

Teaching Content Writing to Students in Grades 4-6

Timothy G. Weih, Ph.D.

University of Northern Iowa, USA

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This article covers instruction in teaching intermediate grade elementary children how to be proficient in applying the English language arts, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension INFUSED into the content subject areas of science, social studies, math, language arts, and literature. This is known as teaching language fluency for the sake of elementary students becoming proficient in all aspects of using the English language across their academic work.

This method of instruction for teaching content writing proficiency builds from the previous articles covering instruction for teaching intermediate grade students how to say, write, and understand word meanings; vocabulary; reading fluency; and reading comprehension (see Weih, 2015c, 2015d, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f).

Planning and Instruction for Teaching Content Writing in the Content Literacy Program

Teaching intermediate grade children how to write means teaching them how to write the alphabetical letters, words, lists, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, narrative text, expository text, and writing mechanics (punctuation & grammar). Teaching writing for meaning is teaching children how to express their thoughts in writing, this is the content of their writing, hence, content writing. Teachers plan for and instruct their intermediate grade children to formulate and compose texts within the English language leading them to become proficient in English language fluency.

Misconceptions Surrounding the Planning and Instruction of Elementary Writing in English Language Arts

There are many misconceptions surrounding the teaching of content writing to elementary children that have been suggested through pedagogy, such as the following:

- It is a misconception that children learn to read and write separately from each other. Instead, pedagogy has suggested that children learn to read and write at the same time.
- It is a misconception that children only need to learn to write through keyboarding because of the digital age. Instead, pedagogy has suggested that children benefit the most by learning both at the same time.

- It is a misconception that teaching writing to children means only teaching them penmanship. Instead, pedagogy has suggested that children benefit the most when penmanship and writing for meaning are taught at the same time.
- It is misconception that cursive penmanship is outdated and no longer needed to be taught and that most schools no longer teach it. Instead, research has shown that most schools continue to teach cursive penmanship primarily for the sake of children being able to read and understand historic documents and other writings that were written in cursive penmanship for the sake of content studies across the curriculum.

Best Practices for Instruction and Delivery to Promote Student Writing Proficiency in a Content Literacy Program

Just as motivation is a key factor in getting children to reach all four levels of reading comprehension (see Weih, 2018d), so, too, is motivation key in getting children to achieve high proficiency in their content writing abilities. It is best practice for teachers to model, i.e., show how, show examples, and give demonstrations of the writing that they want children to do on the classroom screen or large board for all to see. The content of the writing that teachers want children to do should relate to something they already know a lot about, i.e., content subject reading, an event, their family, or anything related to their lives and cultures.

Teachers should not expect the content or mechanics of children's writing to be like adults. The content of children's writing is more personal than their choices of what they read, therefore, never demand that they share it, never criticize it harshly, never make fun of it, in other words, treat the content of children's writing with the utmost respect and care. It can be very revealing of who they are as a person, thereby making them feel very vulnerable. Children need constant inspiration, motivation, encouragement, and support by the teacher towards their content writing.

Choose the Purpose for the Content Writing

Children are most motivated to write content when they have a clear purpose for doing the writing. It must be meaningful to them if teachers expect them to put everything they have into it, because, after all, content writing is very difficult for many people at all ages.

It is best practice for teachers to guide children to come up with their own purposes for content writing. Some of the purposes could include selections from the following: write something for a family member, friend, community member, celebrity, a member of the government, a character in a book, a character in a movie, a character in a TV show, write to remember something, share with the broader public, or writing something just for yourself.

Content Literacy Instructional Strategies that Promote Student Content Writing

Teachers can build upon children's educational knowledge regarding what they have previously learned about the English language in the areas of words, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension by continuing with some best practices for instruction in content-area writing. These best practices of instruction include the following but are not limited:

- Teachers implement content literacy planning and delivery through the Content Literacy Strategy Lesson Plan Format (see Weih, 2015a; Appendix).
- Plan and deliver instruction through topic and thematic units whenever feasible.
- Engage elementary students in reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension in the content subject areas through the Guided Practice and Checking on Understanding phases of the strategy lesson format design (see Weih, 2015a; Appendix) while students are working in small, mixed ability groupings.

There are many content writing strategies that make up content writing methods and they can be categorized according to the characteristics of the text that each strategy produces. There are two main categories which are narrative texts and expository text.

Planning for Instruction and Delivery of Content Writing Strategies

It is best practice to teach children the skills they will need BEFORE they begin the content writing. Children need to physically see many examples of the content writing that teachers want them to do, for example, if teachers want children to write a letter to someone, they should have examples of letters to look at for models for their own writing. If students are to write an expository report, they should have examples that represent exactly the reports they are to write to use as models for their own writing. If teachers want their students to write a persuasive speech, the students should have examples that represent exactly the speeches they are to write to use as models for their own writing. If students are to use capitalization in their content writing pieces, then they should have lots of experiences with proper nouns and how to begin a sentence. If teachers want children to use punctuation in their content writing, then they should have lots of experiences with commas, periods, question marks, exclamation marks, and quotation or dialogue marks.

The examples of writing that teachers want children to emulate, should be child-written, not adult written (children do not write like adults).

Teachers can now find many directions for content writing online and then use this information to create, develop, and design their own instruction using the Strategy Lesson Format (Weih, 2015a; Appendix). For the sake of giving teachers some guidance in doing their online research into these strategies, I have included below some strategy lesson titles for their searches. Content Writing Strategies typically found online include the following:

- How to Write a Business Letter
- How to Write a Report
- How to Write a Story
- How to Write a Speech
- How to Write an Essay

It is important to note that in conjunction with the Strategy Lesson Plan Format covered in Weih (2015a; Appendix) that each of these content writing strategies can be plugged into, elementary students should be using content subject reading materials as the basis for the content of their writing pieces, hence, INFUSED into the content subject areas of science, social studies, math, language arts, and literature. Many times, teachers use children's literature, mainly books, as a means for children to relate to the content they are teaching. Children then write in connection to the books they are reading.

The reading that students are engaged with should be used as inspiration for the writing that they do. If they are reading expository books or text, for example, some of the literacy strategies that can be developed into strategy lessons (using the Strategy Lesson Plan Format) could include the following expository writing strategies based on expository text:

- Quick Write-this is a timed piece that students write in response to an open-ended, topic-driven prompt given by their teacher. Students are free to write their thoughts without concerted efforts towards style, appearance, punctuation, or grammar. It is an ungraded piece that students use for talking points following a brief writing time of about 3-5 minutes.
- Biopoem-directions for these can be found online.
- Acrostic Poetry-directions for these can be found online.
- Expository Poetry-(see Weih, 2017).
- Breaking News- have students write an exciting news report for an online newspaper including the application of the 5 Ws plus "how."
- Write and Record a Podcast-directions for these can be found online.
- Crossword Puzzle-have students use software for generating and creating a crossword puzzle or write in print if computers are not available.

If students are reading a narrative book or narrative text, then the writing strategies to develop and teach them could include the following narrative writing strategies (develop these into the Strategy Lesson Plan Format covered in Weih, 2015a):

- Similarities- students create a list poem comparing two characters, then multiple characters (see Weih, 2016a).
- Magnetic Poem-students create a poem based on a character (see Weih, 2016b).
- Alternate Ending-students use their creative thinking to write an alternate ending to the story they read.

- Setting Analysis-students use their critical thinking skills to write a descriptive paragraph about the setting for the story and explain how they feel about it.
- Alternate Setting-students use their creative thinking to write a descriptive paragraph about a different setting for the story that they make up.
- Character Analysis-students use their critical thinking skills to write a descriptive paragraph about a character in the story and explain how they feel about this character.
- Letter to a Character-students use their creative and critical thinking skills to write a letter to a character in the story telling him or her how they feel about something in the story.
- Add a Character-students use their critical and creative thinking abilities to write a descriptive paragraph about a new character that they would like to add to the story and explain why this character should be added and his or her role in the story.
- Pretend you are a Character-students use their critical and creative thinking abilities and write a paragraph about how they feel about something in the story from the perspective of one of the characters.
- Write a Letter to the Author-students use their critical and creative thinking abilities to write a letter to the author about their feelings about something related to the story.
- Free-Response Journal Entry-students use their critical and creative thinking skills to write about their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about something in the story.
- Create an Alternate Problem-students use their critical and creative thinking skills to develop and describe an alternate problem for the story.

This method of instruction is known as teaching language fluency for the sake of elementary students becoming proficient in all aspects of using the English language across their academic work.

During Content Writing Instruction

During the content writing strategy instruction, teachers need to make available to their elementary students the writing tools and materials they need when they are engaged in writing, e.g., pencils, pens, markers, crayons, paper (all kinds), computers (all kinds), staplers, hole punchers, and so on. It is important for teachers to also make available the writing resources their students need when they are engaged in writing, e.g., dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, and examples of the type of writing they are doing, e.g., if they are writing a letter, they should have letters to look at; if they are writing certain kind of a poem, they should have examples of that specific type of poem to look at; if they are writing a short story on a particular topic, they should examples to look at. The examples of writing that teachers want children to emulate, should be child-written, not adult written (children do not write like adults).

Teachers need to have spaces in the classroom for children to write alone and in peace and quiet. It is also important for teachers to have spaces in the classroom where children can write and discuss their writing together (but using whisper voices).

Teachers need to constantly read the writing that children are creating, while they are creating it (not after), and constantly giving them encouragement and direction (feedback), while they are writing (not after). Children developmentally are here and now. If teachers want to have the most impact on their students' learning, they need to give immediate feedback to children while the children are working on their assignments.

After Content Writing Instruction

It is best practice for teachers to provide the means for children to share their writing, but it is very important to not make this mandatory. Instead, teachers should set the stage for children to WANT to share their writing. This, many times, can be accomplished when the teacher insures follow through. Whatever the purposes were for the children's writing, help them to follow through, e.g., if they were writing for a family member, friend, or other person, help them get the piece to them. If they were writing to a public person, help them get the piece to him or her. If they were writing for the broader public, help them display their writing, publish their writing, or display their writing somewhere public, beyond the classroom; e.g., library, lunch room, hallway, or community building.

Set the stage after the children have written their pieces for them to make any changes necessary in their writing to make it as error free as possible for their developmental level. It is important to remember that they are children, and that their writing will not look like adult writing, but they should make their writing readable and understandable for others to enjoy. Therefore, it is important for teachers to constantly read the writing that the children are producing while they are producing it and not after, for the sake of catching the mistakes they are making and teaching them, in the moment, how to correct their writing. Children will want their writing to be understandable to others for the sake of sharing their ideas and opinions.

Many times, when children see and experience the real, authentic rewards that come from sharing their writing, they will want to repeat the process over and over. When this happens, teachers will not have to worry about making them correct their writing and share-they will want to all on their own.

Closing Comments

This article covered instruction in teaching intermediate grade elementary children how to be proficient in applying the English language arts, i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing INFUSED into the content subject areas of science, social studies, math, language arts, and literature.

Methodology covered supports instruction in language fluency for the sake of elementary students becoming proficient in all aspects of using the English language across their academic work. If teachers want their elementary students to fully advance in their content writing proficiency, the following best practices will help: create a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment for children to write; teach the skills they need before they need them in their writing; connect the writing to something they already know a lot about; help them establish a clear purpose for writing; provide many child-written examples of the writing for them to emulate; provide the tools, materials, resources, and classroom spaces that they need in order to accomplish the writing; and support follow through with the writing to accomplish the initial purposes. Writing proficiency builds within elementary students' literacy development as they become increasingly fluent in the English language.

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For Further Reading see the Following Reference

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University of Northern Iowa, USA

About the Author

Timothy G. Weih is an associate professor of education at the University of Northern Iowa, USA, and teaches elementary teaching methods courses.

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Appendix

Content Literacy Strategy Lesson Plan: Instructing and Engaging Elementary Students in Learning

Teaching involves three main areas of activity on the part of the teacher. First is the curriculum and assessment creation, development, and design; next is the instruction; and finally is the assessment and evaluation. Instruction involves the teacher in the delivery of information to students. Usually the instruction first takes the form of a lesson plan the teacher creates or modifies from one found online or from some other sources. Effective instruction, or the delivery of the lesson plan to students can take many forms, but there is a logical sequence of events, widely associated with Madeline Hunter's design (Hunter, 1982). Most strategies and lesson plans found online can be modified into Hunter's template. The following subsections present this template in a modified version in multipart procedures for curriculum development and instructional delivery.

Preliminary Phase

Before developing, creating, and designing the strategy lesson plan, the teacher needs to engage in some preliminary activities for the sake of developing the necessary content. Typical preliminary tasks are included in the following list:

- Research the appropriate strategy through online search engines
- Determine the content area or focus
- Ascertain the main concepts or big ideas that students will learn
- Gather all the materials that students will need in order to do the strategy
- Determine the related standards
- Develop the objectives
- Determine what prerequisite skills students will need for the sake of accomplishing the strategy and teach these prior to teaching the main strategy
- Determine how many class periods instruction will be needed

After this preliminary work has been done, the teacher is ready to create the content literacy strategy lesson plan, which is presented in the next subsections.

Instructional Procedure: Get Student Attention and Review

In this part of the strategy lesson delivery the teacher focuses the students' thoughts upon what will be learned. Teachers think of ways to connect back to a previous strategy lesson or other means to peak the students' interests. Get Attention and Review is defined as a brief activity or prompt that focuses the students "attention" before the actual lesson begins. This activity usually occurs right away when students enter the room or in a transition from one strategy lesson to the next. Examples could be a hand-out given to students at the door, review questions written on the classroom screen, two short problems presented on the screen, an agenda for the lesson written on the screen, a short video clip on the screen, a discussion prompt that engages elementary students

in a brief sharing time of background knowledge-the ideas are actually endless, and teachers are encouraged to be creative.

Instructional Procedures: Strategy Definition, Benefits, and Applications

Students learn more effectively when they know what they are supposed to be learning and why it is important to learn it. Teachers also teach more effectively when they have the same information. In this part of the strategy lesson delivery, teachers tell their students the definition of the strategy; the student benefits of learning the strategy; and how students can use or apply the strategy in their academic work for the sake of enhancing their success.

Instructional Procedure: Content and Modeling

During this phase of the lesson, teachers present the CONTENT, i.e., facts, generalizations, main ideas, and concepts, necessary for student understanding of the strategy along with the instructional directions for completing or doing the strategy. To help students understand exactly what teachers are asking them to do with the strategy directions, they also MODEL, which means they demonstrate to the students how to do the strategy, show them an example, or in some way make it so students can actually see the finished product of what they are going to do.

Instructional Procedure: Guided Practice and Checking for Understanding

For this component of the lesson, teachers have students practice the new content literacy strategy within small groups as the teacher circulates close to students and intently observes their work for the sake of performing the following: guiding students in the right directions, answering questions, giving more content instructions if needed, observational assessment and evaluation of students' performance, and making decisions about further instructional directions.

Instructional Procedures Repeated

The instructional procedures leading to and including the part of the Guided Practice and Checking for Understanding must be repeated for multiple class periods until the teacher is assured most students can demonstrate the new content literacy strategy without teacher and other student support. Even though students are working in small groups on the strategy, each student needs to complete his own work sample. Teachers should constantly assess and evaluate students' work both while they are working, and by collecting the work samples for further assessment and evaluation. When it appears that most students have successfully learned the new content literacy strategy, then the teacher can move on to the next part of the strategy lesson which is called CLOSURE.

Instructional Procedure: Closure

When it appears that most students can demonstrate that they have learned the content literacy strategy, then the teacher can have each small group of children share what they have learned or done with the whole class. This constitutes a review of the strategy from the perspectives of the students. There are many ways this can happen, but one of the most beneficial strategies is called "Recorder, Reporter" (see Weih, 2016). In this discussion strategy, each small group of elementary students selects one student to write down the main points of their discussion and then report out the content to the whole class, however, all group members are also required to write down the main points, this keeps all students fully active and engaged in the learning process, and in addition, creates a work sample from all students. After students have determined who is going

to be the Recorder, Reporter, the teacher asks the students to respond through small group discussion to a question relative to the content literacy strategy that they just engaged in. After giving students enough time to discuss and write their responses, the teacher calls on each small group's Recorder, Reporter to report out to the class. In the end, the teacher collects all the papers from each individual student for the purpose of assessment and evaluation, but mostly for the sake of determining if it is feasible to move on to the next part of the Instructional Procedures called INDEPENDENT STUDENT WORK SAMPLE, which is presented in the next subsection. If it appears that many students are still not clear about the content literacy strategy, then the teacher should reteach the strategy as necessary.

Instructional Procedure: Independent Student Work Sample

In this phase of the lesson plan, teachers separate students from their groups and give them a new example of the same strategy that they have been learning and working on for the sake of assessment and evaluation of individual student work samples. The teacher should help students as little as possible. These samples need to be evaluated and any students that are not performing to the degree of success in regards to the objectives for the strategy, the teacher should reteach these students again in the strategy, but this time, in small, teacher-guided groups in which the teacher sits with the group and leads them through the strategy step-by-step.

Next part of the Strategy Lesson Plan: Adaptation and Differentiation

Teachers modify and make adaptations in their strategy lesson plans in order to accommodate the needs of one or a few students in the classroom who, for whatever reasons, are not going to be successful as the majority of students in the classroom will be in doing the lesson plan activity or in learning the strategy. This is called "differentiation." Each child with special needs is different in what he or she needs in order to learn and demonstrate learned skills. Each strategy lesson plan is different in content and directions. There is not a "one size fits all" method that can be applied to every situation. This is why it is so important for teachers to learn how to think for themselves when it comes to academic curriculum development and instructional delivery rather than learn to follow a textbook, teaching manual, or some other form of what is called "scripted curriculum." It is crucial for educated teachers to be allowed to develop, create, and design their own curriculum and instruction. The role of textbooks, teaching manuals, and materials found online (including this article) can be used as "resources" to meet the needs that teachers have.

The best way to make decisions about how to make adaptations to strategy lesson plans is to constantly think about individual student needs, and then make the necessary accommodations in instructional lesson plans. It is critical for teachers to do everything they can to help individual students grow and become as independent as possible in their academic learning and work samples. The main point is that teachers make accommodations, rather than ignore the need for them. When children reach the intermediate grades, they are more sensitive to standing out or being different in any way. Knowing this, then, the best and first accommodation should be to plan and deliver the strategy lesson design covered in this article, with the most important part as being Guided Practice and Checking on Understanding happening in small, mixed ability groupings of the classroom children. This way, children with special needs can draw from the benefits that come from social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers know best how to help their individual students in their classrooms through their daily ethnographic observations.

Next part of the Strategy Lesson Plan: Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation is a continual process of engagement on the part of the classroom teacher as she plans and delivers instruction, thinks back about what happened, and then makes changes based on the new knowledge gained. For information covering assessment and evaluation instruction, see the article “Assessment and Evaluation for Grades K-6” by Weih (2015a, 2015b). Classroom teachers are constantly learning, and their students are their teachers.

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