

White Paper

for Writing A-Z

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Why are writing and writing instruction essential?

Writing is a major form of communication that allows people to interact with, and learn from, others. It allows individuals to accomplish everyday tasks as well as express knowledge and ideas in a permanent, transferable way. Writing helps people discover their personal voice and understand how to share this voice with others.

Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity.

Graham and Parin
(2007; p. 3; Writing Next report)

The authors of the *Writing Next* report of the Carnegie Foundation (2007) looked at factors that contribute to writing mastery from fourth grade through high school. The executive summary of the report starts with the statement: “Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy” (p. 3).

Many young children see themselves as writers long before they see themselves as readers. Young children may draw a picture, scribble some marks that represent an early attempt at writing, and say that the writing piece is a letter to a grandparent. They understand that marks on paper represent an attempt to record oral language in a written message (Graves, 1983). Further, the first explorations of print in the preschool years are thought to happen in writing rather than reading (Clay, 1991). Understanding that their message is talk written down (Van Allen, 1982) is part of learning to read and comprehend an author’s message from the printed page. The reciprocity of reading and writing is key to learning to read. Clay (1991) said, “What the child writes is a rough indicator of what he is attending to in print” (p. 109). Through reading, children gain information and ideas, and then share what they know in their writing.

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Clay (1991)

Just as in reading instruction, writing is a developmental process that must be practiced and supported as a child takes on the challenge of learning to write. The theory of Gradual Release of Responsibility in Teaching and Learning (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) applies to writing as well as reading comprehension and other aspects of literacy. The theory states that the adult first models an aspect of the literacy process for the learner, which is followed by guided practice, shared practice when the learner takes on more of the work, and independent learning when students practice skills in the context of new tasks.

In schools, this process of scaffolding is often phrased as “I Do, We Do, You Do,” with the expectation that students can perform in reading, writing, mathematics, and other learning tasks if good teacher modeling and sufficient student practice are evident. The modeling as well as guided and shared practice are well developed with best practices in teaching reading. But the understanding and execution of gradual release are not as apparent in writing instruction. In the home, parents and caregivers model reading easily and often—they read to their children as a regular practice. However, writing is not often modeled and practiced as frequently.

Children may have paper and crayons or other writing tools, but parents aren't necessarily modeling the practice of writing or sharing the task with children. In some homes and job settings, parents may generate a shopping list, a note to a teacher, or a reminder message to a child to do something after school, but may not model many other examples of writing on a regular basis (Clay, 1987).

In addition, technology is changing the types of writing opportunities in the home and in the world at large as email, blogs, text messages, and other forms of flexible communication become part of everyday life. This is especially true for the younger generation of parents, who use writing through technology to stay connected to family, friends, and current events. Still, these types of short compositions may be the only writing that is done. The opportunity to see a parent write a story, a longer message, a poem, or several drafts of an extended piece of writing is not often part of the modeling at home at any socio-economic level. Extended writing, when done, is often a solitary process for adults, who often wait for a quiet moment away from distractions to engage in composing.

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Loban (1963)

Interrelations among the language arts exist—reading, listening, speaking, and writing show a positive relation (Loban, 1963). Writing is like an ongoing conversation with oneself. Learning how to write and effective writing instruction start with the discussion and sharing of ideas, reading good examples from mentor texts, and social interaction among individuals as they try out various ways to express themselves.

Writing Instruction: Past, Present, and Future

Much has changed over the years in the teaching of reading and, more recently, in the understanding of writing instruction. The focus on the connections among reading, writing, listening, and speaking—and the resulting implications for instructional practices—are just now beginning to emerge.

Most teachers have had some type of methods course in their teacher-preparation program. But if there were ten class meetings for a quarter-long course, nine would be on the topic of reading instruction, and possibly one would be on writing instruction along with spelling, assessment, and other topics. Although teacher preparation in writing instruction isn't as commonplace, some opportunities do exist for professional development through excellent established organizations and efforts, such as the National Writing Project and all its regional replications across the United States. Some specialized training also exists at various universities, such as Columbia Teacher's College, where Writing Workshop instructional institutes based on the work of Lucy Calkins and her colleagues have pioneered a very effective approach to process writing that uses genres to focus the writing instruction (Calkins et al., 2008a, 2008b). However, professional development in the teaching of writing across the United States is still very limited, especially for teachers of the earliest grades—kindergarten through grade two or three.

Most recently, technology has become a major influence on new developments in writing and has broadened the definition of a varied and complex writing task. Developments in written expressions of communication such as Twitter are a long way from the formal writing practices taught in schools over the last century. The role of letter writing and other formal writing processes is slowly adapting to the new forms of written communication. Thus, a new look at all of the diverse ways in which writing impacts our daily lives is beginning to occur within the field of education.

... help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future.
Yancy (2009; p. 1)

As a result of initiatives such as the National Writing Project and Writer’s Workshop, an understanding of how to teach writing is both evolving and emerging. Writing instruction is a significant component of 21st-century literacy skills. In the NCTE report titled *Writing in the 21st Century*, Yancey (2009) asks for a “call to action, a call to research and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, become the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future” (p. 1).

Best Practices in Writing Instruction

In the National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE) report *Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing*, the following statement sets the stage for a discussion of writing instruction: “Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers” (2004).

NCTE recommends that “whenever possible, teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce texts—and not only specify criteria for evaluating finished products, in form or content. Students should become comfortable with prewriting techniques, multiple strategies for developing and organizing a message, a variety of strategies for revising and editing, and strategies for preparing products for public audiences and for deadlines. In explaining assignments, teachers should provide guidance and options for ways of going about it” (2004).

Process Writing

Process writing is one approach to writing instruction in which modeling and guidance are provided to students at each step, allowing them to become independent writers. Writing as a process is based on the way individuals create text (Strickland, Ganske, & Monroe, 2002). These steps include: prewrite, draft, revise, edit, and publish. While creating compositions, writers develop their ideas, make sense of them, and then make changes (Egawa, 2001). They interact between steps of the writing process at the same time rather than in sequence. These interactions are then repeated (Fearn, 2001).

Writing as a process is based on the way individuals create text.
Strickland, Ganske, and Monroe (2002)

This positive writing attitude is fostered through opportunities for students to see teachers write, be a partner in learning, make their own decisions about the topics of their writing, and have authentic reasons to write.

Cooper (1991)

Too often, ELL instruction tends to limit writing practice, which doesn't allow children to draw on the reciprocity of reading, writing, and speaking.

Kendall and Kuhon (2006)

A wide range of writing abilities can exist within one age group, so it is important to determine and build upon a student's individual strengths, not expecting each student to take the same steps while developing as a writer (Clay, 1991). Providing support at each step of the writing process also helps students avoid developing misconceptions about writing as well as create a positive attitude about writing. This positive writing attitude is fostered through opportunities for students to see teachers write, be a partner in learning, make their own decisions about the topics of their writing, and have authentic reasons to write (Cooper, 1991).

Differentiation, or customizing instruction to meet the needs of individual students, helps teachers set clear, attainable goals with students. During conferencing about writing, the focus can be tailored to the needs of individual students or small groups so that continuous progress and development of writing skills are achieved. This model builds on strengths rather than emphasizing every skill that is missing or errors that are made, which often results in writing skills lessons that contain too many different teaching points and lack clear, obtainable goals. By focusing on strengths, children learn to self-monitor for the skills they know and can successfully apply to future writing. Once these strengths are identified, a new goal or focus is shared with the child and supported in further conferencing by the teacher. As the child is able to self-monitor for this new goal or strategy, the next goal for writing is set, and so on.

Differentiation in writing means that the teacher needs to keep anecdotal notes and regularly conference with students. With more capable students, the teacher may gather several students together for conferencing and allow the students to do some work together, whereas more time will be required for struggling writers (Strickland et al., 2002). The progress of English Language Learners, in most cases, will depend on the level of literacy in the primary language. Older ELLs may develop more quickly in reading and writing than speech. Regardless, writing is key to helping ELLs develop reading skills, as it is with native English speakers. Too often, ELL instruction tends to limit writing practice, which doesn't allow children to draw on the reciprocity of reading, writing, and speaking (Kendall & Kuhon, 2006).

Learning to draft, or plan, for writing, and then carry out that plan, is part of the process of expressing oneself. The use of graphic organizers is central to that planning. When children take time to think through their big ideas through pre-planning, they have a more complete sense of story to convey. This is true for fiction and even more so for nonfiction writing. Very experienced writers may generate many notes while planning their writing and be able to synthesize as they go along. But developing writers need a scaffold to guide them. Depending on the type of writing, some graphic organizers may be more effective than others.

Shared and Interactive Writing

Within the context of interactive writing lessons, concepts about print and written communication are demonstrated to support students at any developmental level of writing as they transition into creating a composition independently.

Swartz, Klein, and Shook (2001)

In shared writing, the teacher and students work together to create a composition. Unlike a language experience approach, more emphasis is placed on the process of writing than scribing the exact words of the students. Interactive writing, an extension of shared writing, refers to the teacher and students sharing the pen to co-construct a message (Swartz, Klein, & Shook, 2001). Within the context of interactive writing lessons, concepts about print and written communication are demonstrated to support students at any developmental level of writing as they transition into creating a composition independently (2001). The writing product is often used for shared reading or as a resource for independent writing. The group size for instruction may vary from whole group to small group. As students progress through the lessons, they learn how to construct increasingly complex segments of writing, moving from a letter, to a cluster of letters, to a word, to a phrase, to a sentence as it is used across the grade levels. Interactive writing plays a unique role in writing instruction, as sharing the pen in writing holds words and ideas in space and time for careful analysis (Klein, 1999).

Regardless of the instructional method employed, it is important to note that research indicates that students should have the opportunity to write daily (Graves, 1983), and it is recommended that writing occur 35-40 minutes daily at least four days a week (Graves, 1991). Further, the authors of the *Writing Next* report (2007) identified eleven factors as essential to effective instruction for adolescents in writing:

1. **Writing Strategies**, which involves teaching strategies “for planning, revising, and editing” (p. 15)
2. **Summarization**, which involves “explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts” (p. 16)
3. **Collaborative Writing**, which uses “instructional arrangements whereby adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions” (p. 16)
4. **Specific Product Goals**, which involves “assigning students specific, reachable goals in writing” (p. 17)
5. **Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
6. **Sentence Combining**, which involves “teaching students to construct more complex, and sophisticated sentences” (p. 18)
7. **Prewriting**, which “engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition” (p. 18)
8. **Inquiry Activities**, which engages students in “analyzing immediate, concrete data” to help them “develop ideas and content for a particular writing task” (p. 19)

9. **Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities within a workshop environment and stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
10. **Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
11. **Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material


Application of Current Research on Best Practices to Writing A–Z Resources

Writing A–Z is a comprehensive collection of downloadable resources for teaching writing. The Writing A–Z lessons and other instructional materials were developed by literacy specialists and tested and/or reviewed by classroom teachers and educational consultants. The resources on the Writing A–Z website are provided by Learning A–Z, an online company specializing in individualized and differentiated literacy instruction.

The core writing lessons on the site are grouped under two categories: Emerging Writers and Beginning–Fluent Writers. The Emerging Writer, or kindergarten, lessons focus on the needs and skills of students who are just learning to write. Early writing is central to a strong kindergarten program. Six stages for emerging writers are addressed on Writing A–Z.

The Beginning–Fluent Writer lessons are grouped under five main writing genres: expository, narrative, persuasive, procedural, and transactional. Each genre category is further divided into a subset of text types with accompanying resources to teach each type (personal narrative, how-to, and so on). Lessons and materials are provided at four developmental levels to meet the needs of students at different writing stages, from beginning to fluent. Each text-type lesson follows the writing process: prewrite, draft, revise, edit, publish.

At each step of the writing process, teachers are guided on how to teach the structure and organization of the type of writing, and how to incorporate traits of good writing, such as organization and ideas, as they apply to each process step and the overall piece of writing. Leveled tips in the lesson sidebars and a variety of writing samples for each developmental level of writer allow teachers to use one lesson to teach to a variety of learners, meeting all of their instructional needs. Once teachers teach a type of writing, students can write multiple compositions of this type in writing workshops.



The Writing A–Z lessons give teachers a great foundation for teaching each type of writing while also allowing them the freedom to choose how to organize student-writing activities afterward. If students need additional instruction on a type of writing, the website provides Writing Process Guides for teachers and students to use, which break down the writing process even further for a specific type of writing. Leveled revision checklists, editing guides, and rubrics are also provided with each lesson, all of which help students understand expectations as well as provide important points for discussion during individual student-teacher conferences about a piece of writing in progress.

In addition to the specific text-type writing lessons and materials, the website houses a collection of mini-lessons on discrete writing skills, such as sentence writing and openings. All Writing A–Z lessons encourage students to choose their own topics for writing and to work at their own pace and level (the latter of which is emphasized with leveled expectations for each of the four main developmental writing levels). Each text-type lesson includes tips for organizing student collaboration for revising and editing work. Each lesson ends with a Publish section, which provides teachers with specific suggestions for ways and formats in which students can share their finished work with others.

A variety of tools, such as graphic organizers, prompts, writing samples, and rubrics, aid instruction, offer opportunities for authentic application, and save teachers valuable preparation time while helping them meet diverse student needs. Other tools, such as author-interview videos, motivate student writing. Resources on Writing A–Z also include the Write Rights, a thirty-week daily grammar review program that thoroughly targets key grammar skills at multiple developmental writing levels. Skills are repeated and expanded upon several times throughout the thirty weeks.

Examples of resources on Writing A–Z are further correlated in the following chart according to the eleven factors identified by the authors of *Writing Next* from current research as essential to effective writing instruction.

Writing Next Instructional Recommendations	Examples of Application to Writing A–Z Resources
<p>Writing Strategies “teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions” (p. 15)</p>	<p>Genre lessons detail the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—for several text types within five genres: <i>expository</i>, <i>narrative</i>, <i>persuasive</i>, <i>procedural</i>, and <i>transactional</i>. Each lesson is leveled for beginning, early developing, developing, and fluent writers.</p> <p>Skill lessons address discrete writing skills, such as effective openings and varying sentence types.</p> <p>Leveled editing guides allow students to check their work for mechanical errors; leveled graphic organizers provide visual frameworks to help students plan their writing; and leveled revision checklists help students modify and correct their writing for semantics.</p> <p>Write Rights grammar activities help students strengthen their revising and editing skills through the instruction of basic grammar components.</p>
<p>Summarization “explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts” (p. 16)</p>	<p>The informational report lesson provides systematic and explicit techniques on narrowing down topics, taking notes from sources, and presenting information in one’s own words.</p>
<p>Collaborative Writing “instructional arrangements whereby adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions” (p. 16)</p>	<p>Genre lessons incorporate pair or group writing activities to reinforce planning, drafting, revising, and editing objectives.</p>
<p>Specific Product Goals “assign the students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete” (p. 17)</p>	<p>Leveled posters highlight the characteristics of each text type; a multilevel rubric for each text type describes good writing traits and characteristics for the type of writing; and leveled writing samples provide models of good writing for each text type.</p>
<p>Word Processing uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments</p>	<p>Genre lessons include “Publish” sections that encourage students to present final compositions in word processing and/or multimedia formats.</p>
<p>Sentence Combining “teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences” (p. 18)</p>	<p>Skill lessons include instruction on how to write simple, combined, compound, and complex sentences and variation in structure.</p>

<p>Prewriting “engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition” (p. 18)</p>	<p>Genre lessons present pre-teaching tips, activities for setting the stage, and suggested books to exemplify each text type; leveled graphic organizers for students to effectively plan compositions; and leveled graphic organizer samples to illustrate transferring notes on a graphic organizer to a draft.</p> <p>Story cards and textual and photographic writing prompts help students create story starters.</p> <p>Leveled writing process guides provide a detailed review of the steps of the writing process for each text type.</p>
<p>Inquiry Activities engaging students in “analyzing immediate, concrete data” to help them “develop ideas and content for a particular writing task” (p. 19)</p>	<p>Leveled research packets provide students with themed sample sources for informational report writing.</p> <p>Story cards and writing prompts provide students with opportunities for the generation of original composition ideas.</p>
<p>Process Writing Approach interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing</p>	<p>Genre lessons provide developmentally appropriate, step-by-step instructional guides for the organization, construction, and presentation of various composition types.</p> <p>Leveled editing guides, posters, revision checklists, writing process guides, and writing samples support writing instruction at each developmental level for authentic purposes.</p>
<p>Study of Models provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing</p>	<p>Suggested books, as well as leveled posters and writing samples, serve as models and offer opportunities to analyze good writing.</p>
<p>Writing for Content Learning uses writing as a tool for learning content material</p>	<p>Leveled research packets consist of a variety of sample sources for writing informational reports on various subjects.</p>

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