

# Connecting Writing and Reading to Civic Education

Civic writing prepares young people for responsible citizenship.

For the past three summers, I have planned and directed a one-week Institute on Writing, Reading, and Civic Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for administrators and teachers from all over the country. The Institute provides a multidisciplinary forum for discussing ways in which writing and reading activities in all subjects can help develop a civic perspective in the most diverse group of young Americans the schools have ever enrolled.

Based on the assumption that both writing and reading must serve the goals of a liberal education—the preparation of the young for responsible citizenship—the Institute emphasizes writing, both academic and civic, for several reasons. First, writing has been as much a part of the history of democratic self-government as reading, and is as essential as public speaking. In the course of American history, as local self-government developed, so too did the kind and amount of writing that people needed to do as citizens. Today, this writing ranges from letters to editors and letters of inquiry or opinion to legislators to the many kinds of writing, such as agendas and minutes of meetings, needed for organizing and maintaining democratically run citizen boards and other voluntary civic or political organizations.

Writing is also a vital support for the most direct way citizens can express themselves and participate in civic or political life: as public speakers. Finally, writing for academic purposes can stimulate the moral reasoning and the inde-

pendent reading and thinking that lie at the heart of both academic study and responsible public discourse.

At the Institute, we maintain that students can write for civic purposes, responsibly and legitimately, in their own classrooms—and for exactly the same purposes for which we adults write as citizens. Through civic writing, we believe that they may even come to value writing and the effort it takes to become a confident writer. Students can write:

- *To personalize civic relationships and/or express civic identity.* For example, they can write a thank-you letter to a public official for something well done or to offer condolence to other citizens and express shared grief, as many students did after the Challenger disaster.

- *To obtain information or services.* Elementary students may write to public officials for material, for example, when studying the states in the union, and older students to obtain information for research reports. These letters of inquiry offer students useful practice in determining the right audience for a letter and in writing courteously and succinctly.

- *To provide information or services.* For example, both elementary and secondary school students may do research to prepare booklets for newcomers that describe their community's history, government, and public institutions. High school students can prepare mini-voting guides for graduating seniors or write weekly columns on their school ac-

*Photograph courtesy of Sandra Stotsky and Sanford Middle School*

*Students at Sanford Middle School are developing a community booklet for new students as part of a Seminole County, Florida, School District project inspired by the Writing, Reading, and Civic Education Institute.*



tivities for local newspapers.

• *To evaluate public services.* As one example, students in special programs, such as Junior Great Books or Chapter 1, may write letters to their program director or their school committee suggesting how they have personally benefited from the program. (However, I would not invite them to evaluate their teachers, administrators, or other personnel.)

• *To advocate a position on a public issue.* Students can write carefully composed and edited letters to editors of local newspapers on community issues that directly affect them, such as skateboarding. Or they may write letters of support or opposition to public officials on proposed legislation or other public issues *after their own thorough study of the issue and all points of view on it.* Students may also engage in many different kinds of advocacy writing as part of student government activities.

Today we have a growing number of students who come from countries with little tradition of concern for a common good, of active participation in public life, or of public service. Writing responsibly for civic purposes may help students understand the relationship between writing and reading in perhaps the most important context where that relationship occurs. Further, students who engage in civic writing engage in active civic learning. Not only do they gain useful information about the history and government of their communities, but they may also develop a civic identity—a sense of membership in their communities that transcends differences in social status, ethnicity, race, religion, and gender. □

*Author's note:* For information about the Institute or to inquire about *The Civic Perspective*, a newsletter that features practical ideas for classrooms, write to the author at the address that follows.

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## Announcing...

National School Improvement Institute & Symposium  
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Chicago, Illinois

June 20-23, 1990

Fee: \$500.00

Participants attending this institute will gain a clear understanding of the background, premises, and implementation strategies for improving schools and school districts based on Effective Schools Research. This institute is appropriate for school and district staffs who are considering the ESR approach to improvement or those who desire additional knowledge and skills to enhance existing programs. The program features outstanding nationally known researchers and practitioners who will examine the role of site based management, staff development, and school culture building in successful school improvement efforts.

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### Symposium:

## Technical and Cultural Aspects of School Renewal

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Kansas City, Kansas

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Fee: \$450.00

Featuring: Dr. Terrence E. Deal and Lawrence W. Lezotte

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For more information, please contact:

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