Writing Ideas That Work
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ABSTRACT

Student writing performance has not appreciably improved in the past decade. While there is evidence that teachers assign more writing than in the past, performance has not kept pace. Three urban schools that experienced significant improvements in students' writing achievement were studied. To glean ideas and examples, the authors observed classroom teachers as they taught writing. In this article, the authors focus on specific instructional strategies used across grade levels by teachers to improve writing performance.

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Educators, parents, and policymakers alike lament the writing performance of American students. Newspapers and professional journals suggest that writing achievement in the U.S. has not changed appreciably in the past several decades. For example, of the 36 states or jurisdictions that participated in the 1998 and 2002 grade 8 writing National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments, only 16 showed score increases in 2002 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003).

We believe that one of the reasons for this lack of significant progress is that many teachers are unsure how to teach writing. In addition, we believe (and the NAEP data confirms) that students today are given more writing assignments than ever. Unfortunately, these assignments are mostly in the form of independent writing prompts with little formal instruction. As Leif Fearn notes, "we are causing more writing than ever before" (personal communication). In other words, teachers are assigning more writing but are not necessarily teaching it.

The current focus on the workshop approach has provided teachers with opportunities to model writing instructional strategies (e.g., Calkins, 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Frey & Fisher, 2006). However, the power of the writing workshop can be diminished if teachers do not provide quality instruction – instruction that guides students in their writing achievement. The workshop will not be effective if instruction time is only devoted to independent writing and peer feedback. Students must be provided instruction and teachers need a wide range of instructional strategies and ideas at their disposal.

In our work in City Heights, students' writing achievement has "beaten the odds." The over 5200 students from Rosa Parks Elementary, Monroe Clark Middle, and Hoover High School, 99% of whom qualify for free lunch and 72% of whom speak at least one language in addition to English, perform well above students with similar backgrounds and demographics. Data from the schools (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2003; Fisher, Frey, Farnan, Fearn, & Petersen, 2004) suggest that teachers in this community do teach writing. For example, the percentage of middle school students who scored the lowest possible score on the state writing exam has been reduced from 78% to 18%. Similar results have been observed at the

elementary and high school levels. In 2004, 58% of the 10th grade class passed the English portion of the High School Exit Exam on the first attempt, up from just 18% in 2001 – a score unheard of in comparable urban communities. Our classroom observations and instructional experiences suggest that there are a number of instructional strategies, routines, procedures, or ideas that teachers need to know and use to ensure that students can and do write well.

We have arranged these instructional approaches according to the level of teacher support and control. The early examples require significant teacher control and this level of responsibility is gradually released to the point that students write independently. The gradual release of responsibility model suggests that the teacher moves from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task … to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211). It is also important to note that these instructional approaches are flexible enough to be used with whole class, small groups, and individual students. For each of the instructional ideas, we will present an overview as well as an example of the way in which the strategy has been used.

1. Language Experience Approach

Teachers use the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to demonstrate the speech to print connection for young readers, students who struggle with print, or students who are not motivated to read or write (Ashton-Warner, 1959; Dixon & Nessel, 1983). Generally, this approach requires that the students and teacher have a discussion about a topic. Once the students and teacher agree on a sentence from their conversations, the teacher writes the sentence on chart paper, a dry erase board, or in a student's journal. In this way, the shared experiences of the class are used to compose text.

This strategy can be used with the whole class, small groups, or individual students. Regardless of the group size, the conversation and oral language development occur first and the writing second. In this way, students see how their talk becomes writing.

For example, in a middle school classroom a group of students was talking with their teacher about the high school basketball team and their undefeated status. This small group had read an Internet page on the history of basketball. As the teacher focused their conversation, they agreed on the sentence, "Naismith invented basketball to keep kids out of trouble, not to make a lot of money," which the teacher wrote on a dry erase board. Each of the group members then copied their agreed upon sentence into their journals and added two sentences on their own. Jamar wrote (corrected for spelling), "His idea was tight and now everybody plays. We could beat the whole state."

2. Interactive writing

Based on the Language Experience Approach (LEA), interactive writing allows the teacher to share the pen with students. Again, students have a discussion about a topic and then agree upon a sentence. The difference between LEA and interactive writing is who controls the pen. As stated before, in LEA the teacher writes while students watch. In interactive writing, students take turns collaboratively creating the message (e.g., McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000). Importantly, students complete the writing one word or phrase at a time while the teacher provides additional instruction. This instruction is vital in teaching students how writers make decisions about composition, layout, letter formation, punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary. While interactive writing was first used with younger students, it is appropriate for older students as well because it provides explicit instruction of the ongoing editing process which writers do (Fisher & Frey, 2002).

In a third grade classroom, the students were discussing a recent visit to the Museum of Art. The topic was focused on artists' use of light to emphasize parts of their paintings. The students discussed different artists' work they had seen as well as the textures and styles they liked and didn't like. The teacher guided their conversation and the students eventually agreed on the sentence, "Artists use light to focus attention, show perspective, and stress important points." As the first student approached the dry erase board to write the first word, the teacher said to the group, "What do all sentences start with?" to which the class responded "capital letters!" As the third student approached the board to write the word light, the teacher asked her students, "Do you know any other words that use the -ight rime?" Several students named words including fight, right, and sight. Each time a word was completed, the class read the sentence as written thus far and then completed the remainder of the sentence from memory. This rehearsal allowed the teacher to initiate instruction about layout and punctuation. When a student spelled a word incorrectly (e.g., atention), the teacher asked for another student to check and correct. This process continued until the entire sentence was written on the board. At that time, the students read the entire sentence aloud and began to copy it into their journals. As with LEA, this teacher asked the students to use this as a topic sentence for a paragraph they would compose individually.

3. Writing models

Writing models provide students with a framework for writing. Some models are created by the teacher while others are based on books or other sources of print. For example, a middle school teacher wrote the following on the board:

I was walking home one afternoon when … I didn't know what to do, so I … When I tried to … Thankfully, … + 3 sentences

Students incorporated their own ideas into this writing framework provided by the teacher. This level of support offers students an opportunity to incorporate their individual ideas into a structure that provides them a certain degree of success. Anthony responded to this prompt by writing the following (with spelling corrected):

I was walking home one afternoon when I was stopped by the cops. I didn't know what to do, so I started to run down the alley. When I tried to jump the fence, I saw a huge dog there. Thankfully, the dog was tied up. But, the cop was on the other side. They caught me. All they really wanted was to tell me that I dropped a book when I crossed the street.

In addition to these teacher-created writing models, books and other printed materials provide excellent models as well. *Somewhere Today: A Book of Peace* (Thomas, 1998) is one such choice. Each page of the book contains a single sentence that starts with the phrase "Somewhere today". After reading the book aloud to students, a fourth grade teacher asked each student to complete his or her own sentence starting with "Somewhere today…" The teacher then turned down the lights, lit a candle, and asked students to share what they had written so they could hear their work in spoken form. The students' individual sentences were then revised as a class poem. The teacher provided instruction about imagery, rhyme and alliteration using the students' original writing.

4. Generative sentences

Also known as "given word sentences" (Fearn & Farnan, 2001, p. 87), this strategy allows students to focus at the sentence level. As many educators know, if students have difficulty composing a sentence, their writing will appear fragmented, incomplete, and amateurish.

In a generative sentences session, the teacher provides students with a word or phrase as well as a placement requirement for the sentence. For example, in a social studies classroom the teacher asked for the following sentences: one that contained *famine(s)* in the second position; one that contained *rights* in the fourth position; and one that contained *constitution* in the final position. Different students produced the following sentences:

Famine:

Worldwide famines threaten peace because hungry people will fight for their lives.

When famine strikes a community, the world must respond.

Rights:

The Bill of Rights provides guidance for how people should be treated.

When our human rights are threatened, we sue the oppressor.

Constitution:

George W. Bush and his politics could destroy our Constitution.

When we need guidance related to our rights as citizens, we look to the Constitution.

Generative sentences sessions allow the teacher to assess both content knowledge and understanding of grammar and vocabulary. In this way, the teacher can provide instruction that is responsive to the writing needs of individuals or groups.

5. Word Pyramids

This is another useful way to encourage students to explore their word knowledge for writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2001). It is a simple strategy in which the teacher gives each student a letter and the instructions to "make a word pyramid". Starting with the letter they were given, students write a two letter word, followed by a three letter word, a four letter word, and so on. On some days, teachers provide students access to dictionaries under the condition that they know the meaning of each word they use while other days students must create their pyramids from memory and still other days students complete this task as partners. Regardless of the approach, our experience suggests that students "rack their brains", as one fifth grader said, to find good words. This exercise ensures that students think about different words they can use when they write. A sample word pyramid for the letter N included:

No
Not
Nail
Naked
Nature
Noticed
Nineteen
Napoleons
Narcissism

The activity then moves to the sentence level. Working in pairs or individually, students select words they generated from the pyramid and use them to write sentences. This challenges authors to consider both semantic and syntactic elements to create sentences that are accurate.

6. Power writing

Each of the strategies presented thus far is used in the overall writing curriculum and is not necessarily done on a daily basis. Power Writing, however, should be done daily. The goal of this

strategy is to improve writing fluency (e.g., Kasper-Ferguson & Moxley, 2002). As Fearn and Farnan suggest, the strategy is "a structured free-write where the objective is quantity alone" (2001, p. 501).

We recommend that students complete three 1-minute sessions each day. As we observed in a fifth grade classroom, the teacher can make it a ritual. Ms. Allen has her fifth grade students hold their pens or pencils high in the air until she gives them the topic and then starts the timer. When the timer rings one minute later, students stop writing and count their words. Each time, Ms. Allen begins by saying, "Write as much as you can as well as you can" and then announces the topic. When the timer rings, she says, "Count your words and circle any words you think you have misspelled." They repeat this two times for a total of three 1-minute sessions. Students then graph their highest score on a piece of graph paper found at the front of their writing notebooks. Ms. Allen often invites them to use their Power Writing for journal entries, for responses to essay questions later in the day, and for homework completion during which they revise their writing and present it in complete paragraphs. Ms. Allen consults their Power Writing graphs as she confers with students providing them with a way to assess their own progress in writing.

The topics range from social studies content – slavery, colonies, or government – to the use of spelling and grammar such as *they're, their*, and *there.* Regardless of the topic or word provided, the goal is for students to write increasingly long responses that can be edited during a writer's workshop (e.g., Dorn & Soffos, 2001).

7. Found poems

The found poem strategy is excellent for encouraging students to re-read what they have written (or read) for a specific purpose. The strategy can be used with just about any text – from the science textbook to students' own Power Writing. The task is to re-read the selection and choose specific words and phrases that re-tell the text in an open verse poem format. For example, Jenny wrote the following poem based on her reading and summary writing of *Phineas Gage: A Gruesome but True Story About Brain Science* by John Fleischman (2002). The opening of her poem read:

> *Phineas – the famous patient*
> *A family man – a good man*
> > *Survived a rod – a tamping rod*
> *Through his skull – through his brain*
> *Phineas – the famous patient*
> *Became a horrible man – a gambler and cheat*

Jenny's found poem demonstrates her understanding of the text as well as her ability to select key ideas and place them in order to tell the story. As a writer, this found poem assignment encouraged her to look for powerful words and phrases to convey the impact of this tragic event of Phineas' life.

8. RAFT

Too often students write for their teacher and do not consider the range of audience members who may be reading their writing. RAFT provides a scaffold for students as they explore their writing based on various roles, audiences, and formats (Santa & Havens, 1995). RAFT is an acronym for: Role – what is the role of the writer? Audience – to whom is the writer writing? Format – what is the format for the writing? Topic – what is the focus of the writing?

RAFT prompts can be used for a variety of purposes, from teaching perspective in writing to assessing student understanding of a book. For example, in a unit of study on the various Cinderella stories around the world, the teacher read aloud the picture book *Rough Face Girl* (Martin, 1992) and asked students to respond to the following RAFT:

R	Cinderella
A	Rough-Face Girl
F	Letter
T	Our stepsisters

This allowed the teacher to determine whether or not the students understood the similarities and differences between the Cinderella stories they had examined thus far in the unit. In addition, these writers assumed a point of view from the perspective of the protagonists in the tales.

The usefulness of RAFT writing is not limited to narrative texts. Ms. Diaz, a computer technology and business applications teacher, uses the RAFT format to teach students how to apply for jobs. Using an ad for a student clerk position that at least one student will be selected to do, Ms. Diaz asks her students to type their responses to the following:

R	a student at John Adams Middle School
A	Ms. Renee Garcia, Vice Principal
F	Business letter
T	I want the student clerk job!

Through this assignment, these students participate in an authentic writing experience that consolidates their knowledge of the business letter format, the job specifications, and the word processing technology.

9. Writing to learn prompts

In addition to learning to write, students must write to learn. As noted by at least one student, "I didn't know what I thought until I had to write it down." Writing to learn prompts are a powerful way to encourage students to think – to think about the content they are studying. Different from process writing in which the teacher returns the paper with corrections and the student re-submits the paper, writing to learn papers allow for students to clarify their thinking and for teachers to assess what students do and do not understand.

Fisher and Frey (2004) provide a number of writing to learn prompts such as:
- Yesterday's news – a review of class from the previous day
- Crystal ball – a prediction of what might come next
- Best thing I learned – a summary or analysis of the best part of class
- Exit slip – a written review of the class completed before leaving the room

Regardless of the prompt, the goal of writing to learn activities is to encourage students to think (Jenkinson, 1988). These writing prompts provide students with the space and time necessary for them to consider new information, make connections with information, predict new information, and summarize what they have learned.

10. Independent writing assignments

Independent writing is the goal of all of our instruction. We want to show students how to respond to prompts in thoughtful ways. Further, we want to ensure that our students can write for a variety of

purposes and audiences. The writing instruction we have reviewed thus far ensures that students will be able to do so.

The final instructional strategy involves the creation of independent writing prompts that are developed for specific writing purposes. For example, *expository prompts* might require that students explain a procedure or explain a phenomenon. *Narrative prompts* provide students the opportunity to recount or tell events from books they have read, their own lives, or their imagination. Finally, *persuasive prompts* require that students convince or persuade someone to do or to believe something.

Writing good prompts is key. Therefore, we often focus on things that matter to students – things that they care about enough to write about. Similarly, we often attempt to incorporate youth and popular culture (e.g., Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999). Examples that connect to lives of students include:
- Describe your ideal crib (house, apartment, or other living area).
- In a letter to the principal, persuade him to maintain or to eliminate the school uniform policy.
- Relate the school motto to your life.

In response to the school motto prompt, a middle school student who is identified as having a behavioral disability wrote:

"Teach me respect, responsibility, and lifelong learning" is our school motto. In the following essay, I will try to express what it means to me.

First of all, respect means to me to treat others how you want to be treated. Have respect for your elders and people around you. That means not to cuss people out, no talking back to teachers, no fighting, bugging, or picking on people. That's what respect means to me.

Responsibility means to do your chores and remember to feed your dog. Be responsible for doing your homework. Be responsible for your actions and bad actions. Be responsible for getting up in the morning and being on time for school. Be responsible for studying for school and tests, and using good language not bad language. That's what responsibility means to me.

Lifelong learning means to get to know new things forever. It means doing your work in class and accomplishing goals. You need to learn to read so you can read books, newspapers and applications to get a job. You need a good attitude to learn new things. You will have goals all your life.

I think our school motto is a good motto. It will teach you to be a good person and help you accomplish your goals. Respect and responsibility will help you use good manners. Responsibility will keep you on track. Lifelong learning will help you through your whole life.

Summary

These ten writing strategies are useful for teachers as they provide instruction for their students. However, they do not replace curriculum planning and pacing that must also be considered. In addition, there are multiple assessment and feedback systems, including student grading and statewide writing tests that must be considered in an effective writing curriculum. Teaching writing is a complex task – at least as complex as teaching reading. Simply assigning more writing will not ensure that our students become skilled writers and thinkers. Our students need and deserve quality instruction as they hone their craft; express their ideas, dreams, and beliefs; and understand that their words can change the world. The ideas presented in this article, when taken together and arranged in a "gradual release of responsibility" model, are likely to significantly influence the ways in which students write.

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