



Professional Book Discussion Guide

Book Title: *Keys to Content Writing*

Summary of Book: *This is the training book used during professional development for “Keys to Content Writing”. The introduction provides an overview of the program. Chapters 1 and 2 define content writing, make connections to state literacy standards, and present a review of the research about most effective writing instruction practices. The remaining chapters are devoted to each of the five instructional practices that make up the routine: quick writes, basic text structures for the three types of writing, the writing process, two-column notes and top-down topic webs, and a Writing Assignment Guide (WAG). Sample classroom WAGs and assorted handouts are provided in the appendix.*

Introduction

- Review the classroom scenario on p. 7. Is this scenario typical of the way writing is addressed in science and social studies classes in your school?
- On pages 7-8, why do you think the author included information about the current writing skills of American students?
- Do you agree with this statement: “Content teachers may be in the best position to teach students how to use writing to learn because they know best how to read and write in their subject area (e.g., science, history, math, literature.” Why or why not?
- Identify the five components that make up the instructional routine for *Keys to Content Writing*.

Chapter 1: What is Content Writing?

- In your own words, explain how writing improves content learning.
- Review the examples of disciplinary writing tasks. Then identify at least one writing task that is unique to your subject area.
- Summarize the difference between *writing to learn* and *learning to write*.
- Make a list of the literacy state standards that will be your focus as you use *Keys to Content Writing*.
- Complete Activity 1A and refer to your list of students as you continue using the book.

Chapter 2: Effective Writing Instruction

- Do you already teach explicitly the stages of the writing process? If so, what labels do you use to describe each stage?
- Can you use *The Process Writing Routine (Think, Plan, Write, Revise)* terminology in your classroom? If not, how could you adapt it for your classroom?
- Review the suggested percentages for time spent at each stage of the writing process on p. 22. Do you agree with these percentages? Why or why not?
- Why do you think *review of content* and *proofreading for conventions* are listed as separate steps under the **Revise** stage?

- Review the list of examples of skills and strategies that can be taught explicitly on p. 23. Then make a list of some strategies you teach explicitly (from the list or in addition to the list).
- Do you agree with the requirement of state writing standard #10 that calls for students to write routinely in all subject areas? Why do you think writing routinely was given such prominence by devoting one of the ten writing standards to it?
- In Figure 2D, look over the details in the right column next to the six components of the *Keys to Content Writing* planning model. Which components are already areas of strength for you as a teacher (i.e., you use them on a frequent basis) and which components do you think you should use more often?
- Look over the feedback checklists and rubrics located on pages 202-208 in Appendix B. How are they similar to checklists and rubrics you already use?
- Review this quote from p. 28: “*We live in a world of revision. Whether it be the ways in which we approach our lives, alter a recipe, accessorize an outfit, or modify our golf swings, our world evolves because of the revision that happens within it. Our writing, too, evolves as we consider ways to add prose, remove words from our poetry, reorganize our arguments in analysis, and substitute better words for almost-right words.*” (Witte, 2013). How might this quote be used to convince teachers and students that it is important to find the time to revise a writing piece beyond simply fixing errors such as spelling and capitalization mistakes?
- Review the list of suggestions for increasing student motivation and engagement in Figure 2E. Are there additional suggestions you would add to the list based on your personal experience?

Chapter 3: Quick Writes

- How would you best describe a *quick write* and its usefulness for learning content?
- Review the list of quick write activities in Figure 3A. Place a check next to activities you already use on a regular basis. Then think of another activity to add to the list.
- Which of these quick write activities would be good to include in your classroom? *admit and exit tickets, text message quick write, square/circle/triangle reflection, questions* (as listed on pages 37-38).
- Explain what the author means by using quick writes to practice writing sub-skills. How is this different from using quick writes to learn content?
- Do you think quick writes must be graded and collected?
- Complete Activity 3A and share your response with colleagues.
- Identify a content-related complex sentence that can be broken into simpler sentences for a sentence combining activity in your classroom.

Chapter 4: Basic Text Structures for the Three Types of Writing

- List the three main types of writing. Then give basic information about the following for each type: *what it does, examples, text structure*.
- What is similar and different about persuasive writing and argument writing?
- What is similar and different about informational writing and argument writing?
- What distribution is recommended in state standards for the amount of argument, informational, and narrative writing that students should do in school? Why do you think those recommendations change as students move from elementary to high school grades?
- How would you explain the difference to students between *text features* and *text structures*?

- Review the detailed state standards for introductions, conclusions, and linking (transition) words in Figures 4H and 4I. What do you notice about the requirements for these basic text structures as students move from grade 4 to grade 12?
- Look over the *Writing Component Cards* in Figure 4B and the examples in Figures 4C and 4D of how they can be used to visually represent text structure. Can you use these cards in your classroom to help students understand text structure? If not, how could you adapt them so you could?
- List the elements that can be included in an introduction. Which component(s) are a “must” for informational and argument writing?
- Define a *lead* and list six common types of nonfiction leads.
- List the three main goals of a conclusion.
- Reflect on this statement by the author: “*Many students in grades 4 through 12 struggle to write because they have difficulty with basic text structures (i.e., writing sentences and paragraphs).*” What has your experience been about the sentence and paragraph writing ability of your students?
- Do your students use grade-appropriate transition words and phrases when they write? Can you use the list of transitions in Figure 4G in your classroom? If not, how could you adapt it so you could?
- Complete Activity 4A and share your response with colleagues. You can use any of the three student writing samples on pages 77-81.

Chapter 5: Writing From Sources

- Review the details for the state writing anchor standards in Figure 5A. Why do you think the standards emphasize *short* projects? At what grade are students expected to write more than short research projects?
- Do you agree with this statement by the author: “*Because students do not have the time or the ability to find quality sources to write from, we recommend that initially teachers provide sources for informational and argument writing assignments. Teachers should explain how the sources were selected and why they are credible and accurate.*” Why or why not?
- Can you use the template for collecting source information in Figure 5B? If not, how could you adapt it so you could?
- How would you best describe to students the format of two-column notes?
- Why is it important to have strong main idea skills in order to take good notes?
- Why is it important to have strong paraphrasing skills in order to take good notes?
- Generate a set of two-column notes that could be used to take notes from a source related to your content. Can you think of some main ideas you can include in the left column as a scaffold for identifying details that should be included in the notes?
- In five sentences or less, explain why having good paraphrasing skills can help students avoid plagiarism.
- Describe how students can use two-column notes to develop the sentences and paragraphs for a writing draft.

Chapter 6: Keys to Literacy Writing Scaffolds

- Review the examples of scaffolds on p. 115, then list examples of scaffolds you have given students to support writing.
- Give an example from your teaching where you have used the *Gradual Release of Responsibility* model.
- Explain to a colleague this research finding: *Explicit instruction of writing strategies can have a dramatic effect on the quality of students’ writing, especially for struggling writers.*

- Review the list of examples of writing strategies in Figure 6B. Underline items for which you provide explicit instruction in your classroom. Can you think of additional strategies that you teach explicitly?
- List some ways that you might scaffold two-column notes as a tool for gathering and organizing information before writing.
- Summarize how a top-down topic web can be used to provide scaffolding to help a student organize before writing.
- Look over the sample *Sets of Steps* on pages 124-128. Can you use any of them in your classroom? If not, how can you adapt them so you could?
- Look over the sample *Writing Templates* on pages 129-136. Can you use any of them in your classroom? If not, how can you adapt them so you could?

Chapter 7: Keys to Literacy Writing Assignment Guide (WAG)

- Using Figure 7A, reflect on the eleven elements identified in the *Writing Next* report as most effective practices for writing instruction. Which of these elements do you use on a regular basis? Which elements would you like to start using more often?
- Do you already use a formal planning guide to develop writing assignments for your students? If so, do any of the components in your guide match up with the components in the *Keys to Writing WAG*?
- Look over the sample WAGs on pages 171 to 197 in Appendix A. Summarize in eight sentences or less your overall reaction to these WAGs.
- Look over the planning questions in Figure 7D. Do you think they might help you plan a writing assignment using a WAG?
- Why do you think it is important to start a WAG by identifying the unit of study and connections to content as well as literacy standards?
- Why do you think it is helpful to vary the form of writing assignments (i.e., brochure, article, web page, poster, etc.)?
- Define *authentic audience* and explain to a colleague why teachers should identify authentic audiences for writing assignments.
- Why is the purpose of a writing assignment related to the audience?
- Look over the examples of content and text requirements in Figure 7K. Do you think it is a good idea to combine text structure requirements with content requirements?
- Reflect on this statement by the author: “*Well-developed content and text structure requirements clearly outline expectations for success. These requirements also provide a springboard to generate checklists or rubrics for providing feedback, evaluating writing pieces, and grading writing pieces.*” Explain how this section of a WAG can be used in this way.
- Look over the examples of source requirements in Figure 7L. Why do you think it would be helpful to students to see these requirements?
- Regarding length: why does the author suggest providing a *range* based on words, paragraphs, or pages?
- Complete the activity on page 160: When have you emulated a piece of writing? Share your response with colleagues.
- Review the instructional routine for helping students analyze a sample of model text on p. 161. Can you use this routine in your classroom? If not, how could you adapt it so you could?
- Identify at least 2 content sources related to the same topic. Generate an informational or argument writing assignment using the sources. Use the blank, modified WAG on pages 164

- 166 to plan the writing assignment. Complete the sections in the order of the numbers in the black boxes. Share your WAG with colleagues.
- Generate the following and share with your colleagues:
 - A top-down topic web as a planning scaffold that is aligned with the content and text structure requirements in your WAG.
 - A scaffolded set of notes that can be used by students to take notes from the sources.
 - A writing template for your assignment that can be used as a scaffold for struggling writers.