



Teaching Writing to Learn Content

By Joan Sedita

Classroom Scenario

In a middle school history class, the students are writing about several pieces of text that include a primary source, a textbook section, and a history magazine article. The writing assignment is to answer an extended response question by synthesizing information and using text evidence from the three sources. The teacher has given the students a set of guidelines that describes the purpose and type of the writing, the suggested length of the piece, and specific requirements such as how many main ideas should be included. The teacher has differentiated the assignment to meet the needs of students with a variety of writing skills. Scaffolds such as a pre-writing template have been provided for students who struggle with planning strategies. The teacher has provided models of good writing samples and has also provided opportunities for students to collaborate at various stages of the writing process. This is a classroom where the teacher is teaching students to write and also using writing to help them learn content. Unfortunately, classrooms like this are rare.

Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic achievement and essential for success in post-secondary education. Students need and use writing for many purposes (e.g., to communicate and share knowledge, to support comprehension and learning, to explore feelings and beliefs). Writing skill is also becoming a more necessary skill for success in a number of occupations. ¹The goal of content writing instruction is to teach students how to use writing to learn content -- that is, writing to learn.

Unfortunately, there are far too many students in the United States today who do not write well enough to meet grade-level demands. The writing assessment scores for grades 8 and 12 of the 2011 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) show that the number of students who do *not* reach proficient for their grade level remains at very high levels: 73% of eighth graders and 73% of twelve graders. ² About a third of high school students intending to enter higher education do not meet readiness benchmarks for college-level English composition courses, and among certain ethnic groups, the percent is higher: 50%. ³ Once in college, 20% of first-year college students require a remedial writing class and more than half of them are unable to write a paper relatively free of errors. ³ At least a quarter of new community college students enroll in remedial writing courses. ⁴ Compounding the problem, remedial enrollments appear to underestimate the number of students with reading and writing difficulties.

The good news is that we have a very good idea of what students need to acquire in order to become good writers. There is a significant amount of research that has been conducted and reviewed on effective writing instruction. ⁵ The Common Core literacy standards place a significant emphasis on teaching students in all subjects how to write and how to use writing to learn. ⁶ The key is getting this information to teachers, including teachers of science, social studies, math, English and other content areas.

It is often assumed that the job of teaching students how to write belongs to English Language Arts teachers. However, the truth is that they cannot do it alone and content teachers are needed to support learning to write. Writing to learn skills in particular are best taught by content teachers because they understand how to show examples of subject-specific writing, teach students how to write about subject-specific text, and provide feedback to students about content-based writing assignments. From grades four through twelve, content teachers are in a unique position to teach students how to write like a scientist, mathematician, historian, or literary author. This is described in the literature as *disciplinary literacy*.



What does the research say about effective writing instruction for grades 4 through 12?

There are three broad findings that are consistent in the research on effective writing instruction:⁸

1. Teach the steps in the writing process
2. Explicitly teach writing strategies that are used at each step of the writing process
3. Increase how much students write – the more they write the better they get at writing

In their seminal report *Writing Next*, Graham and Perin⁷ identified eleven elements of writing instruction that were found to be effective for helping students in grades four through twelve learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. These elements were recommended based on a large-scale statistical review of research (called a meta-analysis). The elements are: Writing Strategies; Summarization; Collaborative Writing; Specific Product Goals; Word Processing; Sentence Combining; Prewriting; Inquiry Activities; Process Writing Approach; Study of Models; Writing for Content Learning.

A second report, by Graham and Hebert, based on meta-analysis of research on effective content writing was *Writing to Read*.⁸ The report presented three recommendations: (1) have students write about the texts they read; (2) teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text; (3) increase how much students write.

Effective Content Writing Instruction

Teach the Steps in the Writing Process

It was noted earlier that teaching students the steps of the writing process was one of the eleven recommendations of the Writing Next report.⁸ In 1980, Hayes and Flower published their seminal book chapter titled *Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes* in which they identified the actual mental behaviors of experienced writers at work.⁹ Over the years, the model was informed by new research and substantially reconceptualized,¹⁰ resulting in four major stages:

1. **Pre-Writing** (reflection, selecting a topic, planning what to say)
2. **Text Production** (writing a draft)
3. **Revising** (reflection, making changes to improve the writing)
4. **Editing** (proofreading)

The writing process is dynamic and recursive – writers repeat and revisit the stages several times as they develop a piece of writing. For example, a student may discover while he is writing a first draft that he needs to go back to the pre-writing stage to gather and organize more information about the topic. Similarly, while revising the draft, the student may discover he needs to change the way he originally planned to organize the content. Figure 1 is an example of a student writing routine based on the writing process.¹¹

Students need to be taught what each stage is, the skills and strategies they need to apply at each stage, and to make sure they do not skip any of the stages when they write. The more effort they put into pre-writing, the better the finished the product will be. Students also need to know that in some cases a piece of writing is never finished – further thinking and editing can always improve the piece. While students should know that it is not practical to develop multiple drafts for every writing piece (e.g., an email message or a note to a family member), but for important writing assignments, such as key homework assignments and research reports, students need to get in the habit of revising and rewriting.

Explicitly Teach Writing Strategies That are Used at Each Stage of the Writing Process

Explicitly teaching strategies for each stage of the writing process has a strong impact on the quality of all students' writing, and it has been found especially effective for students who have difficulty writing. Strategy instruction can include teaching generic skills such as brainstorming a topic or how to use transition words, or it can include teaching strategies for a specific writing task such as how to write a summary or an argument.¹²



Teach Text Structure

Students need to understand text structures in order to write well. When students write, they have to work through four structural levels: word structure, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and overall text structure. Difficulties on any level may cause writing to suffer.¹³ Knowledge of word structure includes the ability to spell words correctly and join suffixes and prefixes to root words. Students need knowledge of the other three levels of text structure in order to organize and express their ideas in writing. In this sense, text structure represents thinking.¹⁴

Knowledge of overall text structures includes recognizing that each type and genre of writing has a different overall structure for how the ideas and information are organized. The Common Core State Standards require students to learn the differences and similarities between narrative, informational, and argument writing types. Narrative text structures are usually based on a sequence of events as well as literary elements such as setting, characters, and theme. Informational text is usually organized around hierarchies of topics and sub-topics. Argument writing is typically organized around a stated claim, reasons with evidence that back the claim, and a counterclaim with a rebuttal of that counterclaim. Some writing genres have unique structure, such as poetry, plays, and certain types of content-writing tasks such as a science lab report or a biography. It is important to make a distinction between text features and text structure. Text features includes things such as headings, glossary, table of contents, and captions for illustrations. Text structure focuses more on how ideas and information are organized at the sentence, paragraph, and overall text levels.

The Common Core Standards require that students learn to use several text structures that are common to all three types of writing: introductions, conclusions, and transition words and phrases (e.g., at first, after, lastly, another, likewise, above all, for example, as a result). Transitions can do a lot to help students make connections among sentences and paragraphs.

It should be noted that knowledge of text structure also aids comprehension. Text structure refers to how a piece of text is built. When students are writing, they use text structure to *construct*, and when they are reading they use text structure to *deconstruct* in order to make meaning. Increasing student knowledge of text structure improves reading comprehension and writing ability.¹⁵

Follow a Teaching Routine

There are a number of best practices that teachers of any subject should incorporate when they assign writing tasks to students. Taken together, these practices constitute a *teaching routine*. Research finds that establishing a predictable routine that permits ample practice with skills and strategies should be an essential component of a strong writing curriculum, regardless of grade or student writing ability.¹⁶ Sedita has developed a teaching routine that includes six components: Set Writing Goals; Show Models; Provide Scaffolds; Provide Opportunities for Collaboration; Provide Feedback; and Provide Opportunities for Revision.¹⁷ This routine embeds the most important research findings about effective writing instruction. Figure 2 provides details about each component of the routine.¹⁸

Provide Scaffolds

Scaffolding describes a type of assistance offered by a teacher to support learning. It is one of the principles of effective instruction that enables teachers to accommodate individual student needs. When you scaffold, you help a student master a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently. The amount of scaffolding is gradually released as the student becomes independent with his ability to complete the task or understand the concept.¹⁹

There are several types of scaffolding:²⁰

Content Scaffolding: The teacher introduces simpler concepts and skills and slowly guides students through more challenging concepts and skills.

Task Scaffolding: The student proceeds from easier to more difficult tasks and activities.



Material Scaffolding: A variety of materials are used to guide student’s thinking, including partially completed graphic organizers or templates.

Instructional Scaffolding: The teacher demonstrates, models through the use of a think aloud, provides prompts, questions, or a set of steps that students can follow by instructing themselves through the steps.

Endnotes

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2. National Center for Education Statistics (2012).
3. Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates, 2002 as cited in Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald (2007).
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5. Hillocks (1986); MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, (2006); Graham & Perin, (2007); Graham & Hebert, (2010).
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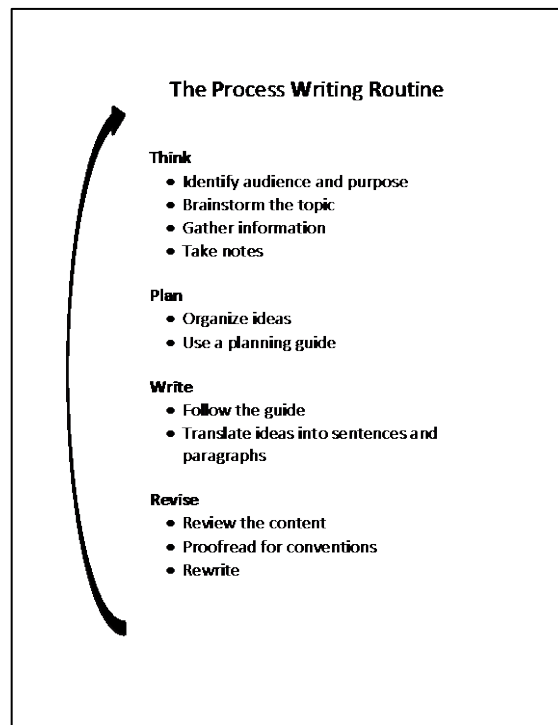
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FIGURES

Figure 1



Source: Source: Sedita, J. (2012) *Keys to Content Writing*. Rowley, MA: Keys to Literacy.



Figure 2

Keys to Writing Instructional Routine

<p>Set Writing Goals</p>	<p><u>Identify and clarify the writing task:</u> set specific product goals that include characteristics of the finished product. This includes identifying the audience and purpose, providing guidelines about length, suggestions about the type of writing to be used (e.g., narrative, informational, argument), suggested format, and requirements for the finished product.</p> <p><u>Identify specific student goals:</u> when possible, provide students individual objectives to focus on a particular aspect of their writing.</p> <p>Goal-setting can be the basis for grading writing assignments.</p>
<p>Show Models</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing. • Show models of every step in the writing process. • Provide models of what the completed writing assignment should look like.
<p>Provide Scaffolds</p>	<p>Provide supports for completing a writing task such as assignment guides, steps to follow, graphic organizers, two-column notes, or writing templates.</p>
<p>Provide Opportunities for Collaboration</p>	<p>Provide opportunities for students to work together and with the teacher to plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing. Collaboration engages students more in the writing process because writing is a social activity that is best learned in a community.</p>
<p>Provide Feedback</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The feedback you give students matters as much as the writing instruction you provide. Without feedback, students won't learn how to improve their writing. • Students need to know if their writing is accurate and conveying the message. • Feedback can be from the teacher, peers, or the student himself. • Feedback should be more than marking mechanical errors on final drafts. • Teachers should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – provide feedback throughout the writing process – focus on the content of the writing first, mechanics later – provide feedback that is descriptive, specific, and based on the individual needs of the student – provide feedback checklists
<p>Provide Opportunities for Revision</p>	<p>Students need time to reflect on self-assessment and feedback from others, and then improve their drafts through revision. Students need explicit instruction in how to incorporate feedback to revise their writing. Not every writing task has to be revised to the point of "publication ready", but students will not improve their writing skills if they do not have some opportunities to revise based on feedback.</p>

Source: Sedita, J. (2012). *Keys to Content Writing*. Rowley, MA: Keys to Literacy. www.keystoliteracy.com