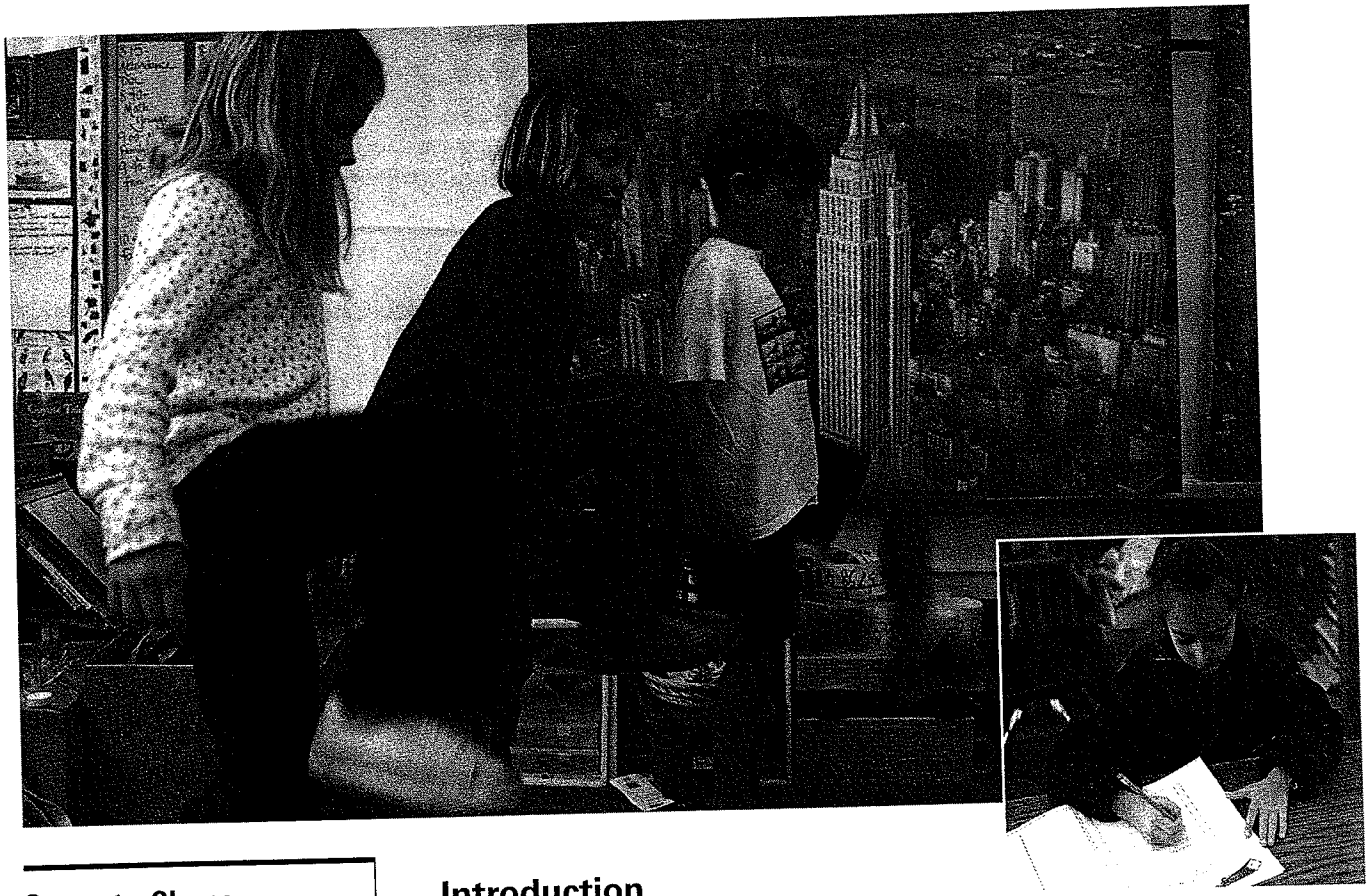
Writing for Understanding



Steps at a Glance

1. Use writing to help your students learn key social studies concepts.
2. Give students rich experiences to write about.
3. Have students record their ideas, thoughts, and feelings in prewriting activities.
4. Provide students with authentic writing assignments.
5. Guide students through the writing process.

Introduction

Have you ever given your students an engaging writing assignment, only to find they respond with poorly organized, incoherent prose? Take, for example, the fourth grade teacher who asked her students to write a letter to a friend describing places in the Northeast region of the United States. She believed that after reading their textbooks and filling out several worksheets, they would have plenty to write about. The letters, however, were uncreative and lacking in detail: "The Northeast is a part of the U.S. Lots of people live there. There is lots of land in the Northeast. The Northeast is a nice place to live." She felt that her students had learned little, if anything, about life in the Northeast. What had gone wrong?

In truth, this writing assignment, and its predictable outcomes, might be found in almost any upper-elementary classroom. A new approach to writing in the content area is vital. To write forcefully and in detail about social studies topics, students need interactive experiences about which to write. Writing for Understanding activities tap into students' multiple intelligences so that *all* learners have something memorable to write about. Before asking students to write such a letter, for example, you might take them on a simulated "train tour" of the Northeast in which they see the coast (a projected image), hear the call of a foghorn (a recording), and walk up several floors in the Empire State Building (stepping in place, 18 times for each floor). Let them record their thoughts, reactions, and feelings along the way, and then give them clear guidelines for writing the letter. Teachers are finding that such creative activities motivate students to write with style and meaning.

Use writing to help your students learn key social studies concepts.

Writing for Understanding activities will improve both your students' understanding of key social studies concepts and their writing ability. They will also help build a strong foundation in expository writing that will serve your students well throughout their lives. Here is why.

Writing during social studies activities supports students' writing fluency. Writing for Understanding activities help lower-elementary students move from scribbles to letters, to words, and ultimately to sentences. They give students concrete, meaningful experiences to write about. Upper-elementary students, who tend to be quite verbal, need to learn to communicate via the written word. They may begin with lists, categories, and sentence fragments. Ultimately, they discover how to "chunk" their learning and put what they've learned into cohesive paragraphs, stories, letters, dialogues, and essays.

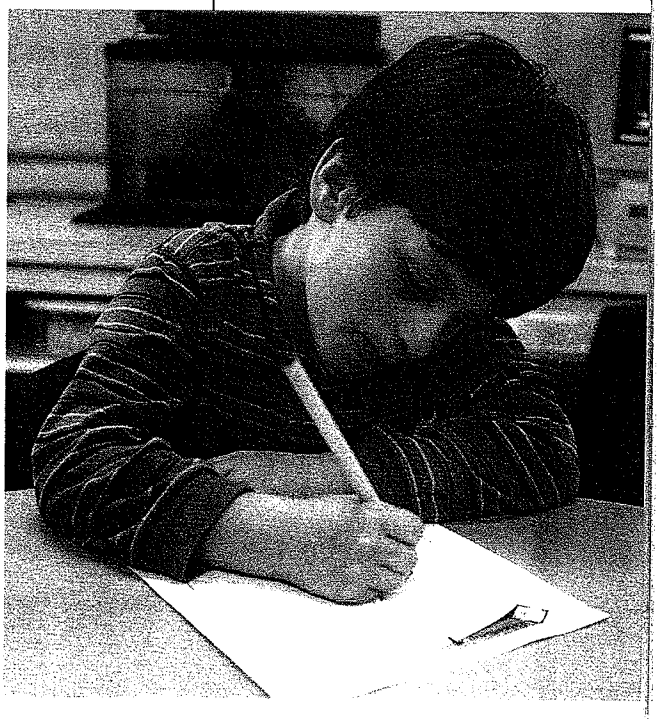
Writing challenges students to clarify, organize, and express what they have learned. When students are asked to verbalize their understanding of a key social studies concept, they often respond with vague, unorganized thoughts. Requiring them to put their thoughts in writing challenges them to construct explicit, detailed, and tangible ideas.

Writing enables students to reach a deeper understanding as they draw on previous learning for supporting detail. Too often students make generalizations or express opinions without supporting details or facts. Having students write about social studies is an excellent way to teach them the necessity of supporting arguments with solid evidence and precise details.

Ownership of written products motivates students to excel. Students will invest more time and energy in learning social studies if they are challenged to write creatively. If you encourage your students to develop their individual voices, their writing will become a form of self-expression rather than just a regurgitation of what they read in their textbooks.

The writing process compels upper-elementary students to refine their ideas. The writing process—brainstorming, writing rough drafts, revising, and editing—requires focused thinking and precise expression. Whereas the spoken word is transitory, a written idea can be reviewed, revised, and embellished. The process of writing a polished, well-supported piece leads to greater understanding of a topic.

Writing for Understanding activities inspire even lower-elementary students to write about what they've learned.



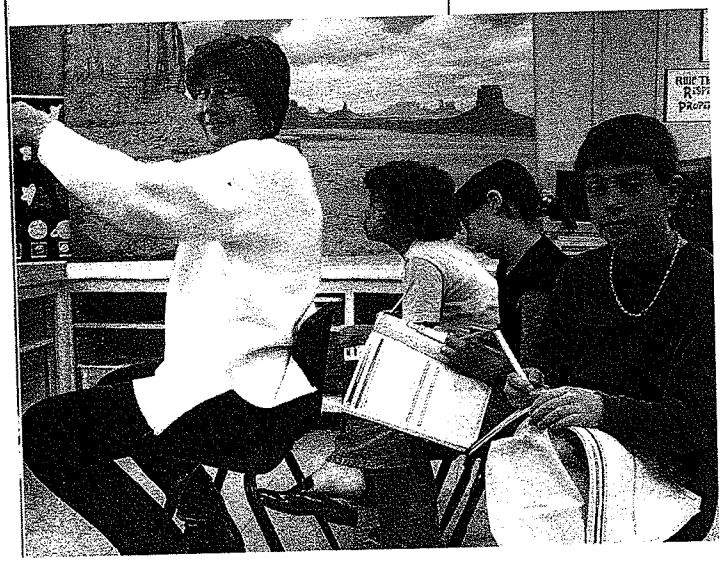
STEP 2 Give students rich experiences to write about.

Whether simple sentences, paragraphs, essays, or stories, writing done in the conventional social studies classroom typically lacks detail, style, and creative expression. At best, most writing efforts tend to be simple recountings of key vocabulary words.

To write powerfully, students need a variety of memorable, interactive experiences on which to base their writing. These activities must tap into the multiple intelligences to give all learners, even those with lesser linguistic skills, something to say. As students participate in these activities—see powerful images, role-play, discuss compelling issues, or act out key social studies concepts—they develop ideas and form opinions *before* they begin writing. Here are three examples of "real life" experiences that give students something tangible to write about:

Who Provides Services in a Community? In this lower-elementary lesson, students learn about service occupations. After viewing and discussing images of various service jobs, pairs of students randomly select a picture card of a service occupation, such as a cook, and bring it to life in a pantomime using simple props. Their classmates try to guess which occupation they are pantomiming. In the subsequent writing assignment, students create a stick puppet with, for example, a drawing of a cook on one side and a simple job description on the other: "I am a cook. I cook in a restaurant. I use pots, pans, and a stove. I like my job because I make hungry people happy."

How Are We Alike Around the World? In this lower-elementary lesson, students learn how their lives compare to those of children in other countries. Six children "travel to the classroom" to visit the students. To learn about Emma from Hungary, for example, students visit a station with a photograph of Emma in her native dress, information about her home and school life, and three artifacts: a flute, swim goggles, and a sewing kit. They also listen to a recording of Emma playing her flute. Students write two similarities they share with Emma and two ways their lives are different. They then use their experiences to write a letter to one of the children they learned about.



Students are anxious to write a letter about the Southwest after touring key sites on a "big rig."

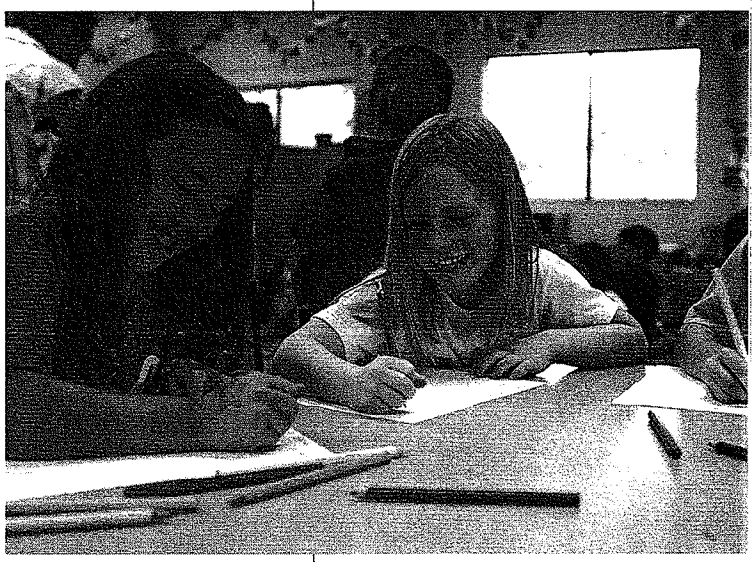
A Big Rig Tour of the Southwest In this upper-elementary lesson, students "tour" the U.S. Southwest. When students enter the classroom, chairs are set up in rows of three (to simulate the front seat of a big rig). Students are told they will visit nine sites (projected images) on their tour and will hear about each site from their guide (a recording that includes sounds of the Southwest such as galloping horses and a Texas folk song). At three sites, students participate in an activity. For example, at the Guthrie, Oklahoma, stop, they re-create the settlement of Oklahoma, discovering the fates of Native Americans, boomers, ranchers, railroad men, sooners, and land-run participants. Finally, they write a detailed, two-page letter describing what they saw and learned on their Southwest tour.

Have students record their ideas, thoughts, and feelings in prewriting activities.

Prewriting activities allow students to record their reactions, feelings, reflections, and ideas immediately after the interactive experiences they have had. Even the most reluctant writers can be coaxed into crafting original, meaningful pieces if you begin the process by having them record their own reactions to fun and engaging prewriting activities—such as matrices, flowcharts, sensory figures, or other types of graphic organizers that relate to the experience. Here are four effective prewriting activities:

"My Family Is Special" Books In a lower-elementary lesson in which students learn that all families are special, students create a simple book about their own family. First the teacher reads to them about different types of families and shows them pictures of a variety of families. Then, on the first page of their books, students draw a picture of their family members and finish this sentence: *The members of my family are....* On the next page, they draw a picture of their favorite place at home and complete this sentence: *My favorite place at home is....* On the last page, they draw a picture of their family engaged in a favorite activity and finish this sentence: *My family likes to....* Students then create covers for their books.

Fun prewriting activities allow lower-elementary students to experience early success with writing assignments. In this prewriting activity, students create books about things they will do to be good citizens, like "Pick up litter in the neighborhood." Adults sign each page as the actions are taken. Students then turn their experiences into a finished piece of writing describing how they have acted as good citizens.



Structured Matrices In an upper-elementary lesson about the geography of communities around the country, students create travel brochures for communities they read about. To get the most from their reading, students first complete a visual matrix for three communities: Roseburg, Oregon; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Gloucester, Massachusetts. For each community, they draw a simple map and list features of the physical geography (for example, mountains, coastal plains, deserts), natural resources (trees, water, minerals), and climate (snow, rain, drought). The completed matrix gives them a wealth of information for creating their travel brochures.

Annotated Maps In an upper-elementary lesson in which students take a "van and airplane tour" of the West region of the United States, students sit in groups of three, listen to a tour guide, and view nine images of places in the West. They record their thoughts and reactions to each site on an annotated map of the West. They later use their notes to write a letter about their excursions.

Talking Buildings In an upper-elementary lesson, students learn about their state's history by creating "talking buildings." As a class, they brainstorm familiar and famous buildings that played an important role in shaping their state's history. Then, in pairs, they research a building, create a three-dimensional model, write a script that tells about one era in the state's history from the perspective of the building, place the building on a timeline, and, finally, bring the building to life to tell the story of their state's history.

Get It While It's Fresh

Ask students to begin writing during or immediately after an Experiential Exercise or other multiple-intelligence task. When they write in the midst of a classroom experience, their writing takes on the emotions of the moment and will be filled with rich detail.

STEP 4

Provide students with authentic writing assignments.

Authentic writing assignments—journals, poetry, stories, letters, and the like—motivate students to write with style and meaning. While traditional assignments such as paragraphs and essays are appropriate for some social studies topics, giving your students a wider variety of writing activities promotes experimentation and makes writing more exciting and novel. When a writing assignment is compelling enough for students to care about, inspired writing almost always follows. Here are five examples of authentic writing assignments that will challenge your students to write creatively and in detail about key social studies concepts:

July 1, 2002

Dear Fire Chief Martinez,

Our class has been studying the people and departments at city hall. Two of the things I have learned about what you do are that you help people in emergencies and teach people how to prevent fires.

I also want to ask you a question. Many more people are moving to our town. Will your department need to buy another fire truck?

Sincerely,

Lana Apple

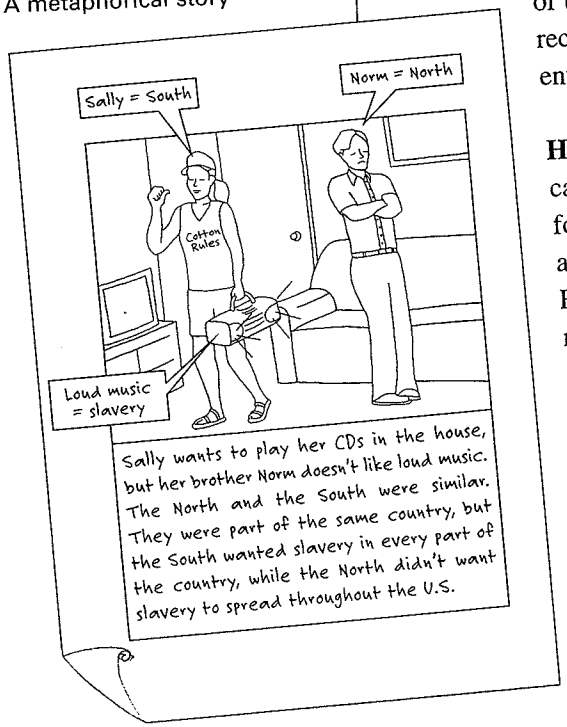
A civic letter

Civic Letters Nothing motivates great writing more than a true purpose. While they are learning about local government, encourage your lower-elementary students to write a letter to someone who works in the local government. The letter should address a problem or an opportunity the students think the government should attend to.

Script Reviews Upper-elementary students with a critical eye will love this assignment. After studying about Native American lifestyles in the Northwest during the 1700s, tell your students they are to critique a movie script in which Native Americans are shown wearing feathered headdresses, hunting buffalo, and living in teepees. Ask them to write a letter to the director that explains why this portrayal is inaccurate and suggests a more authentic way to portray Native American culture.

Journal Entries Most upper-elementary students relish the opportunity to write in a diary. After a make-believe tour in "crop dusters" through the Midwest regio of the United States (accomplished with a few transparencies and a recording of a tour guide), students are challenged to write journal entries describing what they saw, heard, smelled, and felt along the trip

A metaphorical story



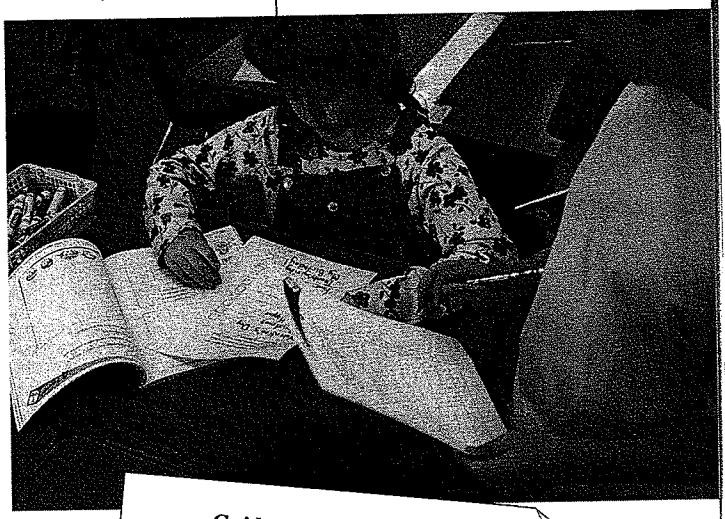
Historical Plaques Creating different types of signs—such as histor cal plaques, museum labels, or road markers—will hold special appea for your students with strong visual-spatial intelligence. For example after they have studied the reasons the American colonies won the Revolutionary War, ask students to create a historical marker that co memorates the factors that allowed the Americans to win. The mark should include a summary of at least four factors that led to victory, each illustrated with a drawing.

Metaphorical Stories Students love to write stories based on metaphors. For example, while studying about the Civil War, challenge upper-elementary students to write a story about a feuding brother and sister. The illustrated story should show how the siblir drama represents the tensions between the North and South that l to the Civil War.

STEP 5 Guide students through the writing process.

Once students have completed a prewriting activity and gathered several rough ideas and details, they are ready to focus on the rest of the writing process: following precise guidelines, writing a first draft, receiving peer feedback, revising the piece, and, finally, writing their final drafts. (The following process may be of greater concern to upper-elementary teachers, though many lower-elementary teachers use a very similar process.) Here are the next steps:

Peer-editing raises all students' awareness of spelling, grammar, and other aspects of their own writing.



1. **Give clear expectations and precise guidelines for writing assignments.** Confusion is a major obstacle to coherent writing. Give your students a handout that clearly states guidelines and deadlines for all parts of the assignment. Nothing will help them more to translate their rough ideas into a coherent piece of writing than this vital step.

2. **Have students write a first draft.** Once students finish organizing their ideas, have them write them all down and experiment with an organizational structure. Stress that while this draft does not have to be polished, it must be well organized and complete. Quickly review their drafts, and note your suggestions.

3. **Use peer-feedback groups.** Divide your students into mixed-ability groups of three or four. Before students move into groups, emphasize that feedback should be honest, constructive, and specific. Each student in a group should use a different-color pen or pencil. Students exchange their papers with someone else in the group. When a student receives another's paper, she writes her name in the upper-right corner, marks any problems (younger students may just check word usage and spelling; older students may be able to comment on content, focus, organization, word choice, vividness of details, clarity of supporting examples, and the writer's voice), and passes the paper to another group member. When the author gets his paper back, he will know who made which suggestions, enabling him to seek further clarification as he writes his final draft.

Guidelines for Writing a Letter to a Global Friend

Write a letter to one of the children you learned about in this chapter. Make sure your letter includes these things:

- A **date**
- A **greeting** (for example: Dear Kazuo,)
- A **first paragraph** that tells the reader two things that are the same about your life and the child's life
- A **second paragraph** that tells the reader two things that are different about your life and the child's life
- **Drawings** showing two artifacts from your life that you mention in the letter
- A **closing** (for example: Your new friend,)
- **Your signature** (your name)

Precise writing guidelines double as a simple, ready-made rubric for the basic requirements of an assignment.

4. **Require students to make revisions.** Students should use the feedback they received from you and their peers to revise their original drafts.

5. **Have students edit their final drafts.** Before they turn in their final drafts, require students to have their papers edited by someone else—a classmate, a parent, or another teacher—before turning them in. Tell students that if their editor finds many errors, they must rewrite the paper. Minor changes can be made directly on the final draft.