# 4. The Writing Road to Reading Proficiency

In this *Harvard Educational Review* article, Steve Graham and Michael Hebert of Vanderbilt University note that major initiatives over the last ten years to improve reading achievement (No Child Left Behind, Reading First, the National Reading Panel) have produced disappointing results: while NAEP math scores improved significantly, reading scores have flatlined and large numbers of students are far from being proficient readers.

Why? Graham and Hebert believe it’s because the instructional practices identified by the National Reading Panel in 2000 and pursued with gusto across the nation were “too narrow and not complete.” In this article, they report on a meta-analysis of research on one of the underemphasized factors: the impact of effective teaching of *writing* on students’ achievement in *reading*. Here are their three research questions and what they found:

• *First, when students write about material they have read, does their comprehension improve?* Graham and Hebert found there is significant positive impact in grades 2-12 when students are asked to write about literature and material in science, social studies, and other expository texts. Students did extended writing, summary writing, note-taking, and answering and generating questions. The positive impact of this type of writing was greatest in middle school and with students who were weakest in reading and writing. Why is writing about reading so helpful?

* It fosters explicitness, as students must select which information in the text is most important.
* It encourages the writer to organize ideas from the text into a coherent whole and establish explicit relationships among the ideas.
* It fosters reflection because it’s easier to review, reexamine, connect, critique, and construct new understandings from written text.
* It gets students personally involved by requiring them to engage in active decision-making about what they will write and how they will treat it.
* Students must transform or manipulate the text’s language to put it into their own words, which makes them think about what the ideas mean.

• *Second, does explicit teaching of writing skills strengthen students’ reading skills?* Again, Graham and Hebert found positive results in this research, which covered grades 4-12 language arts classes.

• *Third, does increasing the quantity of student writing improve how well they read?* Yes, say Graham and Hebert, reporting on studies of students in grades 1-6 language-arts classes.

The authors end on a cautionary note: “Just because a writing intervention was effective in improving students’ reading in the studies included in this review does not guarantee that it will be effective in all other situations,” they say. “As a result, the safest course of action for teachers implementing research-based practices is to directly monitor the effects of such treatments to gauge whether they are effective under these new conditions.” They suggest these key components:

* Frequent student writing;
* Explicit skill instruction;
* Starting small and measuring the impact of each initiative before embarking on others.

“Writing to Read: A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Writing and Writing Instruction on Reading” by Steve Graham and Michael Hebert in *Harvard Educational Review*, Winter 2011 (Vol. 81, #4, p. 710-744), <http://her.hepg.org/content/t2k0m13756113566/>

Students who engage in frequent discussions about what they read are more motivated and have higher achievement scores than students who do not interact with books.  
 *Mullis, Campbell & Farstrup, 1993*

Engaging students in writing about their responses to reading leads to better reading achievement.   
 *Tierney & Shanahan, 1991*