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Winter January 5, 2015

CAP Writing: A Novel Technology Approach to Literacy with Reluctant Writers

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/joy_johnson/1/
Title: CAP Writing: A tiered approach to voice-rich writing

Statement of purpose: The purpose of this article is to guide teachers and administrators working with reluctant writers. A modified writing process that capitalizes on the oral traditions and competencies of struggling learners has been developed to celebrate voice, rhythm and cadence patterns of spoken word. This social justice approach to writing instruction extends ideas presented in the Common Core Standards. Using readily available technologies, learners develop reading, writing, speaking and listening skills enabling critical analysis of their own writing products. Developed by a career STEM educator, the CAP writing process uses inquiry as a basis for expanding reluctant writers' thinking about their communication.

Content Areas:
- 21st c. Learning/Skills
- Language Arts
- Standards/Common Core
- Diverse student populations
- Differentiated instruction

Encore section: Sample lesson plans in science and social studies/history will be provided that allow teachers and administrators to see how CAP writing is used as part of the curriculum. The lessons are aligned to Common Core standards and demonstrate how learners build literacy skills. The encore section will also include questions for facilitators to use as part of CAP writing training.

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Overview

What is CAP writing? CAP writing is a tiered approach to the writing process. Developed in part to address the needs of reluctant writers, it acknowledges learning style preferences that are oral in nature and attentive to cultural norms and traditions that are based in spoken word. CAP is a celebration of self in the process of writing. Empowered to incorporate patterns and principles from familiar cultural norms, the CAP process begins with speaking, moves to listening, then reading before writing happens.

CAP is an acronym that is used differently depending on a learner’s position in the writing process. It enCAPsulates elements of the traditional view of writing while existing within a framework for formal out-of-school learning context for college and career readiness (also described as the COMPASS\(^1\) framework for learning).

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Table 1. CAP Writing Process: Comparison of traditional and novel approaches

This view shows a traditional view of the writing process. It does not necessarily allow writers/learners to see themselves in it. This traditional view is a social capital view because it is a tool that dominant cultures use to engage learning and communication. The reality is that I am advocating for structures that will be functional for students who struggle in these learning contexts.

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1 COMPASS framework was developed by Joy B. Johnson for NJ GEAR UP.
2 Authentic language is content-specific, often described as academic vocabulary; authentic language allows for significant border-crossing for novice writers.
The social capital view does not fully engage learner’s being. The learner’s **voice**, **rhythm** and **vernacular** are not allowed to roam free in a social capital view of writing because it is regulated by rules and conventions (e.g., rigid standards) of communication with and for the dominant culture.

A cultural capital view of the same process celebrates these three elements. Enabled by apertures between micro-level (personal) being, meso-level (community) being and macro-level (societal) being, students learn to cross borders without losing themselves. They are able to stay engaged because complete assimilation (loss of identity) is not required. The notion of cultural relevance takes on important and nuanced meaning in this cultural capital view as code-switching (a specific type of border crossing) is not only allowed, it is expected.
The embedded elements of micro-level being (like speaking patois, Creole and Spanglish) allow the learner to honor the voices, the vocabulary and the cadence of the familiar—it is respectful of family, friends and self. Border crossing into the meso-level orientation, is slow and requires trust but it is still respectful of familiar spaces. By the time a learner is able to cross into macro-level being, the learner is sufficiently able to “code-switch” gauging appropriateness while still being secure enough to share elements of his/her micro-level self.

A view from the literature & insights from others’ work

Oral language competency is distinguished from literacy in “literate societies where reading and writing are critical to the daily function of its members” (Benson, 2009). Because oral language competence is viewed as compulsory and highly rudimentary, in many ways oral language traditions are diminished among the skills that are viewed as valuable in schools. Gone are the days when meritocratic distinction was given to orators for speeches and narration. The consequence (perhaps unintended) of this denigration of such is the excision of large groups of people (mainly from nondominant and multilingual communities) from the populations of students seen as “smart” in schools.

Reading and writing have been given significant emphasis in school settings in spite of the triangular relationship in literacy that regularly plays out in school settings—formal and informal. The relationship between reading, writing and speaking can be seen in most K-12 curricula. Emphasis on these three literacies (or ways of demonstrating literacy) have had a profound impact on the way children are taught and evaluated. An example of instructional time allocation data for elementary grades is provided below. As expected, mathematics and English take up the greatest part of the school day. Increasingly teachers have to find ways to apply these two core disciplines in the others—an example of which can be seen in the Common Core standards. As a point of clarity, I believe in the Common Core and like their organization. Nevertheless, I understand that it is incomplete and if used in inappropriate ways to evaluate students, it could be a very dangerous document.

Conceptual framework

I believe strongly in a “CERO or ZERO” principle. It is our responsibility as academics (or really thinking, literate citizens) to confirm, extend and refine others’ works if we are to rise above a zero-sum reality. In the end, we should be gaining from the work of previous generations not just breaking even. With that principle in mind, CAP writing builds on the fundamental view of literacy as evidence of a person’s ability to read, write and speak. It elevates listening as a critical skill and honors thought in ways that are uniquely personal and community relevant. Although speaking is expected in academic literacy environments, it is somehow always in the background when it comes to evaluation. For that reason, it is shown here in gray.

Figure 4: Fundamental literacy: foundations in reading, writing and speaking
The fourth dimension of literacy, listening, adds a depth that is missing in a triangular model of language literacy. Conceptualized here as an evolution from three points of engagement to four, the model for expanded, culturally responsive literacy is symbolized as both a “literacy circle” and a “literacy pyramid.”

A circular representation of the four literacy domains shows the foundation of literacy skill development. When we problematize this foundation, one path to solution might be the Common Core Standards. In the Common Core documents for English Language, students are asked to “read stories and literature, as well as more complex texts...stressing critical thinking, problem solving and analytical skills” (CCSSO, 2014). Scrutiny of grade 9-10 standards for example reveal that there are nineteen reading standards (literature (10) and informational text (9)); ten writing standards and six language standards. The language standards include conventions, vocabulary and general knowledge about language. Thankfully, the Common Core realizes the importance of speaking and listening as well. However, there are only six standards total that address the speaking and listening dimensions of language literacy. Covering areas of “comprehension and collaboration”, discussion, information processing and analysis of speech embody skills in the first three standards—a convergence of both speaking and listening. “Presentation of knowledge and ideas” frame the second three standards in this category. Geared only toward speech, this set provides insight into our beliefs about speaking and how it can/should be positioned in schools.

An intentional “play” on the concept of literature circle or literary circle described well in the literature about language development, a “literacy circle” uses the natural complements of literacy dyads (speaking-listening and reading-writing) and places them in context for students. In this model, all four competencies are treated equally. As ideal as this might sound, this is not
the reality of school literacy programs nor should it be. Equal distribution is not usually equitable when it comes to human development and conventions.

An alternate conception of this model incorporates the additional depth of understanding and cognition required by active listening. The pyramidal view of these four elements expands thinking about literacy to build on language using cultural norms, media, information and visual cues. It lifts listening to a higher status. Of the four standards, it is probably the more socially challenging thing to do but will likely yield the greatest outcome toward critical thinking. When listening skills are cultivated, there exists a larger potential for critical thinking and analysis.

![Literacy Pyramid Diagram](image)

**Figure 6. Literacy pyramid: Elevating critical literacy skills with engaged listening**

Listening is an important discipline and habit to develop in people. Simple and yet taken for granted, strong listeners generally know how to cooperate/collaborate well with others. Here is a list of characteristics I believe to be true about strong (engaged) listeners.

- Strong listeners are often able to organize streams of thought well and ask deep level questions to discern a speaker’s perspective;
- Strong listeners process information and judge it slowly. Even if what a strong listener is processing elicits an immediate reaction, s/he typically waits to respond;
- A strong listener hears and reads nuances in voice or text and is able to categorize each and critique them separately, in tandem or in whatever way is appropriate;
- A strong listener picks up on background “noise” that may shape the text, the place, the space and ecology.

Listening requires more than just hearing, but feeling and interpreting. Attribute lists abound as it relates to listening (Bonura, 2003; Campbell, n.d.) however at its core, listening should be a normalizing standard of good communication and literacy. It also may be an important source of self-efficacy. Having the ability to hear and process well, a strong listener can anticipate outcomes and build understanding. This enables the negotiation of borders from personal (micro-level) thinking to larger systems of thinking (meso- and macro-level).
Techniques: Transcription & Variations of Text

Peterson-Karlan (2011) issues an important challenge to those of us using various technologies to enhance learning experiences for children, especially those with identified special needs, in areas of compositional writing. Describing specific issues with narrative and expository writing, Peterson-Karlan acknowledges the dilemma that teachers face when asked to evaluate students who are differently able to write (communicate).

“...[the narrative writing of] students with learning disabilities reflects a paucity of ideas that prevent them from embellishing their narratives and, as a result, produce qualitatively perfunctory stories that may not meet the minimal requirements for a story…” (p. 42)

In terms of expository writing, the writing of students with learning disabilities generally reflects:

- less knowledge of steps of the writing process, including the relevance of planning
- less knowledge of the structure of various expository texts
- more mechanical errors, irrelevancies, redundancies
- a lack of coherence and organization
- fewer procedures for generating, selecting and integrating information from multiple sources
- fewer strategies for organizing and presenting ideas including modeled strategies

Notable Side-Bar: The Reading Analogue to CAP Writing

In full acknowledgement of the cognitive relationship of writing and reading, a model for CAP Reading is being developed in collaboration with Pamela Joyce, Ph.D. (http://www.911educator.com/). Figure 5 shows the dyadic nature of reading and writing; we firmly believe that if you read, you write. If you write, then you read. As is the case with CAP Writing, CAP Reading provides multiple and varied opportunities for members of non-dominant cultures to code-switch, build their reading self efficacy and develop the necessary academic habits and skills to gain access to dominant/universal language communities.

Common Core and PARCC emphases on informational texts (especially in science and social studies) may provide an additional opportunity for reluctant learners to use CAP strategies to “read between the lines” and process complex information in ways that are meaningful to them. If learners’ habits are to seamlessly switch between familiar and unfamiliar words and ideas (for example) using their own voice, rhythm and vernacular, they may build the confidence to “translate” a range of complex texts rather than give up on the process altogether (Peterson-Karlan, 2011).

Figure 7. Future direction: CAP Reading

Many of these descriptors accurately summarize challenges that urban teachers see in the writing styles and preferences of students from non-dominant cultures. I believe that two

underutilized techniques can be used to build students’ writing (literacy) skills while also building their confidence: transcribing personal speech and developing variations on previously published texts embrace aspects of personality that otherwise may never be leveraged.

**Transcription** is described in the literature in various ways, usually related to the manual development of writing (putting pen to paper). There are various assistive technologies that have been reported to help students. Our use of the term “transcription” is for the task of listening to spoken words and typing/writing based solely on aural skills and processing. Without any editing, students’ composed text is spoken and then transcribed.

**Variation** is a technique that allows writers to model their own composition after others’ works. The works that are usually referenced are musical but can also be linguistic adaptations of non-linguistic models.

My first experiences with each technique helped me to truly understand their potential to transform my own “writers’ block” moments. I discovered the utility of transcription while conducting research with a participant who did not agree to be recorded—I would capture my own reflections and recollections on a mobile voice recorder which allowed me to actively participate. Transcripts were later member-checked for accuracy further allowing me to build trust within that space. Variations were something I learned to do in college. Poetic license and freedom to use original texts as much or as little as I wanted helped me develop a repertoire of styles.

A traditional view of the writing process shows key components of writing. CAP writing is a systematic approach to this process that reminds writers/learners to check for their own understanding metacognitively.

![The Writing Process](image)

Figure 8: Traditional view of writing process
CAP Writing is a tiered approach to writing that reminds the learner (writer, student) to do three things at every phase of the writing process. Each “thing” is represented by the letter C, A or P. Full description of each element is elucidated here (Refer to Table 1.).

**Tier 1: Academic habit formation around use of essential questions**

In 2000, Wiggins and McTighe first introduced the idea of “essential questions” with their volume *Understanding by Design*. The basic tenets of that seminal work has transformed the way curricula are developed in all content areas. Essential questions themselves are simply important questions that are generated in a range of *authentic learning contexts*. From the point of view of CAP, there are three questions that every learner should ask before venturing into the territory of communication. Communication is an active response to thoughts or ideas; in school, academic and professional settings, these responses are articulated in spoken words/texts or written/papers.

**Tier 1 CAP: Key Questions**

- **What Content domain do I want to explore in this text/paper?**
  Since there are so many ways that ideas can be bridged, giving a learner the flexibility to first discuss ideas using any discipline they prefer (at first) is important to stimulating creativity. When a student is asked to focus on content over language, barriers to the writing process have been shown to come down for students—making the process fully interdisciplinary and without the expected challenges associated with emergent literacy. A key example exists simply in the explanation of ecology. If a student wants to write about ecological relationships from a natural science perspective, the ideas s/he conveys may be different from those if approached from a social science perspective. What will likely remain the same is the vocabulary that the writer uses.

- **Who is the primary Audience for this text/paper?**
  An important aspect of code-switching is the development of an internal monitor of appropriateness. As a teacher, I have always wanted my students to distinguish between formal and informal writing styles. Knowing the audience for which a text is being composed is important—writing/speaking *for* a job interview is different from writing/speaking *about* a job interview. Writing/speaking to friends, is different from that which is designed for family (especially elders) and employers for example.

- **What is the Purpose of this text/paper?**
  Making learners aware that it is okay to write to be funny is important. As a teacher I found that students how are reluctant to write often assume that the only purpose for writing is for evaluation. NOT SO!!! Sometimes it is simply cathartic to write with your own reflection in mind.

Once barriers (blocks) are removed around these three questions, it is generally easier to do the hardest part of writing—get started!

**Tier 2: Meaning-making around language development**

Once a learner has utilized the techniques outlined in CAP (whether by transcribing personal speech or by doing a variation on others’ work), it is important that the learner “clean up” their
first thoughts and impressions and begin the process of internalizing or modifying so that others understand the intent. In order to do this, the learner must attend to the language that he uses to communicate ideas. In tier two, learners are able to build vocabulary and employ the “CERO or ZERO” principle. In tier two, writing becomes more like science than art and learners gain access to inquiry practices that can sustain long-term learning rather than the common trap of writing activities that end when a bell rings. In tier two, scholar identity, is developed and learners become empowered to ask questions, make observations and interact with other thinkers about ideas that may have at first seemed invalid. If learners are in fact going into uncharted and unconventional linguistic territory, tier two is an opportunity to develop an argument about one’s ideas or modify one’s thinking.

Tier 2 CAP: Language development—standard and nonstandard considerations

- **Concise language**: if in reviewing a recording or transcript a learner hears (or sees) that they are rambling, s/he has an opportunity to scale back and remove unnecessary or tangential words or ideas
- **Authentic language**: if in reviewing a recording or transcript a learner has used incorrect or made-up words (e.g., conversate, irregardless, whatchamacallit, thingamajig, lol, smh and other text-lingo), s/he has an opportunity to conduct content-specific research to determine appropriate vocabulary and examples from the field of study
- **Precise language**: if in reviewing a recording or transcript a learner has used words that while correct fall short of rich description, s/he has an opportunity to vet ideas with a peer or authoritative collaborator and add complexity to the writing. This is also an opportunity to re-write with the assistance of technology or writing tools

Tier 3: Organizing text for presentation

Tier 3 is about re-casting the revision process. To re-cast is to allow new shapes to be molded from a long-standing form. The writing process is itself a long tradition in school settings. Unfortunately, if the goal of curriculum implementation for this process was to narrow gaps between students, it has not been realized over the last fifty years of reporting. Several generations of students have been subjected to various forms of the traditional model for the writing process and yet, performance data has not changed significantly. I admit, this is another theoretical model for the process however there are early indications of success with urban students. Tier 3 is about the revision process. It asks/expects learners to think about sharing ideas for others’ feedback. In keeping with oral traditions, it is expected that in Tier 3, learners have opportunities to “perform” in the safety and sanctuary of shared spaces, with people they trust (micro- and meso-level networks) so that they can move to share with others (in larger social contexts). In the first sharing, they have opportunities to be affirmed and corrected, build independence and autonomy, create additional compositions and realize their own scholarship.

Tier 3 CAP: “Write” conventions

- **Capitalization**: checking for mechanical errors
- **Application**: checking for broader applications and connections beyond self
- **Punctuation**: more checking for mechanical errors; embellishments using a range of punctuation beyond periods, commas; using style guides to cite others’ works appropriately

Works Cited


This work will be presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Education (HICE) in January 2015. Lesson plans are available that show how teachers can use these strategies in secondary classrooms. A manuscript is in preparation that details this work. Please respect the process and do not distribute or share without permission from the author.
Sample Lesson: Dissent—Movements from the Hood

Lesson Title: **Movements from the hood: Dissent Rising**

Objective(s): Develop an argument based on **one of the four dimensions of dissent** described

**Big Idea Statement:** Protest literature provides value to the American literary canon by conveying “aesthetic, performative, rhetorical and ideological dimensions of dissent within specific cultural contexts”.

Core Curriculum Content Standard(s): Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. *(W.11-12.1--Text types & purposes)*

D: Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the **norms and conventions of the discipline** in which they are writing.

References:

- Cesar Chavez timeline [http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/timeline.html](http://www.pbs.org/itvs/fightfields/timeline.html)
- Photo gallery of 10 Protest Symbols [http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1906434,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1906434,00.html)

Additional Resources:


> Once a form of social protest in the United States, rap appears to be anything but that now. Outside of the US, where rap music is articulating and addressing local political and social concerns, it presents a remarkable contrast. Tapping into hip hop’s potential as a force for social change should be easy to realize, given that it boasts an active, captive, global youth base. But can we realistically expect solutions to complex world problems from teens and twenty-something rappers? More importantly, is hip hop immune from the same historical processes that turned historically black musics like jazz and rock’n’roll into pale shades of their former selves, genres enjoyed, profited from and largely consisting of performers from every other ethnic group but that of the creators? (Higgins, p. 15)

Higgins describes the four genres of hip hop: deejaying, emceeing, graffiti art and dancing—he provided in this first chapter a context for the
debate about the value of hip hop to broader audiences and challenges the reader to consider how it has changed over time. It is not clear whether the change is evolution or devolution however this easy-to-read chapter provides an excellent example of an introduction section for a larger research paper. Consider using this with students as a model for writing long papers.

Sample Lesson Plan: High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Exploration</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Elaboration/Extension</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listen to/watch the song “War” by The Temptations featuring Edwin Starr (1969) <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01pNCZINk">video</a></td>
<td>Dissent &amp; Protest Pieces [Small group work]</td>
<td>Four Dimensions of Dissent⁶</td>
<td>In small groups, assign students one of the reading examples⁷ provided below</td>
<td>Pick two different genres of music or art that have the same message. Develop a third variation. Draft a poem or speech that expresses dissent on a current topic that is important in your community. Find or create an alternative means to express that dissent (consider graffiti murals, photos, essays, videos/public service announcements).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Class Discussion: Identify the Content, Audience and Purpose of this song? What features of the video or song support your view?</td>
<td>A. Boondocks comic strip analysis</td>
<td>1. Aesthetic value</td>
<td>A. “Hip hop vs. rap” by KRS-1 (Song lyrics)</td>
<td>What “hood” are they in? How is dissent conveyed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. Chavez timeline (simple timeline)</td>
<td>2. Rhetorical value</td>
<td>B. <em>Incident</em> by Countee Cullen (poem)</td>
<td>FOCUS QUESTIONS: Each example could be tied to a historical event or time in American history. Describe what time period is being addressed. Provide evidence from the text or by conducting web-based research. Describe who was being effected; where the event(s) were occurring; what was happening/the context for the protest and when it was happening. Which dimension of dissent is more prominent in your example? Write a review of the piece highlighting your responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In small groups, assign students one of the media examples of dissent provided above⁵. Analyze the text to determine what is being protested. What might the “original” views have been?</td>
<td>4. Ideological value</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide students with a definition for dissent (alternatively, students may use mobile devices to find a definition).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explain the sociocultural differences between aesthetic (<em>beauty, visual</em>) value, rhetorical (<em>political leverage</em>) value, performative (<em>rhythmic/cadence</em>) value and ideological (<em>belief system</em>) value</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CAP Writing (Tier 1: Identify content, audience, purpose) | Small group discussion/share out | Vocabulary development | Reading, CAP Writing (Tier 3: Verifying information) | CAP Writing (Tier 2: Drafting) |

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⁴ Extension activities involve showing clips from popular films (Suggested titles include: *Cesar* (2014), *Les Miserable* (2012), *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or *Children’s March* -- available online)

⁵ Paper versions of each is provided as a handout

⁶ Based on Engl-E 196 Syllabus (Harvard University)

⁷ Paper versions of each is provided as a handout