# An online tool empowers middle school writers

Trail Ridge Middle School

WriteToLearn®

## The Challenge

Trail Ridge Middle School (TRMS), a STEM focus school in Longmont, Colorado, is a one-to-one iPad® school serving a diverse student population. Some students come from wealthy families; others are homeless. About half of the students are English language learners.

TRMS wanted to find a way to improve the writing skills and success of all its students. "I think there's a good amount of research that shows that when you focus on writing, student achievement increases across the board," explained Eddie Cloke, the principal of TRMS.

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# An Online Solution

In the 2014–2015 school year, TRMS piloted WriteToLearn™, Pearson's online tool for building writing skills and reading comprehension in grades 4–12. The tool scores essays and provides writing advice based on three scoring rubrics: College and Career Readiness, English Language Learning, and the Six Traits of Writing. Essays are scored on a 4- or 6-point scale, depending on the type of prompt and its associated scoring rubric.

TRMS chose to pilot WriteToLearn partly because a teacher who had previously used the tool in the school had high praise for it. Erin Elsen, who teaches 6th grade, and a former intervention teacher conducted the pilot in their classrooms.

"When our school piloted WriteToLearn, we kept hearing these amazing things," said Carolyn Thaler, an 8th-grade language arts teacher and the student council advisor. So the following year, TRMS began using the online tool in all its language arts classes.

Using both teacher-created and WriteToLearn prompts, the language arts teachers can choose how they want to integrate the online tool into their classes. Thaler uses it in her units on argument, narrative, and the research report, three genres covered on the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests.

At the start of her argument and narrative units, she has her students respond to a prompt as a form of pre-assessment of their writing skills. Then, at the end of each unit, her students respond to a different prompt to serve as a post-assessment. To wrap up the unit, students fill out a reflection sheet. They compare their pre- and post-assessments—noting, for example, whether their narrative contains imagery—and set goals for their writing.

Teachers in other subject areas are beginning to use the online writing tool as well. As part of an 8th-grade cross-content unit on Mars, the science teacher had students write a five-paragraph essay. In their social studies class, 8th-grade students wrote an argumentative essay about the Salem witch trials. "It's really helping us to develop practices that promote writing across our content," Cloke remarked.

For Thaler, "motivation and immediate feedback" are the "two biggest selling points" of the online tool.

Cloke explained, "The simple fact that WriteToLearn gives instant feedback to students accelerates the learning curve, accelerates the opportunity for more writing, and it takes away the roadblock of the time it takes the teacher to read and grade an essay and return it to the student."
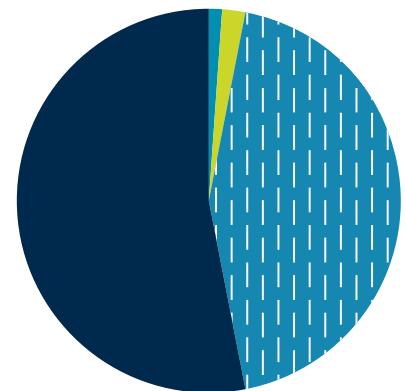
"The engagement of students in the writing process has increased. They are engaged in improving their own writing because they're getting that instant feedback."

Thaler also observed, "There's a gamification aspect as students wait for their score, and they want to beat that score. If they have a 3, they want a 4."

By increasing student engagement, the online tool is helping Thaler solve one of the biggest challenges she faces as a middle school language arts teacher: "finding programs or curriculum that motivates kids, that makes them want to read and write and also improve their reading and their writing."

WriteToLearn has "changed a lot of students' attitudes towards writing. They actually want to write," she said. "The kids are taking ownership; they're taking pride in their work."

Both Cloke and Thaler noted that the online writing tool's automated scoring is benefiting TRMS's diverse population of learners. Students working at an advanced level can use the tool's personalized feedback to revise their essays right away and then resubmit them, without having to wait for teacher feedback. The online tool allows teachers to quickly identify struggling writers and provide them with one-to-one support.

"The real-time feedback allows teachers to be able to individually conference with students right then and there in the moment," Thaler explained. Instead of having to read an entire essay, teachers can immediately see where students are struggling. "So we're able to pinpoint goals for them to work on right away."

For English language learners, WriteToLearn is "empowering," Thaler remarked, "because it's showing them that they can be writers" and it gives them ideas for improving their writing.

The online tool helps students in special education meet their writing fluency goals because it gives them practice in writing and counts words for them.

Thaler recounted the story of one girl in special education who had to write an essay using evidence from four different sources. After she scored a 1 on the essay, she spent a great deal of the class "looking at the feedback and going back and fixing" the spelling and grammar, ultimately earning a score of 2.

"She just had the biggest smile on her face, and she was kicking her feet under the chair, literally bouncing up and down. And she said, 'Miss Thaler, look what I got.' And so just the smile on her face, just that confidence because she was able to, by herself, go from a 1 to a 2 meant the world to her," Thaler said.

> "What I love about WriteToLearn is that it helps improve my grammar issues and spelling before I submit [my essay]."
>
> —8th-Grade Girl,
> Trail Ridge Middle School

# The Results

While it is too soon for TRMS to have standardized testing data to show the impact of WriteToLearn on students' writing skills, Thaler's class data from 2015–2016 shows improvement from students' pre- to post-assessments "in every population," she said.

One student in special education's overall score for a narrative essay improved from a 1 on the pre-assessment to a 4 on the post-assessment, based on a 4-point scale. The total word count for the essay increased from 156 to 769 words.

The score another student in special education received for language and style increased from a 1 to a 3 in an argument essay, based on a 4-point scale. The number of spelling errors the student made dropped from 9 to 0. The number of grammar errors decreased from 18 to 3.

The overall score a student in gifted and talented education received for a narrative essay improved from a 3 to a 4. Another student, who received a 4 on both the pre- and post-assessment, had 24 spelling errors and 20 grammar errors in the pre-assessment but produced a post-assessment free of spelling and grammar mistakes.

TRMS is using a train-the-trainer model to encourage more content-area and elective teachers to use the online writing tool, with Thaler and Elsen leading the training. This past fall, all new teachers received the training as well to set "the groundwork for them. It's a nice opportunity for us to say, 'This is a great tool that we have,'" Cloke commented.

Cloke noted that because TRMS has such a "wide range of students in terms of ability," the school focuses less on achievement and more on student growth: "We want to really focus on meeting levels that give each and every one of our students greater than a year's growth of learning through one school year. When we look at WriteToLearn, we really feel like this could be a key ingredient to that because of the impact that writing has on learning."

> "I love WriteToLearn because when you look at your scores you can improve them and learn a little more each time you do it."
>
> —8th-Grade Boy,
> Trail Ridge Middle School

To learn more about how an online tool can help you build your students' literacy skills, visit **writetolearn.net**

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