

Implementing MI Write in the Classroom

This brief aims to help middle school leaders and teachers understand what helps and hinders the use of automated writing feedback tools in the classroom. Curriculum developers might also generate ideas for integrating these tools into their curricula. The brief summarizes key implementation takeaways from a study of MI Write in grades 7 and 8 English language arts classrooms during the 2021–2022 school year and provides strategies for school and district leaders to support using MI Write. Read more about the [study methods](#).

The MI Write Tool

[MI Write](#) is an automated writing feedback tool designed to support instruction and improve students' writing. In MI Write, teachers assign writing practice, and students plan, draft, and revise their essays. After students submit their drafts, MI Write then provides text-embedded writing and spelling feedback. It also provides a report with scores and feedback on the following six traits of writing: development of ideas, organization, style, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Although not a standard feature of MI Write, during the study coaches provided monthly and ad hoc support to teachers. Research suggests that students' writing skills improve when they have frequent opportunities to practice and receive clear feedback on their writing and revisions.¹

Key Takeaways

- / Monthly coaching sessions helped teachers use and integrate MI Write with their instruction.
- / To successfully learn and use MI Write, teachers need time to plan and carry out daily writing instruction.
- / Pandemic-related absences and reading setbacks made it difficult for teachers and students to have consistent writing-focused interactions.
- / MI Write's feedback is most useful to students when it supplements, not replaces, teacher feedback.
- / A key barrier to successfully using MI Write is a lack of both curriculum integration and alignment.

Implementation Context

The study took place in one rural, one urban, and one suburban school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. All districts held in-person instruction, but two schools required remote, asynchronous learning for two weeks in spring 2021 because of COVID-19 outbreaks. English language arts teachers were randomly assigned to either have access to MI Write (intervention group) or teach using their typical methods (comparison group). Intervention-group teachers and students used MI Write for the first time during this study. About 80 percent of students in the sample used for analysis were Black, Latino, and/or eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, which were communities in focus for this study.

Although teachers and students in the intervention group used MI Write, no teacher or student completed all intended activities. The MI Write team and study researchers requested teachers assign at least eight interactive lessons, pre-writing activities, and essays (each with two revisions), and at least three peer reviews. Students were intended to complete all assigned activities. On average, teachers assigned 7.6 essays and students completed 3.6 essays in MI Write. Teachers were also expected to attend monthly coaching sessions and, in spring semester, to use the annotation tool to supplement feedback on all submitted essays. Teachers attended 5.8 of 8 coaching sessions on average, and no teacher used the annotation tool for all spring essays.

Samples Used for Analysis



Student surveys: 1,182 (intervention)



Teacher surveys: 19 (intervention)

Teacher interviews: 9 (intervention)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Monthly coaching sessions helped teachers use and integrate MI Write with their instruction.

Although not a standard feature of MI Write, during the study coaches provided monthly and ad hoc support to teachers. Anecdotally, MI Write coaches reported that developing strong relationships with teachers helped build trust, allowing coaches to tailor their sessions to the experiences and implementation challenges teachers faced. Coaches aimed to meet with teachers for one hour per month over eight months in small groups to discuss how to use the tool, integrate it with instruction, and address technical issues. On average, teachers attended 5.8 of 8 coaching sessions, which included 3 professional learning sessions to advise teachers on how to use the tool to improve their instructional practices.

The coaching really helped me home in on different aspects of how I teach writing and give feedback.

—Grade 7 teacher

90%

of surveyed teachers agreed implementation supports helped them understand how to use MI Write.

79%

of surveyed teachers agreed implementation supports helped them integrate MI Write with their instruction.

95%

of surveyed teachers agreed that resources provided during coaching sessions were useful.

Interviewed and surveyed teachers reported that coaching supports and resources, such as sample lesson plans, helped them integrate MI Write with their curriculum and instruction.



Strategy. Collaborate with the tool developer to identify professional development opportunities and support needs, as well as resources that teachers can leverage to facilitate MI Write’s implementation, address barriers, and strengthen its classroom integration.

2 To successfully learn and use MI Write, teachers need time to plan and carry out daily writing instruction.

MI Write requires that teachers have enough classroom time for writing in their schedule, allowing teachers to model and students to practice the writing process through pre-writing, essay writing, and revisions. Nearly half of surveyed teachers reported that not

The number one barrier is time for writing instruction in my daily schedule...all these different things like district assessments, exams, grades were layered and put on us and all these different duties made it a timing issue as well.

—Grade 8 teacher

having enough time for writing in their daily schedule was an implementation barrier. Teachers shared that classroom demands unrelated and related to the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to find time in their schedule for writing.

47%

of surveyed teachers agreed not having time for writing in their daily schedule was a moderate or great implementation barrier.

In addition to normal classroom demands such as district assessments and exams, teachers said during the COVID-19 pandemic they faced additional unprecedented demands on their time, which may have limited their capacity to learn and implement a new tool. For example, teachers experienced frequent changes in safety protocols and increased communication with parents. Additionally, teacher preparation periods were not a reliable meeting time for coaching sessions: teachers regularly covered other classes during those times because of substitute shortages. Forty-two percent of teachers agreed that coaching sessions did not fit easily into their schedules. According to coaches, teachers also struggled with burnout due to the pandemic, which may have affected their ability to learn new practices.



Strategy. Find ways to dedicate more time for writing in the classroom and use the time more effectively, for example through schoolwide or grade-level initiatives that promote writing opportunities. Consider what structures or supports would work in your context to encourage teachers to prioritize use of MI Write, help them address implementation barriers, and make it easy for them to attend coaching sessions.

3 **Pandemic-related absences and reading setbacks made it difficult for teachers and students to have consistent writing-focused interactions.**

Teachers most commonly identified COVID-19-related disruptions, including unprecedented student absences and school quarantine policies, as an implementation barrier. According to some teachers, students who were absent or quarantined missed MI Write classroom instructional time, making it difficult for teachers to gain momentum with writing. Because of the pandemic, some schools prohibited teachers from enforcing schoolwork expectations of quarantined students, and many students struggled to complete their assignments outside of the classroom. As one grade 8 teacher reported, “You have to try to catch those students [who were absent] up from all the time that they missed, so that was difficult. I’ve never had absences like this year before.”

68%

of surveyed teachers agreed COVID-19-related disruptions were a moderate or great barrier to implementing MI Write.

Teachers in interviews said they prioritized teaching reading over writing skills to compensate for COVID-19-related setbacks. By prioritizing reading, some teachers may not have had time for consistent writing-focused interactions in MI Write. About half of surveyed teachers reported students’ reading skills was an implementation barrier. Teachers reported that students with reading difficulties had trouble getting started writing essays. They noted that students who struggle with reading also struggle with writing and require additional teacher support. Students with reading difficulties often did not complete writing activities on time, making it difficult for those students to keep up with tool usage expectations.

53%

of surveyed teachers agreed that students’ reading skills were a moderate or great barrier to implementing MI Write.



Strategy. Provide students with enough class writing time to work on essays and revisions, to ensure they understand the instructions and can get help from teachers when using MI Write.

4 MI Write’s feedback is most useful to students when it supplements, not replaces, teacher feedback.

MI Write provides writing analysis feedback in a report that includes scores for six writing traits—development of ideas, organization, style, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The report also includes explanations of each score—for example, why the essay was scored 2 out of 5 on development of ideas. More than one-quarter of surveyed students (29 percent) said it was not easy to understand this feedback. One grade 8 surveyed student reported, “I don’t really understand the feedback that I get, so sometimes I don’t know what to change.” Some teachers reported spending time explaining the tool’s feedback to students to ensure they understood how to interpret it.

A student who is struggling may ask me to explain the score report to them. They might not fully understand it. I might have to break it down into different terms for them.

—Grade 8 teacher

MI Write’s writing analysis feedback is meant to be supplemented with teacher feedback to help students understand how to address the feedback to improve their scores. However, teachers did not use MI Write’s annotation tool in every submitted essay to add their own text-embedded feedback. Although no teachers used the annotation tool as intended, more than three-quarters used it at least once (84 percent), and in more than one essay (79 percent). Interviewed teachers reported that although the annotation tool was easy to use, they preferred to give verbal, not written, feedback to students.

84%

of teachers used the annotation tool at least once.



Strategy. Allocate time for teachers to supplement MI Write’s writing analysis feedback, whether verbally or through the tool. Refine MI Write’s feedback so it provides more specific and accessible guidance on how students can improve their writing.

5 A key barrier to successfully using MI Write is a lack of both curriculum integration and alignment.

Although coaching sessions helped teachers integrate MI Write with their instruction, about half of surveyed teachers (47 percent) reported that lack of alignment between MI Write and their writing curriculum was a great or moderate implementation barrier.

In interviews, some teachers reported that their English language arts curriculum did not prioritize writing or writing-process practice as much as MI Write. This misalignment made it difficult to keep up with tool usage expectations, and some teachers fell behind in their curriculum. For example, in one district, teachers reported they typically assign writing-process assignments—which require a cycle of pre-writing, drafting, and multiple revisions—only once a marking period. MI Write, however, required monthly writing-process assignments in the study.

We all tried our best...but I think a lot of [MI Write’s requirements] were kind of unattainable because it made the focus of everything be on the writing, which is totally understandable for the program, but not everything in our classroom is about writing.

—Grade 8 teacher

Additionally, some of the 10 teachers who implemented a new English language arts curriculum alongside MI Write faced challenges integrating MI Write into the new curriculum, which included a technological writing platform. One teacher reported, “The only problem we had this year was that we were simultaneously having MI Write and a new curriculum... MI Write itself was easy to use, but trying to fit it in became really difficult.”



Strategy. Review the English language arts curriculum to ensure it includes a focus on writing and allows time for teachers to model the writing process before integrating MI Write. Give teachers time before the school year to identify ways to integrate MI Write into their teaching practice, especially when implementing a new curriculum.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Study design. The study team randomly assigned 39 English language arts teachers from three school districts either to have access to MI Write (intervention group) or to teach using their typical methods (comparison group). The team then compared student and teacher outcomes for the intervention group to outcomes for the comparison group. The study included about 2,500 students in grades 7 and 8 across 14 schools. Read more about the [study methods](#).

Data and methods used for the brief. Not all study participants completed all data collection activities. The study team analyzed completed surveys from 1,182 students and 19 teachers in the intervention group at the end of the study to assess MI Write’s usability and usefulness, in addition to conducting individual or group interviews with nine teachers in the intervention group. The study team also reviewed MI Write usage data and coaching logs. The study team calculated descriptive statistics from the survey and usage data and identified themes in the qualitative data.

Implementation context. The study took place in New Jersey and North Carolina in one rural, one urban, and one suburban school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instruction in all districts was conducted in person, but two schools required remote, asynchronous learning for two weeks in spring 2021 because of COVID-19 outbreaks. School districts provided students with laptops and internet access, which are required to use MI Write. The intervention-group teachers and students used MI Write for the first time during the study, and 13 of the 19 teachers also used a curriculum with its own technological writing platform, StudySync. For 10 of those teachers, it was also their first time using StudySync. About 80 percent of students in the sample used for analysis were Black, Latino, and/or experiencing poverty (as measured by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch), which were communities in focus for this study.

Level of implementation. Although teachers and students in the intervention group used MI Write, no teacher or student completed all intended activities. Teachers were requested to attend one half-day initial training on how to implement the tool in their classrooms. Although not a standard feature of MI Write, coaches also provided monthly and ad hoc support to teachers during the study, including eight monthly coaching sessions to advise teachers on how to use the tool to improve their instructional practices. The MI Write team and study researchers requested teachers assign at least eight essays (each with two required revisions), eight pre-writing activities, eight interactive lessons, and three peer reviews for students to complete in MI Write during the study. The MI Write team and study researchers also requested that teachers use an annotation tool to provide supplemental writing feedback. On average, teachers assigned 7.6 essays and students completed 3.6 essays in MI Write and completed 1.3 essays with at least two revisions. Forty-seven percent of teachers assigned all eight essays, and four percent of students completed eight essays. All teachers assigned at least one essay, and 87 percent of students completed at least one essay.

Read more briefs in this series here: [Evaluating the Development of Secondary Writing Teaching & Learning Solutions](#).

The MI Write team (Corey Palermo, Ph.D., Halley Eacker, Ph.D., and Jessica Coles) and University of Delaware evaluator (Joshua Wilson, Ph.D.) designed and conducted the study with technical assistance from Mathematica ([Ryan Ruggiero](#), [Lindsay Fox](#), and [Megan Shoji](#)). Mathematica ([Ryan Ruggiero](#), [Lindsay Fox](#), and [Megan Shoji](#)) wrote the brief with contributions from the MI Write and UD teams. [Virginia Knechtel](#) reviewed the content and provided feedback. This publication was prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Interested in implementing MI Write in the classroom? Email info@miwrite.net.

Endnote

¹ Graham, S., Hebert, M., & Harris, K. R. (2015). Formative assessment and writing: A meta-analysis. *Elementary School Journal*, 115(4), 523–547; Kellogg, R. T., & Whiteford, A. P. (2009). Training advanced writing skills: The case for deliberate practice. *Educational Psychologist*, 44(4), 250–266; Tehrani, F. A. (2018). Feedback for writing or writing for feedback? *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 14(4), 162–178.

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