first like to express my deepest gratitude to my director, Dr. Timothy Taylor, for his wonderful guidance and support throughout this process. Thank you for your feedback on my numerous revisions. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Robin Murray and Dr. Donna Binns, for their valuable feedback. I would like to thank my friends and colleagues at Effingham High School for their constant support and motivation. Without their day-to-day support, this project would not have been successful. I also appreciate their participation in this project. Finally, I need to thank my husband for his constant love and support.
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Introduction

Personal narratives are perhaps one of the most widely debated types of writing in the high school and college writing classroom. Anne Ruggles Gere offers a clear definition of personal writing in "Revealing Silence: Rethinking Personal Writing." She states, "terms like personal narrative, personal experience essay, and autobiographical writing are often used interchangeably with personal writing. The specifics vary, but there is general agreement that personal writing is prose that gives significant attention to the writer's experiences and feelings" (204).

In his article, "Personal Writing Assignments," Robert Connors details the history and use of personal writing in the classroom. In the early 1800s, students included no part of the self into their writing. A major shift, however, came with Alexander Bain's "formalization" of the modes of discourse in 1866: "narration, description, exposition, and argument" (173). This "formula" for teaching writing transformed most composition classrooms. By the 1890s, "the two personal modes – narration and description – became the first elements of composition taught in most classes. Commonly there were whole chapters devoted to these modes, and narration and description were the gates through which personal writing entered composition instruction" (173). Since the 1890s personal writing has been a regular part of composition classrooms. Since personal writing has found its way into the classroom, there have been supporters and critics. In his article, "The Rise and Fall of the Modes of Discourse," Connors goes into greater detail of the modes he discusses in "Personal Writing Assignments." These modes under which most students have been taught to write came under attack in the late 1920s (449). One such mode – exposition – became widely popular by the 1940s, even becoming more popular
than the "general' modal freshmen composition course" (450). The other modes did not entirely disappear, but rather found homes in more specialized courses rather than in a general composition class (450). Narrative and descriptive writing laid the foundation for most creative writing courses while argumentation was pushed more from the composition classrooms and found a place within Speech courses (450). The specific modes that Bain referred to may have diminished within the college classroom after the 1940s, but because of the pedagogical power of textbooks, these modes still trickled down to the high school level and perhaps had more staying power with teachers who must prepare their students to be able to know all types of writing.

Personal writing has gained even more popularity in the recent past due in large part to Expressivist pedagogy. For those who are heavily involved in Expressivist pedagogy, personal writing is a necessity. A pedagogy that developed in the 1960s and 1970s (heavily influenced by Elbow, Macrorie, Murray, and others), Expressivism encourages writing that focuses on the individual and their opinions, their personal growth, and their voices as writers. In his article, "Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice," Christopher Burnham states that "Expressivism originated in opposition to mainstream practice, offering an alternative to current-traditional teaching" (27). Teachers who have aligned themselves with Expressivism often make the students' voice a focus in the writing process. This focus on voice "symbolizes the expressivist value system" (Burnham 23). Followers of the pedagogy also "work to subvert teaching practices and institutional structures that oppress, appropriate, or silences an individual’s voice (Burnham 23). In an Expressivist classroom, clearly personal writing remains a heavy focus. There is, however, a clear line that exists between those scholars that
believe writing should center on the student, and writing that should center on writing for the community.

From some scholars’ perspectives (Christie, Gilbert, Smagorinsky), keeping the sole focus on personal writing can hinder a student’s ability to gain more awareness of the world around them. If students are continually taught to only look to what they know to compose all of types of writing, they are not learning to look at things critically. Most critics of Expressivism and personal writing agree, as Connors states, “the question persists as to what place telling personal stories and citing personal observations should have in the process of teaching students to write” (179). Sometimes high school teachers begin the year with personal writing and use it often because they believe it is the easiest way to encourage a student to start writing. Unfortunately, teachers are always going to have students in their classrooms who don’t want to write, or don’t want to do anything for that matter. Starting off the school year having students write a personal narrative isn’t going to magically make them want to write the rest of the school year. Even if teachers are able to motivate students with personal writing, in the end it doesn’t matter if the curriculum is less challenging. Many students have no idea how to write academically. There is value in teaching them to write in this manner. Critics of expressive writing argue that this type of writing will hold the most transfer value for students. Teaching students to be critical viewers of texts and the world around them is skill they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

In 1995, Sandra Stotsky published an article titled, “The Uses and Limitations of Personal or Personalized Writing in Writing Theory, Research, and Instruction,” that examines the uses of and effects of personal writing in the classroom. Stotsky questions
the shift to heavy use of personal writing in the classroom. She states, "Just as any
wholesome practice may be carried to an unproductive extreme, so too, it seems, may the
emphasis placed on the student's life experiences in the design of writing assignments for
the English language arts and other disciplines" (758). Stotsky's focus is to find out
whether or not the shift to personal writing in specifically the K-12 classroom is a
warranted shift (761). She makes her case;

If we agree that the goals of any reasonable curriculum should include
helping students learn both about the world they inhabit and how to write
effectively on a variety of topics for a variety of purposes and audiences,
then we should want to find out if there is evidence to suggest that writing
assignments that ask students to focus on their life experiences or to
ground their understanding of what they read in these experiences have
helped schools achieve their purposes, thus supporting the emphasis
placed on these kinds of writing assignments (761).

After examining empirical evidence of heavy reliance on personal writing in the K-12
classroom, Stotsky claims that a strong emphasis on personal writing is problematic:
the results of the research studies suggest that an excessive emphasis on
personal or personalized writing, at least as it has been taught or used, is
not warranted, underscoring the need for educators and researchers to
examine empirically any theoretical claims and strongly advocated
pedagogical practices, no matter how reasonable and appealing these
beliefs and practices may seem (759).
If indeed focusing so heavily on personal writing can hinder a student’s ability to
grow as writers and critical thinkers, I question whether high school curricula should
emphasize that type of writing so much, especially since the Common Core State
Standards (CCSS) have now focused more on higher-order analytical skills such as
analyzing, synthesizing, inferring, connecting, applying, and argumentation. It is my job
as a teacher to constantly challenge my students and ensure that they show growth, and I
want to provide them with skills necessary to succeed. Right now with the new changes
in education that compass points towards helping students develop higher-level critical
thinking skills and cognitive awareness of the world around them. This study takes a
closer look at how teachers and students alike see personal writing in the high school
classroom.

For this study, I surveyed approximately thirty students from each grades nine
through twelve at Effingham High School. Through the surveys, I was able to gain more
insight into student perceptions and attitudes about personal writing. When taking the
survey, all students were provided with the following definition of personal writing at the
top of their surveys: **Personal Writing: A type of writing that requires students to create a
piece that is heavily influenced by their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.** Students
then answered the following survey questions:

1) How often have you been asked to write a personal essay in your classes?

2) Have you ever been asked to write a personal essay in a class other than

   English? If yes, what class?

3) Have you ever been ASKED to share your personal essay in class?

4) Have you ever been FORCED to share your personal essay in class?
5) Do you feel that you have benefitted from writing a personal essay?

6) How do teachers evaluate and grade your personal writing?

In asking students these questions, I hoped to gain some insight into how students react to personal writing assignments, as well as how they feel they are graded on personal writing assignments.

I also surveyed my colleagues at Effingham High School. I surveyed the entire faculty in the English Department as well as non-English teachers. I wanted to gain some insight as to how my colleagues were using this type of writing and how often. I gave the English teachers the following questions:

1) How often do you use personal writing in your classroom?

2) What purpose do your personal writing assignments serve?

3) How do you evaluate personal writing?

4) How can evaluating personal writing be easy?

5) How can evaluating personal writing be difficult?

6) Have you ever run into an issue using personal writing in your classroom? Explain.

7) Do you have students share their personal essays with classmates? If so, in what manner? (whole class, small groups, partners, etc.).

Non-English teachers (Math, Science, Social Studies, P.E.) were given the same questions as the English teachers as well as the same definition of personal writing as the students. If non-English teachers did not use personal writing, they simply stated so and were finished with the survey.
Though Stotsky has already examined personal writing based in empirical evidence in the K-12 classroom and made substantial claims regarding the downfalls of too much focus on personal writing, I feel there is still more research to be done, especially in light of the Common Core State Standards. These standards have brought a more rigorous focus to student learning. With a stronger emphasis on argumentative and source-based writing, high school educators need to reexamine if or how personal writing should fit into the curriculum.
Chapter 1 – The History and Use of Personal Writing in the Classroom

As noted in the previous chapter, personal writing hasn’t always been included in the studies of students, but has found its way, and has become increasingly popular over time. Robert J. Connors notes in his essay “Personal Writing Assignments,” that instructors were more concerned with “the concept of synthesis” in which students would include no concept of the self in his writing (168). This “formulaic way” of for teaching writing transformed most composition classrooms. By the 1890s, “the two personal modes – narration and description – became the first elements of composition taught in most classes. Commonly there were whole chapters devoted to these modes, and narration and description were the gates through which personal writing entered composition instruction” (173). Since the 1890s personal writing has been a part of composition classrooms. Connors also states that “It was John M. Hart’s very popular Manual of Composition and Rhetoric of 1870, however, that really opened the floodgates to personal writing in composition courses” (173). Hart included several different topics in his text that ranged “from simple to complex” (173). Students were asked to write about several topics like objects, transactions, abstract subjects, imaginary subjects, personal narratives (i.e. “How I Spent My Vacation”), and descriptions (173).

The writer’s voice remains a focal point in the personal piece. Anne Ruggles Gere states that “Authenticity, ownership, and empowerment are key terms…” (204). Everything about the writing process is centered on the student. In these “’teacherless’ classrooms” the responsibility of learning is handed over to the students (Burnham 23). A student-centered classroom is certainly how it should be. We know students retain more information when they are engaged and a direct part of the learning process. It’s no secret
that students get more out of the material/lesson when they are not be lectured to for forty-five minutes. In Expressivist pedagogy, which has deeply influenced high school writing classrooms and the National Writing Project, “writing is a process of discovering meaning through shifting back and forth from participant to spectator modes, and writing involves interaction between self and subject” (Burnham 24). It is, however, this constant focus on the self that continues to raise questions with critics.

Though personal writing became more common in the writing classroom after the 1890s, it was not the dominant type of writing in the classroom. It merely became a part of the composition class. As Connors explains, there was certainly backlash against the increased use of personal writing within in the classroom. In fact, in 1895, George P. Baker’s *Principles of Argumentation* completely rejected the personal writing mode and instead relied on the objective, research style, which went over very well (178). Critics of Expressivism (Berlin, Connors, et al.) and how it still influences high school and college composition classrooms often argue that we live in a self-absorbed culture and many students are unaware of events occurring outside of the small bubble in which they live. Many teachers in high school composition classrooms still employ the use of personal writing on a regular basis, most of the time assuming that all students find it easy to complete assignments because it involves research of the self. When completing a personal writing assignment, students are asked to write about their feelings, or talk about a vacation, make up their own story, or tell a story about a time when they were sad, or afraid, or happy. Some teachers also employ the use of open-ended journals as a focus activity at the beginning of a class period. It’s possible that in many composition classrooms today, personal and narrative writing assignments have become a heavy focus
because students are often encouraged to “write what they know,” a common adage among high school and college writing teachers.

That has been the way that teachers have been able to get their students writing, by giving them topics that they know. By constantly posing topics that students can relate their personal experience to, students might not be getting enough practice locating, evaluating, and incorporating meaningful sources into their writing. By focusing on personal writing assignments, teachers might not be preparing students to write in other curricular areas or the workforce. What is more concerning, however, is that many times teachers often lose sight of the purpose they want personal writing assignments to serve. Teachers might keep using this type of writing perhaps because they see that it is “easier” for the student to complete the assignment because they have more to write about.

Stotsky also discusses that encouraging students to “write about their personal experiences suggests to students that their personal feelings and lives are appropriate content for the curriculum and for sharing with others in the classroom” (764). It is possible students could reveal details about their own lives that would have to be shared with a counselor or administration. It's easy to see how students can become too focused on themselves and lose sight of other important aspects such as writing logical arguments and evaluating and incorporating sources. Some critics have even gone so far as to say that personal writing is waste of students’ time. Christopher Burnham addresses this concern in his article titled, “Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice.” Burnham states, “expressivism’s concern with the individual and authentic voice directs students away from social and political problems in the material world” (28). He also states that “students need training in the conventions of academic discourse, so they can
succeed in the institutions that will provide them access to economic and social power” (31). Critics argue that continuing to only ask students to complete writing assignments that are only based in what they know will hinder students’ ability to think more critically. If students are constantly asked to only write about things they know, it will become more and more difficult for them to learn anything new. Keeping the focus on personal writing could hinder a student’s ability to gain more awareness of the world around them. A teacher’s job is to constantly challenge students and ensure that they show growth. In order to be able to do that, students need to be provided with the skills necessary to succeed. Right now with the new changes in education (CCSS) teachers need to make sure, more now than ever, that they are helping students develop critical thinking skills and cognitive awareness of the world around them.

As a high school English teacher who wants my students to succeed in college and workplace writing, I question the transfer value of personal writing. I am skeptical whether personal narratives are effective assignments to prepare students to write in other high school courses, in college, and in the workplace. Likewise, I question whether high school curricula should emphasize that type of writing so much, especially since the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have now focused more on higher-order analytical skills such as analyzing, synthesizing, inferring, connecting, applying, etc. The CCSS are a rigorous set of standards that convey high expectations for all students. According to corestandards.org, the standards are:

1) Research and evidence based
2) Clear, understandable, and consistent
3) Aligned with college and career expectations
4) Based on rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills

5) Built upon the strengths and lessons of current state standards

6) Informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society.

Even though the Social Studies Standards and the Science and Technical Subjects Standards are not completely finished, it has already been decided that these subjects will not include narrative writing within their writing standards. With the recent changes in standards for K-12 institutions, the CCSS still include narrative writing in the standards, but the focus seems to be more on the analytical part of writing. In the CCSS, there are three major strands in the writing standards – two of those three consist of argument and source-based writing and also include narrative writing. Narrative writing is included at all levels – kindergarten through twelfth grade – and has its very own designated standard.

This new focus on narrative writing differs greatly from Illinois Learning Standards. Students are now being held to a much high level of thinking, and more details are explicitly mentioned throughout the standard. Narrative writing was included in State Goal 3 of the Illinois Learning Standards and is only briefly mentioned. It is first mentioned in the early elementary standard, that states, “(3.C.1a) Write for a variety of purposes including description, information, explanation, persuasion and narration” (isbe.net). Narrative writing is again mentioned at the late elementary level, which states, “(3.C.2a) Write for a variety of purposes and for specified audiences in a variety of forms including narrative (e.g., fiction, autobiography), expository (e.g., reports, essays) and
persuasive writings (e.g., editorials, advertisements)” (isbe.net). Narrative writing is again mentioned in the middle/junior high standard that states, “(3.C.3a) Compose narrative, informative, and persuasive writings (e.g., in addition to previous writings, literature reviews, instructions, news articles, correspondence) for a specified audience” (isbe.net). Narrative writing is left out of the early high school standard but appears again in the late high school standard which state, “(3.C.5a) Communicate information and ideas in narrative, informative and persuasive writing with clarity and effectiveness in a variety of written forms using appropriate traditional and/or electronic formats; adapt content, vocabulary, voice and tone to the audience, purpose and situation” (isbe.net).

There is no other guidance given to teachers on how to approach narrative writing. The standards simply state that narrative writing should be covered. Frequency of incorporating this type of writing is also not mentioned. Clearly, there is a huge shift with the narrative writing standard included in the CCSS. It is detailed and explicit about expectations for students at all grade levels. The chart below shows the narrative standards for each grade level. In the chart, words that are bolded signal parts significant to narrative writing and higher-order thinking skills.

**Figure 1.1 – Common Core State Standards Narrative Writing Strand**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.K.3</td>
<td>Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to <strong>narrate a single event</strong> or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.1.3</td>
<td><strong>Write narratives</strong> in which they <strong>recount</strong> two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, <strong>use temporal words</strong> to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Grade</td>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.2.3</td>
<td><strong>Write narratives</strong> in which they <strong>recount</strong> a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Write narratives</strong> to develop real or imagined experiences or events using...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.x.x</td>
<td>Narrative Focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Third Grade| CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.3.3 | **Write narratives** to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.a 
**Orient the reader** by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.b 
**Use dialogue and description** to develop experiences and events or **show the responses of characters to situations.** 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.c 
**Use a variety of transitional words and phrases** to manage the sequence of events. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.d 
**Use concrete words and phrases** and sensory details to **convey experiences** and events precisely. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3.e 
**Provide a conclusion** that follows from the narrated experiences or events. |
| Fourth Grade| CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3 | **Write narratives** to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.a 
**Orient the reader** by establishing a situation and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.b 
**Use narrative techniques**, such as dialogue, description, and pacing, to develop experiences and events or **show the responses of characters to situations.** 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.c 
**Use a variety of transitional words, phrases, and clauses** to **manage the sequence of events.** 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.d 
**Use concrete words and phrases** and sensory details to **convey experiences** and events precisely. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3.e 
**Provide a conclusion** that follows from the narrated experiences or events. |
| Fifth Grade | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.3 | **Write narratives** to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.a 
**Engage and orient** the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally. |
| Sixth Grade | CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3 | **Write narratives** to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences. 
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.a 
**Provide a conclusion** that follows from the narrated experiences or events. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Grade</td>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3</strong></td>
<td>and logically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use <strong>narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, and description,</td>
<td>to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence</td>
<td>and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory</td>
<td>language to <strong>convey</strong> experiences and events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from the narrated experiences or events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Grade</td>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Write narratives</strong> to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view</td>
<td>descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence</td>
<td><strong>Engage and orient</strong> the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>that unfolds naturally and logically.</td>
<td>characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use <strong>narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, and description,</td>
<td><strong>Use narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or</td>
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<td>to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to <strong>convey</strong></td>
<td><strong>Use narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or</td>
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<td><strong>sequence</strong> and signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another.</td>
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<td>Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory</td>
<td>**Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and</td>
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<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from and <strong>reflects</strong> on the narrated</td>
<td>convey experiences and events.</td>
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<td>experiences or events.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eighth Grade</td>
<td><strong>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Write narratives</strong> to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and point of view</td>
<td>descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence</td>
<td><strong>Engage and orient</strong> the reader by establishing a context and point of view and introducing a narrator and/or</td>
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<td>that unfolds naturally and logically.</td>
<td>characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use <strong>narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and</td>
<td><strong>Use narrative techniques</strong>, such as dialogue, pacing, description, and reflection, to develop experiences,</td>
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<td>reflection, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.</td>
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<td>Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to <strong>convey</strong></td>
<td>**Use a variety of transition words, phrases, and clauses to convey sequence, signal shifts from one time frame or</td>
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<td><strong>sequence</strong>, signal shifts from one time frame or setting to another,</td>
<td>setting to another, and show the relationships among experiences and events.</td>
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<td>Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory</td>
<td>**Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and</td>
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<td>language to <strong>capture</strong> the action and <strong>convey</strong> experiences and events.</td>
<td><strong>convey</strong> experiences and events.</td>
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<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from and <strong>reflects</strong> on the narrated</td>
<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from and <strong>reflects</strong> on the narrated experiences or events.</td>
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<td>Eighth Grade</td>
<td>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.a</td>
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<td>Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grades 9-10</td>
<td>Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.c</td>
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<td>CCSS.ELA-</td>
<td>Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.d</td>
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<td>Literacy.W.9-10.3</td>
<td>Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.e</td>
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<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Grades 11-12</th>
<th>Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.a</th>
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<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-</td>
<td>Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy.W.11-12.3</td>
<td>Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.c</td>
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<td>Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or resolution). CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.d</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3.e</td>
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<td>Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.</td>
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The narrative standard is very detailed, and it is important to note that throughout the grades levels the standards state that the event students choose to write about can be real or imagined. However, upon close reading of the standard, it is clear that the
narrative structure is the focus of the standard. Throughout this standard, students are consistently being asked to focus on the sequence of events, develop characters, use sensory language, and provide a fitting conclusion. Students are given the foundation of the narrative structure, and then they are to build upon it as the progress through the grades.

Schools across the nation (forty-five out of the fifty states) have chosen to interpret these standards differently in terms of incorporating and aligning curricula; however, the rigorous expectations are still the same for all. For instance, the Common Core website gives a general overview of what is expected of students within the writing standards. In the “Key Points in English Language Arts” section it highlights the focus of the writing standards, which is not on narrative writing. The website emphasizes argument and research:

...the ability to write logical arguments based on substantive claims, sound reasoning, and relevant evidence is a cornerstone of the writing standards, with opinion writing—a basic form of argument—extending down into the earliest grades.

Research—both short, focused projects (such as those commonly required in the workplace) and longer term in depth research—is emphasized throughout the standards but most prominently in the writing strand since a written analysis and presentation of findings is so often critical (corestandards.org).

In this section it is clear what the Common Core Standards ultimately expect from students’ writing. The standards expect students to be able to write in an academic and
sophisticated manner. The introduction to the writing standards states, “Each year in their writing, students should demonstrate increasing sophistication in all aspects of language use, from vocabulary and syntax to the development and organization of ideas, and they should address increasingly demanding content and sources. Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards and retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades” (corestandards.org). The focus for students writing has shifted to more argument and source-based writing, which is also clear in the new assessments that many states are adopting.

Illinois, along with eighteen other states, has also become a member of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium. This consortium is working to develop assessments for kindergarten through twelfth grade that test important English and math skills that are needed for college and career readiness. This type of testing will be much different than the most common ACT and SAT tests and will be implemented starting in the 2014-2015 school year. Tests will be taken multiple times throughout the school year (diagnostic assessments, mid-year assessments, performance-based assessments, and end of the year assessments) and students will be asked to demonstrate mastery of skills. The writing portions of these assessments do not ask students their opinion about random topics. Students are asked to analyze reading passages and use text-based evidence to defend their answers. One question on the sample online test asks students, “use what you have learned from reading ‘Daedalus and Icarus’ by Ovid and ‘To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph’ by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms ‘Daedalus and Icarus.’ Develop your claim(s) of how Sexton transforms
‘Daedalus and Icarus’ with evidence from both texts” (parcconline.org). This type of question calls for students to craft a very analytic response to the texts. Nowhere does it ask students to draw on any of their own thoughts or personal experience. Though there is a narrative writing component included on the PARCC assessment test, once again, the questions do not ask for students to draw on personal experience to complete the question. All of the narrative questions are text based. For example, on the sample practice test that is available online at parcconline.org, grade nine students are asked to read a passage from Dickens’ *Bleak House* and asked to pay close attention to the conversation happening in the passage. Students are then given the following prompt: “This passage is written as a first person narrative told from Miss Summerson’s point of view. Write narrative story that describes the major events in the passage from the point of view of the stranger, emphasizing his thoughts and feelings about Mr. Skimpole, Miss Summerson, and Richard” (parcconline.org). Questions like these are where it is important that a student has background knowledge on narrative structure. In order to succeed in answering this question, the students must craft his or her response based on information from the text as well as craft it in the proper structure. It is most important to note, however, that even though this type of question is asking students to write a story, it is still a *text-based* question that requires an analytical response in narrative form.

If these are the types of questions high school students are being required to answer on standardized tests, teachers should want to be able to be able to provide them with the proper writing instruction necessary for them to succeed on these tests, as well as in college and the workplace. If that means shying away from the multiple personal writing assignments that are currently in high school English curricula, then teachers
should consider taking a closer look at the types of writing assignments being used in the classroom.

Currently, our English department at Effingham High School is taking much closer look at the curricula we offer our students at Effingham High School. Of course this closer look was prompted by the shift to the Common Core State Standards, but most educators know that it always important to evaluate and assess the curricula in a meaningful way. We are evaluating each of the English classes we offer based on the CCSS. Hopefully the data gathered from this study will help us make decisions when updating our current curriculum.
Chapter 2 – Student Reactions to Personal Writing

For this study, Effingham High School students were surveyed on their attitudes towards personal writing in the classroom. Approximately thirty students from each grade level (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) were given a survey about personal writing. A total of 116 students participated in the survey. The survey defined personal writing for all students: *A type of writing that requires students to create a piece that is heavily influenced by their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.* Students were asked to answer a survey that consisted of six questions (See Introduction and Appendix A). There was space available on the survey after each question for students to also write an explanation after answering the survey question. It was important to gather data from students at all grade levels because the level of cognition among high school students varies greatly, therefore so would their answers towards personal writing. Asking freshmen through seniors asked for responses from a wide variety of intellects and maturity levels.

The first question students were asked to answer how often they have been asked to write a personal essay in English class. By asking this question, I wanted to see the frequency in which this type of writing was being used throughout our department and school. After examining the freshmen surveys, I found that all freshmen who had been surveyed had always done some sort of personal writing in one of their classes. Fifty percent of the freshmen said they had used personal writing between one and five times, and 50% of freshmen said they had been asked to use personal writing more than five times. Of the sophomores surveyed, less than one percent said they had never used personal writing in the classroom, 76% of sophomores stated they had been asked to
complete a personal writing assignment one to five times, and 18% of sophomores confirmed they have used personal writing more than five times. Of the junior students surveyed, none said they have never done any personal writing, Eighty-five percent stated they had been asked to use personal writing one to five times, and a little over 15% said they had used personal writing over five times. Of the seniors surveyed, all had used personal writing at some point. Thirty-two percent confirmed they used personal writing less than five times, and 68% reported they were asked to use personal writing more than five times. Students did not provide any additional comments after this question. The chart below shows students’ response to this question:

![Figure 2.1: How often have you been asked to write a personal essay?](image)

With all grade levels combined, here are the findings:

- 2% (n = 2) stated they had never used personal writing
- 61% (n = 71) stated they have used personal writing one to five times
- 37% (n = 43) stated they have used personal writing more than five times in their classes
The second question students were asked was if they had been asked to write a personal essay in any other class other than English and if the answer was yes, they were then instructed to write down which class. Knowing which classes, if any at all, are asking students to write personal pieces, is an attempt to gain insight into the transfer value of personal writing. Forty-three percent of freshmen students surveyed stated that they have been asked to use personal writing in other classes, and the other 57% said they have never been asked to use personal writing in other classes besides English. When sophomores were asked if they did any personal writing in other classes other than English, 55% confirmed they have not used personal writing in other classes, and 45% stated they had. Thirty-three percent of juniors reported that had not be asked to write a personal essay in a class other than English, and 67% said they had been asked to write a personal essay in class other than English. Finally, 32% of seniors reported they had never been asked to write a personal essay in another class, and 68% said they had been asked. Students did not provide any additional comments after this question. The chart below shows students’ responses to this question:

Figure 2.2: Have you ever been asked to write a personal essay in another class?
Below are the results of all grade levels combined:

- 55% (n = 52) stated they had been asked to do personal writing in other classes
- 45% (n = 64) had not been asked to do personal writing in other classes

For the second part of the question, students were asked to identify the classes in which they were asked to complete a personal writing assignment. Freshmen students reported that they were asked to do some sort of personal writing in Computer Applications, Life Science, Spanish, Technology, Band, World Civilizations, Health, Math, and Contemporary World History. Sophomore students said they were asked to use some type of personal writing in Biology, Social Studies, Speech, and Health. Junior students reported they were asked to use personal writing in history, foreign language, Biology, and Band. Finally, seniors confirmed that they had been asked to personal writing in speech, history classes, foreign language classes, and Band.

The third question asked if students have ever been asked to share their personal writing in class. Of the freshmen surveyed, 27% reported they had never been asked to share their personal writing in class, and 73% said they had been asked to share their personal writing in class. Of the sophomores that were surveyed, 48% stated they had never been asked to share their personal writing, and 52% reported they had been asked to share. Twenty-six percent of the juniors confirmed they had never been asked to share their personal writing, and 74% said they had been asked to share their personal writing. Finally, of the seniors surveyed, 14% said they had not been asked to share, and 86% reported they had been asked to share their personal writing. The chart below shows student responses to this question:
Out of the total students surveyed, these are the results:

- 30% (n = 35) said they had not been asked to share personal writing
- 70% (n = 82) of student surveyed reported that they had been asked to share their personal writing at some point

Some students provided responses after this question. Student responses are listed below:

- “Yes, I love reading in front of people.”
- “Yes, Everytime we write one.”
- “Yes but decided not to share.”
- “We have the opportunity to if we want, but you don’t have to.”
- “Yes I did share cause it was an assignment.”
- “Not really, and before they did in some situations I talked to them in order to avoid it.”
- “Yes, I enjoy expressing my feelings.”
• "Yes, but I don’t like to share unless I have to."

• "Yes, I have had teachers ask if it was okay for them to read all or parts of my essays in class."

• "No. They were entirely confidential."

• "Yes, but I prefer not to."

• "Yes. Those who shared would receive extra credit."

• "No, Even if I was asked, I would most likely not share."

Of the students who provided responses, 54% (n = 7) of students either didn’t want to share their personal writing, or felt like they had to share their personal writing. Also, all of the students who said they were not asked to share, said they wouldn’t have shared anyway. Of the students who said they did share, 31% (n = 4) felt pressured to share because sharing their piece was tied to their grade. Only two of the students who reported that they shared actually wanted to volunteer to share their personal writing.

Students were then asked if they have ever been forced to share a personal essay in class. Of the freshmen surveyed, 77% said they had never been forced to share their personal writing in class with other students, and 23% reported they were forced at some time to share their personal writing. Eighty-eight percent of sophomores stated that they had never been forced to share their personal writing, and 12% said they had been forced to share their personal writing in class. Of the juniors surveyed, 74% reported they had never been forced to share their personal writing in class, and 26% said they had been forced to share their personal writing in class. Finally, 74% of seniors confirmed they had never been forced to share their personal writing, while 26% stated they had been forced
to share their personal writing in class. The chart pictured below shows the responses from students:

**Figure 2.4: Have you ever been forced to share your personal writing?**

Listed below are the responses of the total number of students:

- 77% (n = 90) of students stated they had never been forced to share their personal writing
- 23% (n = 24) of students said they had been forced to share their personal writing

A few students shared additional comments for this question. They are listed below:

- “If I want full participation points I have to share.”
- “No, but I’d be given a 0.”
- “No, teachers don’t make me share my personal life with the class.”
- “Yes it was part of the grade to read the essay to the class.”
• “No, I have been asked but never forced to share a personal essay because my teachers have always respected my privacy.”
• “Yes, many times if I do not volunteer it’s because I am not confident in my opinions or feel comfortable sharing them, but being forced to makes it worse because it is sometimes embarrassing.”
• “Yes we had to share journals.”
• “Yes in my English class, which made me very uncomfortable.”
• “Yes. It makes you feel very uncomfortable and self-conscious.”
• “No. Most teachers understand that a student doesn’t want to share personal information.”

Seventy percent (n = 7) of the students who left comments for this question suggest that if they did not share their personal writing it would affect their grade. Most of the 70% of students also stated their reluctance to share. Only 30% (n = 3) of the students who commented reported that teachers didn’t make them share due the personal nature of the prompt.

Students were then asked if they felt if they had benefitted from using personal writing. Of the freshmen surveyed, 46% stated they did not feel that they had benefitted from personal writing, 46% said they felt that they did benefit from personal writing, and 7% reported they were unsure. Of the sophomores, 33% stated they did not felt that they benefitted from personal writing, and 67% said they did feel that they saw benefits in personal writing. Thirty-three percent of the juniors surveyed confirmed they did not benefit from personal writing, and 67% stated they did. Finally, only 14% of seniors reported they felt that they did not benefit from personal writing, and 86% said they did.
Below are the results of all grade levels combined:

- 32% (n = 37) said they did not feel they had benefited from personal writing
- 66% (n = 77) said they had felt the benefits of personal writing
- 2% (n = 2) were not sure

After this question, many students provided feedback after they answered the question. Feedback provided by students is listed below:

- “No because I don’t want people to know my personal life that I don’t know who they are.”
- “Yes. I feel like I apply my life to school more.”
- “Maybe. If I learn something.”
- “Yes if I get a good grade. No if I didn’t.”
- “No because I’m just writing what’s already in my head. I don’t see a point.”
• "Yes. A better understanding of myself."
• "I don’t think I benefitted from it very much."
• "Yes, it’s a different experience than normal school."
• "Meh." [haha...I had to include that. I’ll take it out of the next draft.]
• "Yes. I like them because it allows me to voice an opinion about something without shyness getting in the way."
• "Yes. More than once. It if I wrote something about a problem, it helped me work through it."
• "Yes. Sometimes I learn more about myself."
• Yes, definitely! I think it helps you explore yourself, as well as sharing – I think it’s good to get feelings and experiences out there. It helps you grow as an individual."
• "No because I feel like personal essays are more opinion based and less structured. There are times when writing personal essays can be uncomfortable as well."
• "No I don’t like writing personal essays."
• "No because I feel uncomfortable with others (even the teacher) reading it."
• "Yes, it helps me express my opinion but I do not think being forced to helps because many people are uncomfortable sharing their opinions."
• "Yes because it gives me a chance to express myself."
• "No. I know my feelings already, so I don’t think writing them helps me."
• “No. Personal writing is easy but uncomfortable to know someone would be reading it.”

• “Yes. They help me learn how to better analyze and organize how I feel so that I can share it with the world and be more likely to leave an impact.”

• “Yes, it’s good to write using your own knowledge. It helps kids realize their thoughts matter.”

• “I believe I benefit from writing my feelings, but not sharing them.”

• “Yes it makes writing more enjoyable.”

• “Not really because I already know my feelings on the topic.”

• “Personally, I have benefitted from personal writing because it provides an opportunity to reflect, and for the teacher to get to know me better.”

Sixty-one percent (n = 16) of students who left comments felt that they did benefit from personal writing in some way. The students who answered yes overall felt that it helped them on a personal level, but not necessarily on an academic level. Thirty-eight percent (n = 10) of students who commented said they did not feel they had benefitted from personal writing. Those students who didn’t feel that they benefitted from personal writing all made a comment about not being comfortable with others reading their personal piece.

The last question students were asked was how they felt teachers evaluated their personal writing assignments. Students had the following options to choose from on the survey: using a rubric, grammar only, length, like any other writing assignment, differently that other writing assignments, or not sure. Freshmen data showed that 57% stated their teachers used a specific rubric for grading personal writing, 21% of freshmen
felt that teachers graded their personal writing just based on grammar, 3% reported they felt that teachers graded it just like any other writing assignment, 14% felt their personal writing assignments were graded differently than other writing assignments, and 7% said they weren’t sure. Sophomore data showed that 3% said their teachers used a specific rubric for grading personal writing, 45% of sophomores felt that teachers graded their personal writing just based on grammar, no sophomores said they felt that teachers graded it just like any other writing assignment, 6% felt their personal writing assignments were graded differently than other writing assignments, and less than 45% stated they weren’t sure. Junior data showed that 12% confirmed their teachers used a specific rubric for grading personal writing, 37% of juniors felt that teachers graded their personal writing just based on grammar, 4% said they felt that teachers graded it just like any other writing assignment. 7% felt their personal writing assignments were graded differently than other writing assignments, and less than 41% stated they weren’t sure. Senior data showed that 11% said their teachers used a specific rubric for grading personal writing, 28% of seniors felt that teachers graded their personal writing just based on grammar, 11% said they felt that teachers graded it just like any other writing assignment, 4% felt their personal writing assignments were graded differently than other writing assignments, and less than 46% reported they weren’t sure. The chart below shows the data for this question:
The chart below shows students’ response to this question:

- 20% (n = 23) said their teachers used a specific rubric for grading personal writing
- 37% (n = 39) of all students surveyed felt that teachers graded their personal writing just based on grammar,
- 4% (n = 5) said they felt that teachers graded it just like any other writing assignment
- 8% (n = 9) felt their personal writing assignments were graded differently than other writing assignments
- 35% (n = 41) said they weren’t sure

Once again, after answering the question, students were provided space for comments. Students added comments for this question. The comments are listed below:

- “They see what my life is about and if it doesn’t seem made up they grade them.”
• “They read it and fix my grammar errors.”
• “If you try or not.”
• “By common sense if it is understandable.”
• “In my opinion, teachers use one set of rules to grade everyone’s essay, when everyone has a different style and it’s not fair.”
• “They usually give a lot of creative liberty.”
• “Probably the same as the other essays, but a little different because it’s about you, not a set subject that they can say wrongs about. They can’t say your opinions and feelings are wrong.”
• “Teacher cannot really grade based on a story if it is personal.”
• “They are lenient on it since it’s your personal story. They mainly focus on grammar and punctuation.”
• “Based on grammar and technique, not so much on content.”
• “I think they do it fairly about grammar and content.”
• “I think it’s a lot about description and depth in your writing, but also about the quality of whatever story or experience you’re trying to convey. But overall, I think just the style and quality of your writing is the important – or at least it should be.”
• “The amount of effort, punctuation, spelling, etc. Not so much the context of the work since it was our own and personal/opinionated; more so just English and grammar.”
• “Much differently than normal/other papers. They do not correct our own thoughts.”
• "There is typically a rubric, but I am of the opinion that essay grading can be highly subjective."

• "I feel like some teachers have a bias against certain students even when it is personal writing. Even if you wrote an amazing personal essay they would still think you only deserve the grade they think based on other work you have completed."

• "They are more lenient."

• "Mostly on grammar and structure rather than based on the personal information."

• "I think teachers are more lenient when it comes to personal writing because they make find it difficult to mark off on personal experience."

• "It's really hard to tell if they're grading you through your work or through your experience. Sometimes it feels like a teacher could judge or be bias because of the personalness of the writing."

• "I feel like teachers are biased when grading personal writing."

• "Very hard. To. The. Rubric! Very standardized. If I want to get a good grade, I know I must always psychoanalyze the teacher, figure out what the ideal essay looks like in their mind, then recreate that. Creativity is punished in high school...."

• "Most don't grade on content but on grammar or something of that sort."

• "Participation only."

• "I feel like they grade based on literary elements and structure, not on content or topic."
• “I think they base it off of content and grammar. I don’t feel that they judge based on what is inside the essay.”

• “Unfairly. It’s almost like teachers don’t know how to grade them. Also it could be a bit offensive.”

For the comments listed, 33% (n = 9) of students stated that they felt that teachers only graded their personal pieces based on grammar and mechanics. Eighteen percent (n = 5) of students felt that teachers couldn’t really grade the writing if it was personal. Twenty-six percent (n = 7) of the students who commented felt that teachers were very biased when grading personal writing. Seven percent (n = 2) of students reported that they felt teachers graded their personal pieces unfairly, and 1% (n = 4) of students said they felt that the over style of their writing was the most important to the teacher.

In the chapter that follows, I will present findings about teachers’ perceptions related to personal and narrative writing in high school classrooms.
Chapter 3 – Teacher Reactions to Student Writing

For this study, the Effingham High School faculty was also surveyed on their reactions to personal writing. The entire English department was surveyed, as well as teachers from other disciplines. All five teachers from the English department participated and eleven teachers from various other disciplines participated. Surveys for English and non-English teachers were the same, with the exception that non-English teachers were provided with the same definition of personal writing as the students. Staff completed surveys that consisted of seven questions (See Introduction and Appendix B). Teachers who did not use personal writing in their classrooms simply stated so and were finished with the survey. Teachers were also provided with space after each question to add any comments. Below the data for teachers is separated into two categories. By separating the data into these categories, I hope to gain more insight into the use of personal writing throughout the school. Though it is presumed that English teachers would use personal writing much more than other disciplines, I want to separate the data to see if that is indeed the case. As a member of the English department, I am familiar with the curricula at all grade levels, as well as how often teachers use personal writing assignments in the classroom. Since I am not as familiar with curricula or teachers’ methods in other content areas, separating the data gives me more insight into other content area’s use of personal writing.

Non-English Teacher Reactions to Personal Writing:

The first question non-English teachers were asked to answer was how often personal writing was used in their classrooms. By asking this question, I was interested to
see just how often my fellow colleagues said they were using personal writing. The list below shows how often non-English teachers use personal writing in their classrooms:

- 0% (n = 0) of non-English teachers use personal writing on a daily basis
- 27% (n = 3) of non-English teachers use personal writing on a weekly basis
- 36% (n = 4) of non-English teachers use personal writing on a monthly basis
- 9% (n = 1) of non-English teachers use personal writing on a yearly basis
- 27% (n = 3) of non-English teachers never use personal writing in their classrooms

Since three teachers stated that they did not use personal writing in their classrooms, they did not continue with the survey. Results listed for the rest of the questions reflect the opinions from teachers who said they use personal writing in their classrooms. Teachers were then asked what purpose their personal writing assignment serve. Below are responses from non-English teachers:

- 25% (n = 2) of non-English teachers stated their personal writing assignments were used to practice proper grammar
- 13% (n = 1) of non-English teachers said stated their personal writing assignments were used to practice new vocabulary
- 63% (n = 5) of non-English teachers reported that their personal writing assignments were used as reflection

For this question, responses from teachers varied. Some non-English teacher responses are included below:
• “Story-telling or artwork interpretation.”

• “To connect grammar and vocab concepts with real life situations.”

• “My writing is in another language, so the purpose is to use new vocabulary in a setting they are comfortable in.”

• “Allow students to share their thoughts and feelings after reading or watching something tied to history.”

• “They are designed to practice the current grammatical concept we are learning or practicing. Plus they allow the student to learn to express his/her own feelings regarding different topics.”

• “Reflections after a discussion or movie.”

• “Most of my assignments require the student to put themselves within a given situation and respond. Most often it is to compare the students’ reasoning to the decision(s) that were made historically.”

• “Usually the assignments are journals asking students to put themselves in the shoes of others throughout history. I want them to be creative but support their thoughts with details.”

When examining these comments, it is interesting to note that the personal writing assignments being used throughout other disciplines are assignments that mostly asking for student’s opinions, and not necessarily asking them to just write about themselves.

The next question teachers were asked was how they evaluate personal writing. Non-English teachers reported the following information:

• 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers stated they usually only give personal writing assignments completion grades
• 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers reported that they use a rubric to evaluate personal writing assignments
• 12% (n = 1) of non-English teachers said they only evaluate personal writing assignments based on grammar
• 12% (n = 1) of non-English teachers stated that they only evaluate personal writing assignments based on style

The next question teachers were asked how evaluating personal writing can be easy. Responses varied greatly, but non-English teachers stated the following:

• 25% (n = 2) of non-English teachers felt that personal writing assignments were less structured, thus making them easier to grade
• 25% (n = 2) stated they easy to grade because of the use of a rubric
• 25% (n = 2)said they were easy to grade because the assignments are enjoyable to grade
• 25% (n = 2) of non-English teachers reiterated that they felt that personal writing assignments were just easier to grade in general

Teachers were provided with space after this question to add comments. Comments from non-English teachers are listed below:

• “By letting students write without a large push on correct grammar or punctuation. Students can be intimidated by trying too hard to get the parts correct.”
• “…because it’s not right or wrong.”
• “I think it’s always easier if I agree with their reasoning…”
For the comments listed, it appears that most non-English teachers find that grading personal writing is easier because most consider it less formal than other types of writing assignments.

Teachers were also asked how evaluating perusal writing can be difficult. Once again, teacher answers varied. Results are listed below:

- 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers found it hard to grade for grammar mistakes
- 12% (n = 1) of non-English teachers felt that they were biased when grading personal writing assignments
- 25% (n = 2) of non-English teachers felt it was hard to be consistent when grading personal writing assignments
- 25% (n = 2) of non-English teachers said that sometimes personal writing assignments can become too personal

Teachers were also give space after this question to provide comments. Comments are listed below:

- “By putting too much emphasis on grammar and punctuation.”
- “You can’t look at what they wrote (content) but how they wrote it. It’s difficult to be impartial.”
- “I am not an English teacher so grammar can be difficult.”
- “It is difficult in that students can vary widely in their responses. I find it is difficult to evaluate pieces of writing consistently.”
- “Students take offense when their personal stories are critiqued.”
- “Responses are very general.”
Concerns non-English teachers have appear to be related to not being exactly sure how they want to grade a student’s personal writing assignment.

When asked if teachers had ever had any issues with personal writing, non-English teachers responded in the following way:

- 38% (n = 3) said they had run into issues with personal writing in their classrooms
- 50% (n = 5) said they had not run into issues with personal writing in their classrooms

Teachers who said they have had issues with personal writing responded with the following comments:

- “Yes...a student shared an entire project that was not appropriate for school...His entire project focused on illegal activities...so I had to give his piece a failing grade.”
- “Students want to express their opinion, but don’t know how do it in an appropriate way.”
- “The only issue is the students choose not to do the assignment.”

The issues teachers have with personal writing assignments vary, but these comments seem to represent the biggest issues: appropriateness and reluctance.

The last question asked to non-English teachers was if they share the personal writing pieces their students compose in their classrooms. Results are listed below:

- 88% (n = 7) of non-English teachers said they do ask students to share their personal writing assignments
12% (n = 1) of non-English teachers said they do not ask students to share their personal writing assignments.

Teachers were also provided space for a comment after this question as well. Non-English teachers had the following responses:

- "Yes usually just through peer editing."
- "It depends. Occasionally, students will read their essays to the class. Usually, however, only a partner might see it..."
- "Only if they (the class) collectively agrees to do so. I usually....use student IDs only. Students then draw the essays at random and share with a partner or in a small group setting."

Non-English teacher data shows that teachers are using personal writing assignments for a variety of purposes in their classrooms. The next section details English department reactions to personal writing.

**English Department Reactions:**

As previously stated, English teachers were given the same survey as the non-English teachers. The first question asked of teachers was how often they used personal writing in their classrooms. Results are listed below:

- 20% (n = 1) of English teachers use personal writing on a daily basis
- 20% (n = 1) of English teachers use personal writing on a weekly basis
- 30% (n = 1) of English teachers use personal writing on a monthly basis
- 40% (n = 1) of English teachers use personal writing on a yearly basis
- 0% (n = 0) of English teachers never use personal writing in their classrooms
The next question English teachers were asked was what purpose their personal writing assignments serve in their classrooms. Responses generally fell into the categories listed below:

- 40% (n = 2) of English teachers use personal writing to gauge student learning
- 20% (n = 1) of English teachers use personal writing for reflection
- 40% (n = 2) of English teachers use personal writing for self-discovery for students

English teachers had the following to say about the purpose of their personal writing assignments:

- “Personal writing assignments build classroom community because through them students are able to share their experiences with their peers and with me. Also, personal writing assignments lend themselves to success for students because everyone has a story to tell.”
- “They are used for me to gauge student understanding of the deeper literary elements we discuss in class. I also use personal writing so that students can write more often, but not always for the larger critical analysis. I find often that if a student can make a personal connection, then that will affect the esthetic impact the story has on that student.”
- “Usually for reflection on a text.”
- “I use personal writing on an assignment for a narrative paper.”
- “My mantra: Think about what you write and write about what you think. Personal writing forces us to think. Students will often say that they know
something. But if they can’t express what they know, it’s no good to them or me. It really is an opportunity for discovery – both for the teacher and the student.”

English Teachers were then asked how they choose to evaluate personal writing in their classrooms. Responses for English teachers fell into the following categories:

- 60% (n = 3) of English teachers said the use a rubric to grade personal writing assignments
- 20% (n = 1) of English teachers stated that they informally evaluate personal writing assignments
- 20% (n = 1) of English teachers reported that they give completion grades for personal writing assignments

Teachers responded with the following comments:

- “I evaluate personal writing the same way as I evaluate most writing tasks – with an analytic rubric created together with the assistance of my students.”
- I evaluated it much more informally than I do any type of analysis or more extended essay response...I usually don’t equate this kind of writing with a large grade because I feel like it is less of a focus for the class.”
- “It’s almost always a completion grade.”
- “I always use a rubric.”
- “I look for these rules to be followed: Has the student used standard written English? Has the student used logic – deductive, inductive, chronological, etc. – with coherence and cohesiveness? Has the student
answered the question and only the question? Has the student written something convincing and sensible and thorough?"

English teachers next responded to the question of how evaluating personal writing can be easy. Responses varied greatly, but English teachers stated the following:

- 40% (n = 2) of English teachers stated that personal writing is enjoyable to read which makes it easier to evaluate
- 20% (n = 1) of English teacher said that personal writing is less structured which makes it easier to grade
- 40% (n = 2) of English teachers reported that they only gave participation grades for personal writing assignments, which makes them easier to grade

Teachers had the following responses:

- “Personal writing can be enjoyable to read which makes the evaluation process less mundane.”
- “I believe that personal writing is usually shorter and less structured than a longer, more formal essay... Personal writing is something we spend less time on, so there is less of a focus attached to it. That makes it quicker for me to grade, which I guess could be considered ‘easier.’”
- “If the writing is simply taken as a participation grade, it’s a matter of giving them points on whether or not they completed the assignment.”
- “It is not, but using a rubric makes it fair and not biased on my part.”
- “The grade could be just a completion grade. Or it could be based on word count. Or just one thing or a combination of things could be graded; just
mechanics; just the thesis; just the support, etc... Personal writing need not be graded at all. In an ideal world we would write every day for an extended length of time. This doesn’t require feedback or a grade. The writing assignment is justified for the discoveries the student makes on his/her own.”

Teachers then reflected on how personal writing could be difficult to evaluate. English teacher’s results to this question are as follows:

- 40% (n = 2) of English teachers felt that personal writing can become too personal, thus making it more difficult to grade
- 40% (n = 2) feel that students lack a connection to the personal writing topics, which makes them harder to grade
- 20% (n = 1) that if there was no rubric to follow, grading would biased

Department members had this to say about the difficulty of assessing personal writing:

- “Students may write about topics that tug at your heartstrings, and while evaluating their work you hope they have distanced themselves from the piece, so they do not view the grade as a reflection of the experience.”
- “Personal writing can be difficult when students do not feel a connection to a text or prompt.”
- “If a rubric is designed for personal writing, the rubric itself becomes difficult to objectively design.”
- “If I didn’t use a rubric it would be biased.”
• “If the prompt is ambiguous, a teacher might get anything in an essay. If the rubric is bad, grading is a bigger chore. The prompt and rubric must have a symbiotic relationship.”

English teachers were also asked if they had ever run into any issue with using personal writing in the classroom. The break-down of teacher responses follows:

• 80% (n = 4) of English teachers said that they had run into an issue with personal writing in their classrooms
• 20% (n = 1) of English teachers said they had not run into any issues with personal writing in their classrooms

Department members had the following to say about having issues with personal writing in their classrooms:

• “At times I have had students write about topics that are of a more personal nature.”
• “Students are often hesitant to write about their authentic feelings in these assignments.”
• “…A student wrote about a personal issue concerning depression and I felt that it needed to be addressed with the counselor.”
• “Sometimes extremely sensitive material is generated… I have had to notify counselors about content in an essay that I must, by law, turn over to authorities.”

The final question English teachers were asked was if they ask students to share their personal writing assignments. English teachers had the following to say:
• 80% \((n = 4)\) of English teachers said they do ask students to share their personal writing in some way

• 20% \((n = 1)\) of English teachers stated that they do not ask students to share their personal writing

English teachers had this to say about students sharing their personal writing assignments:

• “Students have the option to share. I never force them.”

• “When we do peer editing. It’s always they student’s choice who he or she trades with.”

• “Usually in small groups and then for the whole class, on a voluntary basis.”

• “Personal in my class does not mean private. I often offer students the opportunity to read what they write…”

By looking at the overall data and comments from the English department, it is evident that the English department as a whole employs the use of personal writing on a regular basis. All English teachers have specific purposes those writing assignments serve. In the following chapter, conclusions based on student and teacher data will be drawn and implications of the data will be discussed.
Chapter 4 – Conclusions and Implications

When examining the student and teacher data, many patterns emerged. This chapter will discuss those patterns, as well as conclusions and implications drawn from the data. These conclusions and implications will also be compared to what the Common Core State Standards are asking students to master.

The information listed below were some of the most distinct patterns that emerged when the data was analyzed:

- Students say they have benefitted from personal writing, but many admit that they don't know how their teacher evaluated it
- Lower level (freshmen/sophomore) students do more personal writing in other disciplines than upper level (junior/senior) students
- More students from the upper grades have said they have been forced to share their personal writing. Most teachers ask students to share.
- As students’ high school career progresses, there is a steady increase in the number of students who said they were asked to do personal writing in content areas other than English
- As students mature, more students see value in personal writing - seniors claim that they have benefitted the most from personal writing
- Most upper level students reported that they weren't sure how their personal writing assignment were graded
- Most teachers (English and non-English) use rubrics
- Many teachers grade personal writing assignments informally or give a completion grade
• English teachers reported having more issues arise with personal writing than non-English teachers

• Many non-English teachers said the struggle with grading the assignments because they aren't comfortable with grading the grammar

The previous list was a summarization of the patterns. In the next section, however, I will analyze only the most pertinent patterns that will be analyzed are those, especially those that relate to what the Common Core State Standards have in mind for students. Patterns that will be analyzed are listed below:

• Student benefit from personal writing

• The increase of personal writing in other content areas

• Sharing personal writing

• Students’ confusion about assessment of personal writing

• Teacher assessment of personal writing

• Issues that arise when using personal writing

• What teachers consider personal writing to be

After analyzing the data, it is surprising that many teachers who responded to the surveys said they used personal writing in their classes frequently. As stated in previous chapters, the CCSS ask students to put more of an emphasis on analytical and argumentative writing rather than writing that is just based on students’ own thoughts and feelings. This result makes it seem teachers are still not shifting the focus to the analysis and persuasion Common Core is looking for.

However, after examining the data, it seems that most teachers are using what they call personal writing assignments as ways to get students’ reactions to texts or films.
Most of the personal writing that teachers said they included did not focus on events in a student’s life that they were instructed to narrate. Instead of changing completely what assignments are being given, teachers might consider using smaller personal writing assignments as writing-to-learn tools. Instead of using assignments that rely on students' thoughts and feelings and instead of asking them what they did for summer break, they could consider asking students their thoughts and feelings about a text so they may be able to deeper analyze that text via writing, presentations, etc. Though there is a Narrative Writing strand included in the Common Core State Standards, the standard’s focus is more on the structure of that mode of writing. Students need to understand this structure in order to create an effective narrative.

**Patterns in Student Data**

When looking at the student data, there were a few prominent trends that are worthy of deeper discussion. The first is that as the students move through the grades, there is a steady increase in the number of students who say they benefit from personal writing assignments. Forty-six percent (n=13) of freshmen said they benefited from personal writing, 67% (n = 22) of sophomores and juniors said they benefited from personal writing, and 86% (n = 24) of seniors said they benefitted from personal writing. As students mature, the data shows that students seem to see more of a benefit from personal writing assignments. The comments from this question provided a deeper look at how students feel they benefit from personal writing. One student said, “Yes. I like them because it allows me to voice an opinion about something without shyness getting in the way.” This student would rather write her opinion of something rather than share out loud with her classmates. It seems as though she would want to participate in class but feels
more comfortable writing, obviously benefiting her. Another student stated, “Yes, it’s good to write using your own knowledge. It helps kids realize their thoughts matter.” This comment shows that students can benefit from these types of assignments because it appears to be clearer to them that their thoughts and feelings matter.

Students could feel that they benefit more possibly because they have had more experience with personal writing as they get older. It is possible that teachers of upperclassmen are able to use the personal writing assignments more effectively since they are dealing with more mature students. Also, as students get older they have more experience with personal writing across the curriculum as both English and non-English teachers claim to use personal writing. When looking at the comments students provided for this question, the data showed that students claimed that personal writing assignments helped them more on a personal level than an academic level. For example, this student stated, “Yes, definitely! I think it helps you explore yourself, as well as sharing – I think it’s good to get feelings and experiences out there. It helps you grow as an individual.” Another student stated, “Yes. More than once. It if I wrote something about a problem, it helped me work through it.” Teachers often forget that students are people too – with real problems and real struggles. For students, this type of writing may be beneficial in order to help them get their thoughts and ideas out on paper. This step could then lead to the more analytical writing that students should also be focusing on in the classroom.

Personal writing can also align with adolescent development. Younger students may be asked to write things that are more heavily based in their own thoughts and feelings because many younger students have less awareness of the world around them. As students get older, assignments should become less personal and more critical.
The data also shows that as students’ progress through the grades there is an increase in personal writing in other content areas. Forty-three percent (n = 12) of freshmen reported that they were asked to do personal writing in other classes, 55% (n = 15) or sophomores said they were asked to do personal writing in another class, 67% (n = 18) of juniors claimed they were asked, and 68% (n = 19) of seniors reported that they were asked to do personal writing in other classes. Junior and senior data both showed three common content areas that ask them to complete personal writing assignments: history, foreign language, and band. This increase could be due to expected higher maturity levels in students, or assignments that are more focused on reflection. It is interesting however, that students claim they do more writing in their later years of high school. Many would think the curriculum would be heavier with personal writing in the lower grades since many times teachers are still trying to go by that common mantra of “write what you know.” It would seem that using these types of assignments to help students get their pens to paper would be more common. Instead, it is quite the opposite. In contrast to the requirements of Common Core, students should be doing the most analytic and academic writing in their last two years of high school to prepare them for the college setting.

Though the data shows that most students are not forced to share their personal writing assignments, the data also shows that upperclassmen are forced to share their personal writing assignments more than underclassmen. Twenty-three percent (n = 6) of freshmen said they were forced to share, 12% (n = 4) of sophomores claimed they were forced to share, and 26% (n = 7) of both juniors and seniors said they were forced to share their personal writing with the class in some way. This is not surprising because teachers often feel that juniors and seniors can be more trustworthy and mature than
freshmen and sophomore students, therefore leading to an increase in making them share assignments. Even though some students are forced to share, most of them reported that they are uncomfortable doing so. Students also stated in comments that their grade would be affected if in some way if they did not share. For example, one student stated, "If I want full participation points I have to share." Another student stated, "Yes, it was part of the grade to read the essay to the class." Teachers understand the importance of sharing certain assignments in classroom, but often students do not because most of them are so self-conscious about their work, so they feel pressured and stressed by sharing instead of seeing the benefits in it. Another student stated, "Yes, many times if I do not volunteer it's because I am not confident in my opinions or feel comfortable sharing them, but being forced to makes it worse because it is embarrassing." Other students also responded with comments that included the words "self-conscious" and "uncomfortable." If this is how students really feel about sharing their work, this data suggests that teachers should reevaluate how and what they ask their students to share in the classroom, or what the purpose for sharing might be.

Many upperclassmen also reported that they were unsure as to how their teachers graded their personal writing assignments. Forty-one percent (n = 11) of juniors said they weren't sure how teachers evaluated their personal writing, and 46% (n = 13) of seniors said they weren't sure how teachers graded their personal writing. This could suggest that students feel that teachers grade their personal writing assignments differently than they grade other types of writing assignments. In the comments that students left for this question students reported that teachers either graded for grammar, or that they couldn't give them a bad grade because it was personal writing, and it wasn't fair to dock points
for something that was based on their own feelings. For example, one student said, “Probably the same as the other essays, but a little different because it’s about you, not a set subject that they can say wrongs about. They can’t say your opinions and feelings are wrong.” Other comments that students left about teacher grading really shed light on to the confusion that students have about how teachers grade their personal writing assignments. Students made comments like, “There is typically a rubric, but I am of the opinion that essay grading can be highly subjective.” Another student said, “I feel like teachers have a bias against certain students when it is personal writing. Even if you wrote an amazing personal essay they would still think you only deserve the grade they think based on other work you have completed.” Another student said, “Unfairly. It’s almost like teachers don’t know how to grade them. Also it could be a bit offensive.” Student comments clearly show confusion on how their personal writing assignments are evaluated. Despite the confusion on feedback from teachers, the data does show that students still claim they benefit from personal writing. It is possible that students can benefit personally and not academically simply because they completed the assignment. Students may not be relying completely on the teacher’s feedback to know if they have benefitted from the assignment, but rather internalizing the benefits from simply performing the task of writing. It may be a boost in their confidence. It is also possible that students are benefitting academically as well and just not seeing the results immediately. They may not see the results tied to that assignment specifically because the teachers may be using that small assignment as a stepping stone to a larger and more analytical assignment. Essentially, teachers would be using it as a writing-to-learn task that wouldn’t necessarily be tied to a huge grade. When looking at the data, there is no
way to know for sure if the benefits translate to better performance on other writing assignments in different genres, but it can be assumed that if students see a benefit in something, it would most likely be linked in an increased performance on an assignment.

Patterns in Teacher Data

When looking at the data from non-English teachers, Twenty-seven percent (n = 3) of non-English teachers that returned surveys said they did not use personal writing in their classrooms while 73% (n = 8) of the non-English teachers who returned surveys said they used personal writing in their classrooms in some capacity. Though this number makes it appear that there is heavy use of personal writing going on in almost all other subject areas in the building, there is reason to believe that many teachers did not complete the surveys because they do not use personal writing in their classrooms. It is possible that there are more non-English teachers that do not use personal writing in their classroom than teachers who do use personal writing in their classrooms.

When looking at both the English and non-English teacher data, it shows that both kinds of teachers say they use a rubric to grade their students' personal writing. Sixty percent (n = 3) of English teachers say they use a rubric, and 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers use a rubric to evaluate personal writing. If teachers didn’t use rubrics, most of them (38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers and 20% (n = 1) of English teachers) used the personal writing assignments for a completion grade or admitted to grading them more informally. This data isn’t consistent with the overall student data on evaluating. Only 20% (n = 23) of students said their teachers used a rubric to grade their personal writing assignments, while 37% (n = 41) of students reported that they were unsure how their teachers grading there personal writing assignments. These inconsistencies could arise
from teachers not being consistent on how they grade personal writing, which would support the data that students say they aren’t sure how their personal writing assignments are being graded. Teachers were also asked how personal writing could be difficult. Teachers’ answers to this question could shed light on some the confusion assessing has caused for students. One teacher said, “You can’t look at what they wrote (content) but how they wrote it. It’s difficult to be impartial.” And another wrote, “It is difficult in that students can vary widely in their responses. I find it is difficult to evaluate pieces of writing consistently.” If teachers are many times taking them for completion grades or being less formal when grading the personal writing assignments, that could explain why many students say they are unsure of how their personal writing assignments are graded. Students need to see consistency, and if these assignments are indeed being graded differently, then teachers might need to question what purpose these assignments are serving in their classrooms.

Nearly all teachers ask students to share their personal writing assignments in some way. Eighty percent (n = 4) of English teachers said they ask students to share their personal writing assignments and 88% (n = 7) of non-English teachers reported that they ask their students to share their personal writing assignments. When looking at teacher comments, many (both English and non-English) reported that they ask students to share the most through some sort of peer sharing. One non-English teacher stated, “Yes, usually just though peer editing.” Another non-English teacher said, “It depends. Occasionally, students will read their essays to class. Usually, however, a partner might see it.” When English teachers commented on this question, all of them stated that
students are never forced to share. Some comments from English teachers are listed below:

- “Students have the option to share. I never force them.”
- “When we do peer editing, it’s always the student’s choice who he or she trades with.”
- “Usually in small groups and then for the whole class, on a voluntary basis.”
- “Personal in my class does not mean private. I often offer students the opportunity to read what they write…”

This data is consistent with student data in that many students claimed that they have been asked to share their writing in some way. The data differed when some students claimed that they felt they had to share (whether asked or forced) if they wanted full credit for the assignment. None of the teacher comments indicated that sharing was tied to the students’ grades.

Another pattern that came to light was that almost all teachers admitted to having issues with personal writing assignments in their classrooms. Eighty percent (n = 4) of English teachers said they have run into issues with personal writing in their classrooms while 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers admitted to having problems with personal writing in their classrooms. However, the types of issues varied. Teachers provided comments for the question and the comments they had showed what kinds of issues they encountered. Some non-English teachers reported the following issues with personal writing in their classrooms:
• "Yes...a student shared an entire project that was not appropriate for school...His entire project focused on illegal activities...so I had to give his piece a failing grade."

• "Students want to express their opinion, but don't know how do it in an appropriate way."

• "The only issue is the students choose not to do the assignment."

Non-English teachers seem to have more problems with students not completing the assignment correctly. The first comment was the only comment that a non-English teacher mentioned that the content ended up being the main issue with the personal writing assignment. English teachers also provided comments about the issues they have experienced with personal writing assignments. Their comments are included below:

• "At times I have had students write about topics that are of a more personal nature."

• "Students are often hesitant to write about their authentic feelings in these assignments."

• "...A student wrote about a personal issues concerning depression and I felt that it needed to addressed with the counselor."

• "Sometimes extremely sensitive material is generated....I have had to notify counselors about content in an essay that I must, by law, turn over to authorities."

These comments from English teachers suggest that more issues with content in students' papers arise when personal writing is used in the classroom. Teachers admit that the work students turn is too personal or must be reported to a counselor or appropriate authority.
figure. After looking at the data, questioning the purpose of the writing assignment again comes into the picture. When problems like these happen with personal writing assignments, they are deterring from the learning process in the classroom because now both the teacher and the student must figure out the consequences for turning in such work. The data shows that perhaps time could be better spent with other type of writing assignments that do not have the potential to distract students and teachers from the real purpose of writing, and writing assignments that are better aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

Another pattern of importance to point out is that both students and teachers appear to be defining personal writing as any kind of writing that uses personal experience, not necessarily a time where a student provided personal information about his or her life. This means that when teachers are using what they deem as personal writing assignments, most of the time they are just asking for a student’s opinion, feelings, or reflection on something (text, film, etc.). Teachers were asked what purposes their personal writing assignments serve, and what teachers reported supports that teachers are in fact asking students to use these types of assignments more as writing-to-learn assignments. Writing-to-learn assignments can be defined as small, short, informal writing assignments that allow students to gather their thoughts or respond to questions or texts. Non-English teachers said the following about the purpose of their personal writing assignments:

- “Story-telling or artwork interpretation.”
- “To connect grammar and vocab concepts with real life situations.”
• “My writing is in another language, so the purpose is to use new vocabulary in a setting they are comfortable in.”

• “Allow students to share their thoughts and feelings after reading or watching something tied to history.”

• “They are designed to practice the current grammatical concept we are learning or practicing. Plus they allow the student to learn to express his/her own feelings regarding different topics.”

• “Reflections after a discussion or movie.”

• “Most of my assignments require the student to put themselves within a given situation and respond. Most often it is to compare the students’ reasoning to the decision(s) that were made historically.”

• “Usually the assignments are journals asking students to put themselves in the shoes of others throughout history. I want them to be creative but support their thoughts with details.”

The majority of teachers who provided comments for this question show that they are using the types of writing assignments more for writing-to-learn purposes. Non-English teachers are asking students to respond in short, informal ways in order to assess something else, or it appears they are using these assignments as a stepping stones to other larger, more formal assignments. Though the data shows that personal writing is heavy in other content areas, it seems that those teachers are using personal writing differently than originally thought.

English teachers were also asked the same question about the purpose of their personal writing assignments. Comments are listed below:
• "Personal writing assignments build classroom community because through them students are able to share their experiences with their peers and with me. Also, personal writing assignments lend themselves to success for students because everyone has a story to tell."

• "They are used for me to gauge student understanding of the deeper literary elements we discuss in class. I also use personal writing so that students can write more often, but not always for the larger critical analysis. I find often that if a student can make a personal connection, then that will affect the aesthetic impact the story has on that student."

• "Usually for reflection on a text."

• "I use personal writing on an assignment for a narrative paper."

• "My mantra: Think about what you write and write about what you think. Personal writing forces us to think. Students will often say that they know something. But if they can’t express what they know, it’s no good to them or me. It really is an opportunity for discovery – both for the teacher and the student."

Most English teachers admit to using most of their personal writing assignments in the same way. It could be that some English teachers are using journals for students to record their thoughts and reactions. There are a few that seem to use their personal writing assignments in both ways. Some are used as short, opinion-based pieces, but it is expected that an English teachers would probably include the traditional tell-me-something-about-your-life personal essay.
The Impact of the Common Core State Standards Initiative

What does this teacher and student data mean in light of the Common Core State Standards? As previously mentioned, Common Core Standards set up expectations for more analytical and argumentative writing. The Common Core State Standards Initiative gives three key shifts in the English Language Arts standards. One of those shifts is “reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational” (corestandards.org). That means what is expected of students is more than just writing about their own opinions or feelings. For instance, the following statement can be found on the Common Core website:

The Common Core emphasizes using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from their prior knowledge and experience, the standards call for students to answer questions that depend on their having read the texts with care…

Frequently, forms of writing in K–12 have drawn heavily from student experience and opinion, which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college, career, and life. Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards’ focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice (corestandards.org).
Common Core clearly states what it expects from students. Teachers now need to shift the focus of their writing assignments to prepare students for use of academic and analytical writing. It is acceptable to ask students for their opinion, but a student’s opinion or personal experience is just one form of support. Students are now being asked to dig more deeply and to also use other forms of support like primary sources, articles, counter-arguments, and other arguments. Just asking students for their opinion of a text is no longer enough. Students must learn to base their answers in textual evidence and others’ research. There is also a push to do this not only with literary texts but also with informational texts. It is important to note, however, that the Common Core does not expect English teachers alone to create the balance of 30% literary texts and 70% informational texts by twelfth grade. This is a responsibility for teachers in other content areas as well. The website states, “With the ELA standards, English teachers will still teach their students literature as well as literary nonfiction. However, because college and career readiness overwhelmingly focuses on complex texts outside of literature, these standards also ensure students are being prepared to read, write, and research across the curriculum, including in history and science. These goals can be achieved by ensuring that teachers in other disciplines are also focusing on reading and writing to build knowledge within their subject areas” (corestandards.org). English classrooms will still have a shift to make to add more informational texts, but this change will not fall solely on English teachers. It will also be up to the other disciplines to contribute to the 30/70 balance.

It may be challenging for teachers at first to try to push students to write with higher expectations, but the Common Core State Standards Initiative also provides
samples of student writing on their website so teachers will know what type of writing is expected of their students. Available in Appendix C, student-writing samples from kindergarten to twelfth grade are included. The appendix includes examples from each type of writing the Common Core expects students to master (narrative, argument, informative/explanatory). The student sample is also accompanied by an annotation that explains how the writer of the piece masters the skills Common Core is looking for.

Figure 4.1 shows an example a student’s work on an informative/explanatory assignment:

**Figure 4.1: Student sample: Grade 10, Informative/explanatory**

This essay was produced for an on-demand assessment. Students were told to write about a character in a work of literature whose pride or selfishness creates problems. The abbreviated time frame of the assessment situation (and the consequent lack of opportunity to revise) explains the absence of information and quotations from researched sources and perhaps the occasional spelling errors as well.

**Animal Farm**

In the novel, Animal Farm, by George Orwell, there is one very particular character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. This character had just merely good ideas in the beginning. However, as time went on, his true self-interest began to shine through. This character started a free republic of animals and turned it into a plantation that used animals as slaves. He never did have enough and always wanted more, regardless of the price that others had to pay. This character whose pride and selfishness creates problems, is none other than the great leader of Animal Farm himself, comrade Napoleon [Napoleon], the pig.

Comrade Napoleon is a powerful authority on Animal Farm. In fact he is the leader of Animal Farm and a high strung leader at that. After Old Major died, Napoleon lived upon Old Major’s ideas. Napoleon lead all the animals to rebellion so that Manor Farm ceized to exist, and Animal Farm was born. In the first year, he even worked the fields and helped bring in their biggest harvest ever. Little did the animals know, but he would soon change. Eventually the animals started receiving less food because Napoleon needed more food to power his “large” brain. Later, he goes and runs off his successor, Snowball, so he can have the whole farm to himself. Then he stopped working the fields. He started taking young animals and selling them or using them for his own use. He stopped sleeping in the hay and slept in the farm house instead. Finally, he took away half the grain fields so he could plant barely to make himself beer. This Napoleon was a power hungry, selfish individual for sure.

Being power hungry, always causes problems, and boy did Napoleon cause problems. The animals had received so little food that many were starving, you could see their
bones, and some even died of starvation. Napoleons’s lack of work meant the animals had to work harder, and it wasn’t easy on an empty stomach. Many animals would break their legs or hoofs but would continue to work. The lack of new workers due to Napolean’s selling them off, meant that nobody could retire, and one old animal even died in the fields. Snowball was a great teacher for the animals, and now that he was gone, they lacked education. Then with finally only half of the fields being productive for food, the animals starved even more and worked harder to make beer that they never saw. Not to mention that they had to sleep on a dirt floor while the lazy Napolean slept in his nice comfortable bed. His selfishness had deffinately created problems.

Napoleon’s experience had changed the farm drastically. He thought things were getting better while the animals knew they were only getting worse. After the rebellion, many humans disliked Animal Farm and the animals disliked humans. Napoleons’s selfish ways were much like those of a farmer. So eventually as Napolean became more “human,” the town’s people began to like him. Napolean could care less about his animals, just so long as he was on good terms with the humans. By the novel’s end, Napolean is great friends with every human in town. However, his animal slaves are no longer happy as they once were. They still hate humans which means now, they hate Napolean. So due to Napolean’s pride, the story has changed its ways from start to finish. He has turned friends into foe and foe into friends, but at great cost.

In the novel, Animal Farm, by George Orwell, Comrade Napoleon is a character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. The starving animals have suffered greatly because of their leader’s pride. On the other hand, Napolean has gained great success through his selfishness. Unfortunately, that’s just the way it is. You can’t have pride without problems. Even if they are little problems, it’s still due to pride. Now, if Napoleon had pride in his farm rather than in himself, well then maybe the humans would’ve hated him, but he’d still has his true friends of four legs. However, he chose to follow a different path and he burned those bridges along the way. So for now, Comrade Napoleon’s pride and selfishness has created problems for the animals, but someday, it will create problems for himself.
Figure 4.2 is an annotation of the document that shows how the student is mastering the skills needed for informative/explanatory writing:

**Figure 4.2: Annotation of Student Sample**

**Annotation**

The writer of this piece:

- **Introduces the topic.**
  - In the novel, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, there is one very particular character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. . . . This character whose pride and selfishness creates problems, is none other than the great leader of *Animal Farm* himself, comrade Napoleon [Napoleon], the pig.

- **Organizes complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions.**
  - The organization of the explanation is mostly chronological. The writer focuses on how Napoleon changes over time, how he becomes power hungry, and selfish, and eventually “human.” The writer describes the problems that Napoleon’s changing nature creates.

- **Develops the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic.**
  - Details: In the first year, he [Napoleon] even worked the fields and helped bring in their[the animals’] biggest harvest ever. . . . Not to mention that they had to sleep on a dirt floor while the lazy Napoleon slept in his nice comfortable bed.
  - Examples: . . . nobody could retire, and one old animal even died in the fields.

- **Uses appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.**
  - In the novel, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, there is one very particular character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. This character had just merely good ideas in the beginning.

- **Uses precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.**
  - In the novel, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, there is one very particular character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. . . . This character started a free republic of animals and turned it into a plantation that used animals as slaves.
- Establishes and maintains a formal style and objective tone (with the exception of... and boy did Napolean cause problems).

  In the novel, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, there is one very particular character whose pride and selfishness creates problems... Comrade Napoleon's pride and selfishness has created problems for the animals, but someday, it will create problems for himself.

- Provides a concluding section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented.

  In the novel, *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, Comrade Napoleon is a character whose pride and selfishness creates problems. The starving animals have suffered greatly because of their leader's pride. On the other hand, Napoleon has gained great success through his selfishness. Unfortunately, that's just the way it is. You can't have pride without problems. Even if they are little problems, it's still due to pride. Now, if Napoleon had pride in his farm rather than in himself, well then maybe the humans would've hated him, but he'd still have his true friends of four legs. However, he chose to follow a different path and he burned those bridges along the way. So for now, Comrade Napoleon's pride and selfishness has created problems for the animals, but someday, it will create problems for himself.

- Demonstrates command of some aspects of the conventions of standard written English (yet displays several errors in spelling and other mechanics).

Knowing what these assignments are supposed to look like will help teachers to be able to create similar assignments in their own classrooms. Through examining the data, it is clear that teachers need to realign or rethink some writing assignments they are having students do in the classroom. The data shows that students are not entirely sure how their teachers grade their personal writing assignments, but as shown above, the Common Core website provides teachers with multiple examples of how to do this, as well as what a good writing assignment would look like. The Common Core State Standards are clear about what skills students are expected to master by the end of each grade level. If teachers are going by the skills, then expectations for students should be clear.

The data shows that as students’ progress through the grades there is an increase in personal writing in other content areas. Students in the upper grades need to be
completing writing assignments that better prepare them for college or the workforce.

The Common Core State Standards do not only apply to English teachers. There are writing standards available for Social Studies as well as Science and technical subjects. The major difference between the writing standards for English and the writing standards for other subjects is that other disciplines do not have a narrative writing standard. The standards for these other subjects are also very clear what they expect students to do. The charts below outline the Common Core Standards for eleventh and twelfth graders. All highlighted information throughout each standard denotes the higher-level skills students are asked to master:

**Figure 4.3: History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects Writing Standard for CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1: Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.a</th>
<th>Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that logically sequences the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.b</td>
<td>Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant data and evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both claim(s) and counterclaims in a discipline-appropriate form that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.c</td>
<td>Use words, phrases, and clauses as well as varied syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.d</td>
<td>Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.1.e</td>
<td>Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from or supports the argument presented.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4.4: History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects Writing Standard CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2 - Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2.a</td>
<td>Introduce a topic and <strong>organize complex ideas, concepts, and information</strong> so that each new element builds on that which <strong>precedes</strong> it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2.b</td>
<td><strong>Develop the topic</strong> thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2.c</td>
<td><strong>Use varied transitions and sentence structures</strong> to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2.d</td>
<td><strong>Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary</strong> and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic; convey a knowledgeable stance in a style that responds to the discipline and context as well as to the expertise of likely readers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.11-12.2.e</td>
<td>Provide a concluding statement or section that <strong>follows from and supports the information or explanation</strong> provided (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though I am not as familiar with the curricula in other disciplines, the data supports the fact that teachers may need to make some changes when realigning to the Common Core State Standards. Even though the teacher data suggests that non-English teachers seem to be using their assignments to serve the purpose of writing-to-learn, since their assignments often ask students to provide their thoughts and opinions about something, those kinds of assignments can only take students so far. It is important for students to gauge their own thoughts and feelings about a certain topic because it can add to student motivation. Unfortunately, these assignments don't encourage students to engage in higher-level writing tasks. These assignments should instead serve as stepping-stones to larger writing assignments so students can take them a bit further. Students can start by sorting out their feelings and opinions, but then students need to see how their opinion...
compares to someone else's. Teachers may be doing this, as the data does not reflect this clearly, but these assignments should be used as stepping-stones to larger assignments.

Though it seems that the foundation for the push towards higher-level writing is there, there are still missing elements that high school teachers need to consider. There have been other studies that examine these gaps. In 2010, Joanna Addison and Sharon James McGee published an article in which they examined the data from several writing studies, as well as their own, in order to draw conclusions about writing practices at the high school and college levels. At one point, Addison and McGee present a comparison of college and high school faculty teaching practices. On this chart the authors include information about the opportunities provided for informal, exploratory writing in the high school and college classrooms. Their findings showed that 27% of college faculty reported they always provide an opportunity for informal, exploratory writing, 32% said they provided this opportunity sometimes, and 35% reported that they never provide students with an opportunity for informal, exploratory writing. This data contrasts with the high school faculty. 40% of faculty said they always provide students with the opportunity to write informal, exploratory writing, 39% reported they sometimes provided this opportunity, and 12% said they never provided students with the opportunity to do informal, exploratory writing (158). The data from this study is consistent with the data from my own study in finding that high school teachers, both English and non-English, provide students with these same opportunities through informal, writing-to-learn activities that center around students own thoughts and feelings about a particular subject.
Another aspect of their data that coincided with the data of my study was having students read and respond to others’ work. I asked students and teachers if the personal writing assignments that were being given in the classroom were shared in any way and the answer from both teachers and students was an overwhelming yes. Addison and McGee report that only 19% of college faculty always have students read or respond to other students’ work, 36% sometimes do this, and 41% never do this. The data once again contrasts with the high school faculty. High school faculty reported that 26% they always ask students to read or respond to other students’ work, 55% said they sometimes did this, and 14% reported that they never have students read or respond to other students’ work (158). Providing time to participate in activities such as these is important any time we are asking students of any age to write. Addison and McGee state that “both of these components of literacy instruction are held in high esteem among writing specialists and reaffirmed by NSSE [National Survey of Student Engagement] as activities that contribute to deep learning” (157). These activities can promote deeper learning for students, but they have to be done the right way in order to do so. Activities such as these need to lay the foundation for students in order to lead them to critical thinking, analysis, and argument. Although teachers want students to move to higher-order skills, teachers also need to provide students with a way to do so. One way to do this is to provide scaffolding for students. Scaffolding is a technique that offers students temporary support to help them reach these higher-level skills independently. This temporary support is gradually taken away as student become more independent. Scaffolding is important because often times it helps students bridge the gap between their own prior knowledge to what students are expected to know.
Implications for Effingham High School

The data shows that there is still work to be done throughout the curricular areas at Effingham High School. The transition to adopting the Common Core State Standards has begun, but most curricular areas have not yet fully implemented the standards. Currently, the English department is making changes at all grade levels. The freshmen curriculum is currently being piloted this year, and changes to be made are being noted as the school year progresses. Many changes have been made to create a skill-focused curriculum for our students. The data collected however, still shows that there are issues that may need to be addressed to push our students to reach a higher level of thinking and writing.

For instance, in my own classroom, there are still many changes to be made. Currently, the English II curriculum is very heavy with writing assignments and needs to be more balanced with texts, which is what Common Core is expecting so certain literacy standards can also be met. This year we are working to realign the curriculum to create this balance. Right now, the curriculum English II teachers are expected to follow a syllabus that requires seven papers in the first semester alone. While it is important for students to write, it is equally important for students to master the correct literacy skills before moving on to the next grade level. On the Common Core website it also states, “The standards call for a staircase of increasing complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. The standards also outline a progressive development of reading comprehension so that students advancing through the grades are able to gain more from what they read” (corestandards.org). Our current English II curriculum needs to create this balance for our
students while maintaining a push for higher-level writing skills. This is where, according to Common Core, some major changes need to happen. Currently, students only write papers. There are no accompanying texts at all. Sophomore students are rarely reading, informational text or literature, in the first semester. Many of the assignments are very isolated and students have a hard time understanding the realistic purposes or audiences of these assignments.

One place to start this change would be to make an effect to make it clear to students how their writing assignments are being graded. The data shows that students are confused about how teachers grade personal types of writing assignments. The data also shows that teachers have admitted that these types of writing assignments are difficult for them to grade, thus adding the confusion students have about evaluation. It is possible that the rubrics are either not clear or possibly too informal. The data shows that 38% (n = 3) of non-English teachers and 20% (n = 1) of English teachers admitted to grading these assignments more informally than other writing assignments. Perhaps this is where the confusion is stemming from for students. If teachers are using them informally, is the purpose clear? Or are they indeed small assignments that will lay the foundation for a larger assignment? If teachers have also admitted that they find writing based in student opinion hard to grade, and they do so inconsistently, it is time to perhaps take a second look at what these kinds of writing assignments are doing for students. Teachers were not asked if these types of assignments lead to others, but in some cases it is safe to speculate they may. Even if the assignments are smaller, teachers should be clear about what purpose they want these assignments to serve. Though it is sometimes easier said than done, teachers should always help their students see the value in whatever task they are
performing. One solution for this issue could be that each department develops a rubric for the different kinds of writing that students have to do. The grading would then become more consistent within each department since students’ schedules change at semester time. Though this process could be time consuming, changes are already being made in each curricular area, so this is something that could be done as teachers realign the new curriculum.

Another change to implement would be providing clear expectations for all students from the beginning. Addison and McGee also make this point when discussing leading students to deep learning. They state, “one of the measures of the NSSE/WPA research that lead to deeper learning was clear expectations” (160). Sometimes teachers think they are efficient in explaining what is expected of students for a certain assignment, but the data from my study would suggest otherwise. Students need to know what is fully expected from them at the beginning of any assignment. This leads to deeper learning, which in turn leads to helping our students achieve higher-level writing skills. If a student does not have clear expectations for an assignment, the learning outcome will be much different than the teacher anticipated.

Through examining the student data, it shows that most students are not forced to share, but many feel that sharing is tied to their grade. Teacher data shows that students are never forced to share but are asked to share their writing regularly with other students, either whole class, or in pairs or small groups. Once again, it is important for teachers to set clear expectations for their students. If the data shows that students are never asked to share, that message is not clear, or is not getting through to the students if they still feel that sharing a piece of writing is tied to their grade. Teachers also know it is important for
students to participate in whole class or small group discussion no matter what the teachers are asking of the students, and sometimes this can be hard for students to see. Most students (as the data shows) do not like sharing and are reluctant to do so. Most of the time students are not confident in their own answers or they are very self-conscious about what others will think of them when their work is shared.

Having students share and engage in activities that initiate class discussion is just another aspect that teachers are responsible for under the Common Core Standards. The Common Core Standards also include a speaking and listening strand that encourages students to participate in meaningful class discussion. The purpose, according to the Common Core website is for students to “initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on … topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (corestandards.org). When students share and discuss their work with other students, they are once again setting the foundation for deeper learning. Teachers asking students to share their work is part of fostering that camaraderie and collaborative learning in the classroom.

The data also shows overwhelmingly that students say they benefit from whatever kind of personal writing they are doing in the classroom. Many of the students’ comments discussed how the personal writing their teachers are asking of them makes them feel like their thoughts and feelings matter. This suggests that the staff is doing something right when students overwhelmingly admit that they feel they are benefiting from an assignment. It is obvious that students’ thoughts and feelings should also matter, but it also important for students to feel that they are benefiting from the assignments
being given in the classroom. Assignments should also tap into students’ motivation and interests. This aspect of writing cannot completely be ignored. When a student sees benefits in the assignments they are completing, students then become more active in their own learning. It still is important, however, to push students towards higher-level thinking and writing.

Though it is important to have motivated students, it is equally important to understand that students cannot reach higher-level thinking and writing on motivation alone. Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer have studied writing practices in the high school and college classrooms. Through their research they have come to several conclusions about these writing practices and the lack of students writing on a higher level. They have boiled this problem down to two key issues. One is the absence of prior knowledge in “key writing concepts” and “non-fiction texts that serve as models” (108). Applebee and Langer suggest that students’ higher-level writing skills are lacking due to a high focus on literary texts in the high school classroom, which, in turn, looks drastically different than what is expected of a college freshmen to write (108-109).

As previously mentioned earlier in the chapter, the Common Core State Standards are making a push for schools to incorporate more informational texts (as they are referred to by the standards). By the time a student is in twelfth grade, only 30% of what he or she is reading in the classroom should be literature based. The other 70% should be informational texts. When Applebee and Langer comment that high school classrooms put too much emphasis on literature-based writing and not writing that focused around informational texts, they were probably correct (110). This, however, is changing – and it is changing in many high schools across the country. At Effingham High School, we have
chosen to use the PARCC Model Content Framework as the basis for the implementation of our new curriculum. The framework is available in Figure 4.5 below:

**Figure 4.5: PARCC Model Content Framework (parcconline.org)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Informational</strong></td>
<td>Literature &amp; Informational texts</td>
<td>Literature &amp; Informational texts</td>
<td>Literature &amp; Informational texts</td>
<td>Literature &amp; Informational texts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By using this framework, we are shifting to every grade level including at least two extended informational texts per school year. Shorter informational texts will also be included. Applebee and Langer make a valid point about creating a focus that is too heavy on literature. However, there is a lot of material thrown at high school teachers that is expected to be covered, so the logical choice most of the time is to have students write about those pieces of literature. This helps teachers incorporate both the necessary reading and writing into the curriculum.

It is time though to realize, however, that writing about literature, creating text-dependent questions solely based on literature, as well as only asking students their opinion of something is not enough. This is especially true when Common Core is putting a larger focus on argument. The focus on argument can be used across all curricular areas, and this writing also lends itself to the use of nonfiction secondary sources as well. For example, the standards expect students to “Delineate and evaluate
the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning” (corestandards.org). Students are not just stating their opinion of a topic and trying to get others to see their side. Instead, the argument that the standards focus on is asking students to consider multiple sides of a certain topic. In order for students to do this, they must think on a deeper level, question themselves throughout the process, and anticipate what types of opposition they may face with their argument. This particular skill is not one that can only be used in an English class. If teachers in other content areas encourage students to think this way about texts in their disciplines, students will see more transfer value in the assignments.

If we truly want to push our students to a higher-level of writing, we must go beyond the scope of writing only about what students know. The data shows that both English and non-English teachers at Effingham High School provide students with the starting point of the process of getting students to write at a higher level. Tapping into student opinions and interests may be the first step, but now is the time to push our students towards that higher level be preparing them to write at the next level. For most of our students, the next level is college or the workforce. Addison and McGee make a wonderful suggestion on how to make this happen. They state, “We need to help diversify the types of writing taught through a vertical curriculum that begins in high school, continues through college, and specifically fosters transfer across texts” (170). They also question why there is so much focus on the academic essay. Not all of our students will go straight to a four-year university after high school. According to our 2013 Effingham High School Profile Report, only 32% of last year’s seniors went to a
four-year college. Fifty-five percent went to a two-year institution, and 13% went to the workforce, military service, or technical school. We are already making major changes in curricula, so now is the time to converse with the other disciplines in the building to make sure we are meeting the needs of all of the students at Effingham High School. Everyone in the building would need to work closely with colleagues to ensure that a focus is also being placed on writing in other disciplines so student see more transfer value in the skills teachers are asking them to master. This includes making sure students who are not going straight to a four-year university (which is the majority of our students) have their needs met as well. It would also be beneficial to ask administrators for time to collaborate with each other to ensure accountability. When everyone works together, our students will see the most benefit.

The data, outside research about writing in high school classrooms, as well as the Common Core Standards all point toward moving our students toward higher-level writing skills. At Effingham High School we can do that by working closely together to ensure that we are moving our students in the right direction. Teachers not only need to be working closely within each department, but all teachers throughout the building should all be working together for consistency for our students. Higher-level writing skills lend themselves to be used across all curricular areas. One way we have already started to make this change is by having more articulation among grade levels. The process of transitioning to the Common Core Standards has encouraged more talking among grade levels. At Effingham Unit 40 we are trying to make sure that all skills are building on one another just like the standards ask to ensure proper skill mastery in English/Language Arts and math. Teachers of science, social studies, and other subjects
are just now beginning this articulation process.

Although this may be a hard transition, we know we are not alone. This will be a transition that all school in Illinois will need to make. Most schools that have access to a plethora of resources will probably have an easier time with the transition, but for others it will be a harder transition. Schools across the nation will need to keep in mind the most important aspect in this whole change: our students. The mission statement for Effingham High School “is to create, educate, and inspire life-long learners, effective communicators, confident leaders, and responsible citizens.” As changes are made to each curriculum in the building, this mission statement should be at the forefront of the minds of all teachers. Making sure students can effectively read and write is only part of properly preparing students for life beyond high school.
Appendix A:

Teacher Survey (English)

1. How often do you use personal writing in your classroom?

2. What purpose do your personal writing assignments serve?

3. How do you evaluate personal writing?

4. How can evaluating personal writing be easy?

5. How can evaluating personal writing be difficult?

6. Have you ever run into an issue using personal writing in your classroom? Explain.

7. Do you have students share their personal essays with classmates? If so, in what manner? (whole class, small groups, partners, etc.)
Appendix B:

Teacher Survey (Other disciplines)

Personal Writing: A type of writing that requires students to create a piece that is heavily influenced by their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

1. How often do you use personal writing in your classroom? If you do not use personal writing, you are finished with the survey.

2. What purpose do your personal writing assignments serve?

3. How do you evaluate personal writing?

4. How can evaluating personal writing be easy?

5. How can evaluating personal writing be difficult?

6. Have you ever run into an issue using personal writing in your classroom? Explain.

7. Do you have students share their personal essays with classmates? If so, in what manner? (whole class, small groups, partners, etc.)
Appendix C:

Student Survey

Personal Writing: A type of writing that requires students to create a piece that is heavily influenced by their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

1. How often have you been asked to write a personal essay in your classes?

2. Have you ever been asked to write a personal essay in a class other than English? If yes, what class?

3. Have you ever been ASKED to share your personal essay in class?

4. Have you ever been FORCED to share your personal essay in class?

5. Do you feel that you have benefitted from writing a personal essay?

6. How do teachers evaluate and grade your personal writing?
Works Cited


"Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers | PARCC."

