The writing submission form: a behavioral learning tool to improve writing skills

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the Writing Submission Form (WSF), a resource instructors can use in their classrooms as a catalyst for student writing improvements. The resulting improvements are practical, connect to writing clarity, and relate to writing as an essential soft skill.
As a tool, the WSF is a behavioral learning solution with applications for both teaching and learning. As a teaching tool, it is the enabling mechanism for writing improvements inspired by instructor feedback. As a learning tool, it results in learners displaying new and improved writing skills and behaviors.
This article provides an overview of the WSF, discusses its theoretical underpinnings, explains how it is used, describes how it is introduced and debriefed with learners, and provides detailed suggestions how to do so. The article also includes the WSFs benefits and potential downsides.

Keywords: writing skills, behavioral learning, soft skills, writing improvement, instructor feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Across disciplines, instructors use writing assignments as evaluative mechanisms in their classes. As such, using writing improvement tools as adjuncts to those writing assignments can be assistive to achieving related learning outcomes. The Writing Submission Form (WSF) requires active use, as learners must read, reflect upon, and apply instructor feedback, then submit documentation that they have done so. Further, with solid writing consistently listed as an essential soft skill desired in the workplace (NACE, 2022), writing improvement tools can help instructors facilitate this workplace need.

When viewed through the lens of soft skills development, the WSF is particularly noteworthy because it is a practical tool that strategically targets writing mechanics. Mechanics are the technical aspects of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations, organization, usage, and the like (Nordquist, 2023). In written communication, mechanics are crucial as they directly impact writing clarity and, often, one's perceived credibility and professionalism.

The author uses the WSF in leadership classes; however, other instructors who use writing assignments in their classes may find the WSF a beneficial addition to their efforts. The success of the WSF is undergirded by its theoretical foundations in the areas of active learning, behavioral learning, and change theory. Learning science literature is clear about the efficacy of these three areas of relevant and interrelated subject matter.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Behavioral learning

"Behaviorism is a theory that explains learning in terms of observable behaviors and how they're influenced by stimuli from the environment" (Eggen, 2013, p. 292). Framing a learner's demonstrated way of writing as a consistent and predictable behavior allows the use of behavioral learning solutions to replace the learners' existing writing patterns (schema) in favor of new ones. Schemas are "cognitive structures that represent the way information is organized in our long-term memory" (Eggen, 2013, p. 219). Using the WSF as the mechanism for mandatorily applying previously received feedback to a new assignment disrupts a student's existing writing schema.

Active learning

Active learning strategies include "instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2). Using the WSF moves learners from passively reading feedback to cognitively engaging and doing something with (applying) the feedback they have received.

Change theory

For change efforts to be successful, people must start behaving in new ways (Heath & Heath, 2010). In Switch, their book about the process of making difficult changes, authors Chip and Dan Heath's, Script the Critical Moves content supports the use of the WSF. "To spark

movement in a new direction, you need to provide crystal-clear guidance" (Heath & Heath, 2010, p. 56). In the present case, instructor-provided feedback is highly specific and necessary to eliminate ambiguity as a barrier to learners' changing their default writing pattern. Having precise feedback "scripts the critical moves" on the road to writing improvement, as the learner knows what not to carry over from one writing assignment to the next. The WSF triggers evolved writing behaviors that learners display in successive writing assignments.

DESCRIPTION OF TOOL

The WSF is a cost-free, easy to follow, paper-pencil, or electronic resource that is appropriate for use at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Instructors can efficiently use it on-ground, online, and in blended learning environments.

The WSF consists of three short components, each of which is a combination of questions and statements (see Appendix A). Each component requires the learner's active engagement. Component one is a question that requires the writer to reflect upon previous feedback that the instructor has provided and then list that feedback on the form. Component two requires three separate actions from the writer, each requiring reflection. Component three of the WSF is a holistic reflection.

For context, the WSF tool itself is simple and adaptable; however, implementing it requires formal planning as it unfolds in more than one class session. As such, an intentional course design is vital to its implementation. The course design must include at least two writing assignments to accommodate the WSF. The first, a short, graded writing assignment, will establish the learner's writing baseline. The second writing assignment can be longer and more traditional. The instructor grades the first writing assignment and provides detailed feedback. When the learner submits the second writing assignment, they must include the completed WSF along with the submission. As appropriate, learners apply the instructor-provided writing improvement feedback received on the first assignment to the second assignment.

In a broader context, the WSF can be thought of as an accountability mechanism, as it holds the writer responsible for using, reflecting upon, and applying instructor feedback, and then writing down why they have done so. It is one thing to receive feedback, it is another thing to apply that feedback. The WSF compels learners to decide where and how to apply the feedback they have received.

CLASSROOM USE

The WSF is a useful resource in several ways: a) it is a personalized self-assessment tool, b) it can be used as a mechanism for achieving learning goals and objectives, and c) it can serve as the basis for a collective activity in a class session.

Self-assessment

As a personalized self-assessment tool, individual learners evaluate their work relative to the previous writing feedback they have received from their instructor; they then complete and submit the WSF along with a subsequent course writing assignment. In this process, each writer compares their new written work to a previous assignment in an effort to recognize any deficiencies they have carried over to the new written assignment. If the writer recognizes

deficiencies while comparing the assignments, they can modify the new written work as warranted before submitting it for a grade. Additionally, the WSF requires the learner to explain, in their own words, why their new written work needs modification before submitting it for a grade. This process actively involves learners in improving their own writing through guided reflection. This reflection helps learners recognize faults in their internalized writing schema, alter them, and, in turn, exhibit writing behaviors that are new and improved.

Achieving learning goals

The WSF can also help meet and assess related learning goals in a course. If, for example, a course or program learning goal is to develop essential soft skills, and written communication is the target, the instructor can use the WSF to evaluate achievement of the goal by comparing the writing quality of the first assignment to that of successive writing assignments. Further, because the WSF requires learners to list and describe the specific action steps they have taken to apply previously received feedback to a subsequent writing assignment, instructors will gain overall and direct insight into student learning in their course, and the thought processes their students employed when they modified new writing submissions relative to previously received feedback. This information can help instructors tailor their instruction as needed for individual learners and the whole class, thereby supporting achievement of course learning goals, and related learning objectives.

Collective classroom experience

The WSF can provide a collective classroom experience through discussion and review because it is both introduced and debriefed to an entire class in an interactive class session. While the WSF is not a graded assignment, class members submit it along with an assignment that counts for a grade. Hence, it is the topic that underpins the interactive class sessions. The interactive WSF sessions signal to learners that the tool is an essential course element. The following section provides the primary WSF implementation milestones, with relevant time settings where applicable.

1. Step 1: As part of the course overview, mention the WSF to cue learners that it is important.
   Day 1 of class. 3-5 minutes.
2. Step 2: Learners submit Writing Assignment #1
   As per the syllabus due date.
3. Step 3: The instructor opens the class discussion with learners regarding the same or similar edits made on multiple papers.
   Upon return of Writing Assignment #1. 25- 30 minutes.
4. Step 4: Class discussion of WSF.
   Two weeks prior to the due date for Writing Assignment #2. 25- 30 minutes.
5. Step 5: Learners submit Writing Assignment #2 along with WSF.
   As per the syllabus due date.
6. Step 6: The instructor opens a discussion with learners regarding their experience with WSF. This session will flow into Debrief.
   Upon return of Writing Assignment #2. Return papers in class. 20-30 minutes.
7. Step 7: Debrief

Occurs on the class date when the instructor returns Writing Assignment #2. 20-30 minutes.

Detailed, step-by-step directions with instructional events, and teaching notes for the collective introductory and debrief sessions can be found in Appendix B.

ANALYSIS OF TOOL

The WSF has strengths and potential downsides, several of which parallel items listed under the Classroom Use section of this review.

Strengths

First, the WSF is a self-assessment. Self-assessments are known to improve learning outcomes (Andrade, 2019) by promoting metacognition and students' responsibility for their own learning.

Second, the WSF is a tool that can directly develop writing as a soft skill. In using the WSF for soft skill writing development, the learning is intentional and formal. Consequently, soft skill writing development is not treated as an aside or an incidental, but fortunate by-product of the "real" learning goals and objectives of a course, as is often the case when it comes to developing essential soft skills in an established class. The WSF is a tool that can be used for direct soft skill development and instruction.

Third, the WSF provides a return on investment (ROI) for the time an instructor spends giving writing feedback. It can be disconcerting for an instructor to repeatedly provide the same feedback to the same learners and still receive writing assignment submissions that are only slightly improved, if, at all. In this type of cycle, the time devoted to providing feedback does not yield a worthwhile return, and learners do not demonstrate notable writing gains. The WSF facilitates ROI for instructor time in the form of student learning (change in writing patterns or behaviors) that instructors can tangibly track over time.

Downsides

One instructor downside to having writing assignments in their courses is that giving feedback on student writing consumes a goodly amount of instructor time (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009). For the WSF to work, providing substantive feedback on Assignment #1 is required. Providing this feedback is time-intensive and can pose a challenge for the instructor of a large class. Having teaching assistant support would make the process easier for the instructor.

Another downside of the WSF is also related to instructor time. Deploying the WSF requires more than one writing assignment in a course. While the WSF provides a payoff in terms of student learning, the additional writing assignment requires more grading time.

Comparison with similar tools

The author is unfamiliar with other tools in the vein of the WSF that apply behavioral solutions to writing improvements, especially tools targeted at writing as a developing soft skill. There are, however, extant approaches to the general teaching of writing. These approaches typically focus on writing as a process and include some combination of brainstorming, drafting,

revising, and then resubmitting assignments for a grade. Comparatively, the WSF provides feedback that a learner applies to a future assignment; its focus is not on revising past work. The WSF is a forward-looking tool that requires learners to apply previously received feedback to a future writing assignment.
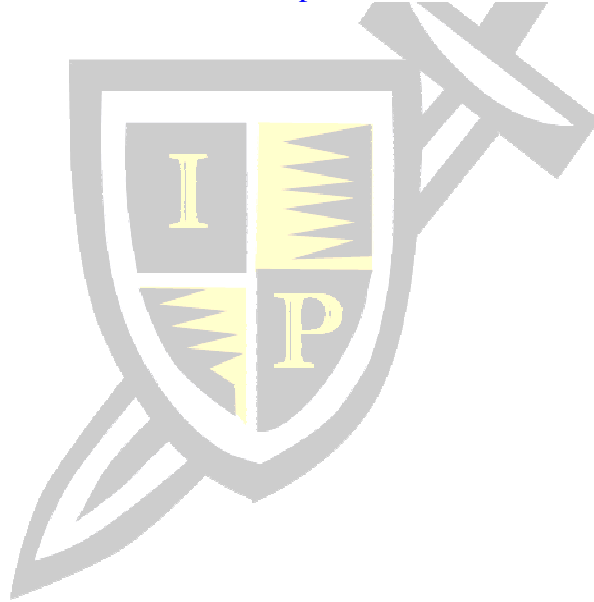
Conclusion

This article frames the way one writes as one's writing behavior. If instructors want learners to display behaviors different from those they see, they can teach to the new behaviors by using course design to arrange their classroom's learning conditions accordingly and by intentionally using tools for the desired changes to occur. The WSF is a tool for this purpose. The WSF requires learners to reflect upon specific writing improvement feedback given to them, actively evaluate if there is a pattern in that feedback that they can apply to a subsequent writing assignment, and, in turn, change their work before submitting for a grade.

Explaining why the three question, WSF is an effective tool is not difficult because it is theoretically grounded in solid, tested, and proven teaching and learning strategies and practices. Further, the WSF is a tool that reinforces instructor feedback while providing learners with a change blueprint of specific action steps needed to improve their writing.

From a learning perspective, time will reveal if the emergence of artificial intelligence diminishes the value placed on individual writing fluency, and, in its place, elevates the value placed on fluency in the use of AI, thus, negating the long-term importance of a tool like the WSF. In the interim, however, and from a teaching perspective, trained writing instructors are not the only ones who need writing improvement tools in their toolkits. Leadership educators and other instructors who include writing assignments in their courses, especially if they wish to deliberately develop writing as a soft skill, may find the WSF a useful tool for their efforts. The author has used the WSF for over a decade, and learner reports about its impact and benefits have been consistently positive.

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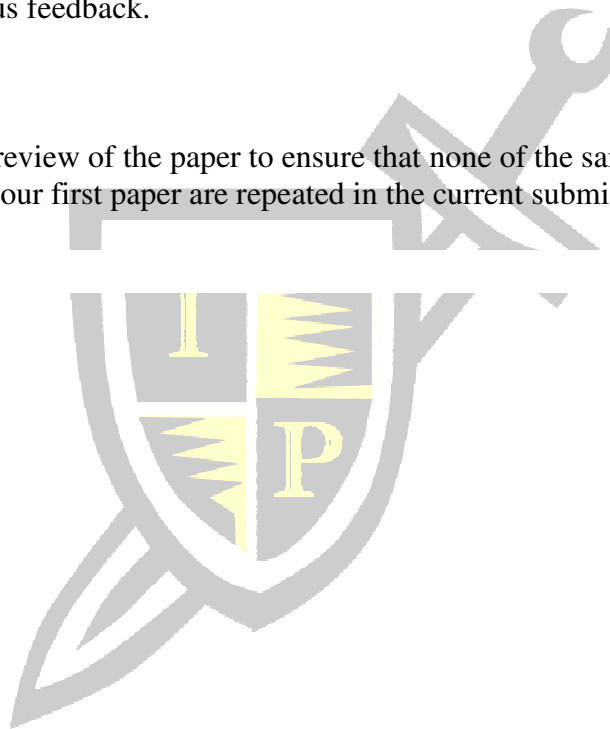
APPENDIX A:

Writing Submission Form (WSF)

1) What feedback regarding mechanics, grammar, writing, style, etc., did you receive on your last paper?
   List here:

2) Use the feedback received on the last paper as a checklist for the current submission. Have you ensured that previous submission comments re mechanics, etc., have not been repeated in this paper?   YES/ NO (circle one)

   Provide two examples of adjustment/s to the current submission that you have made based on previous feedback.
   A.
   B.

3) Conduct a final review of the paper to ensure that none of the same grammar/mechanics issues noted in your first paper are repeated in the current submission.

APPENDIX B.

Writing Submission Form Collective Session - Step-by-Step Instructions, Timing, and Teaching Notes

Session Timing	Instructional Event	Teacher Notes
Day 1 3-5 minutes	1. List WSF on the syllabus in the course schedule section on the same due date for Writing Assignment #2 (Analysis Paper). "Writing Submission Form (WSF) due - to be explained." 2. When reviewing the syllabus, mention the WSF to cue learners that it is important.	Instructor should refrain from a long explanation here. Let learners know that the WSF is coming. The author advises learners to highlight WSF on the syllabus in the course schedule. Writing Assignment #1 concerns content, thought, and grasp of concepts. The goal of this assignment is to establish a writing baseline for each learner and to provide specific feedback that can be used for making writing improvements. The author does not deduct points for writing errors, however, doing so is at the instructor's discretion.
Learners submit Writing Assignment #1	None.	Writing Assignment #1 is due early in the semester, around week four-five of a 16-week term. Writing Assignment #1 is a 2–3-page reflection paper in the author's class. Syllabus directions for Reflection Paper – "at least two—no more than three pages."
Return Writing Assignment #1 25-30 minutes. Timing may vary.	1. Upon return of this assignment – give learners time to review feedback. 2. Open discussion: "This is more feedback than will typically be provided, however, as this is the program's start, there are writing areas that can improve, and these areas will be worked on in the course." Further, advise that, "As a class, the same edits have been made on multiple papers." 3. Write an example on the board— Ask learners, "What is wrong with	If the instructor provides written feedback, ensure that it is legible. Consider giving feedback in print instead of cursive writing. The feedback given on this first assignment is time intensive, though there is a payoff in improved writing and decreased collective correcting of the same things. Make copies of papers with feedback or consider scanning to learners. Learners and the instructor must have future access to feedback provided on Writing Assignment #1.

Session Timing	Instructional Event	Teacher Notes
	this sentence?" Typical edits- comma usage, capitalizations, quotations, using to for, too. 4. Advise learners to keep the returned paper because they will need the feedback for the next writing assignment. 5. To prompt recall, mention the WSF and the fact that they highlighted/marked it on syllabus in the first class. 6. Click into online writing improvement resources (e.g., Purdue OWL). Share where they can get additional information (resources also written on each paper).	
Two weeks before the due date for the second paper /25-30 minutes	1. Introduce WSF with class discussion. 2. Project WSF on screen in class, also post in Learning Management System (LMS). 3. Distribute WSF copies to the class. 4. Prompt recall that the prior paper had more feedback than will typically be provided. Advise learners to make sure they are clear on their personalized feedback and the collective feedback from the previous class discussion. Advise – the writers that their aim with Writing Assignment #2 is to avoid repeating the same writing errors. Let the feedback they received guide in making corrections and edits before submitting Writing Assignment #2 for a grade." 5. State- "Writing is a consistent behavior. People write in a consistent pattern. The WSF is a way to alter their current pattern in favor of a new one without the same writing errors."	Instructor is advised to pay attention to their strong writers, as it is essential to reinforce them as well. Comment on why their writing is good (e.g., easy to follow, painted a good picture). Strong writers must also submit a WSF. .

Session Timing	Instructional Event	Teacher Notes
	6. Remind learners that they must submit the WSF along with Writing Assignment #2. Advise learners to look at previous feedback, then use WSF as a sort of checklist, as they aim to avoid carrying over the issues pointed out in Writing Assignment #1 into the final draft of Writing Assignment #2. 7. Pose questions: Why is writing important to leadership? Pose the questions: How is strong writing connected to leadership, and why does one's writing matter? 8. The preceding questions typically elicit responses along these lines: "says a lot about the writer, it is important to communicate clearly, people need to understand what is being said to them." The instructor is advised to reinforce these statements with agreement.	
Learners submit writing assignment #2.	None.	The WSF is a tool; it is not graded. The paper is the graded assignment. Along with the graded work, instructor should return the WSF with reinforcing comments. Consider scanning back to the learners. If preferred, instructors can use the institution's LMS inline grading option.
Return Writing Assignment #2 and debrief/ 20-30 minutes. This session flows into the Debrief.	1. Return papers in class. 2. Allow learners to review. 3. Start with what instructor found—typically, improvements and fewer carryover errors from Writing Assignment #1 into Writing Assignment #2. 4. Point out any common errors found.	Repeat the WSF process with learners as needed to make the demonstrated writing behaviors permanent. Continue to scaffold (repeat the process) learners with the WSF as necessary to make the newly established writing behaviors permanent. For the strong writers – do not neglect them. Tell them why their writing is strong. Reinforce their strong writing qualities to encourage

Session Timing	Instructional Event	Teacher Notes
		them to continue their excellent work.
Debrief/20-30 minutes. (Return of Writing Assignment #2 flows into Debrief)	1. Open discussion. Pose the question- "How was your experience with the WSF? Helpful, no? Ask how and why. If not—why not? 2. The instructor should talk about the emphasis on mechanics versus the emphasis on the writing process. 3. Typical learner responses- "WSF was helpful. Pointed out things they did not realize." 4. Talk about essential soft skills. Revisit discussion. What is the value of solid writing in the workplace? Does it matter? Why?	The course (Leadership in the case of the author) is not a writing class, so it is important to remain mindful not to turn it into one. Instructors are advised to think about solid written communication as an essential soft skill, and also lean on the importance of solid written communication to leadership (your course topic) or the workplace. Summarize and reiterate the importance of WSF.