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Introduction

Research on Writing Instruction

What is best instructional practice when it comes to writing? Debates rage in many districts and schools about the proper balance between instruction in grammar and mechanics versus instruction in composition itself. Which of these is more likely to lead to quality writing skills? Educational research can provide answers to these questions. The School Improvement Research Series from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) offers educators a synthesis of research on effective writing instruction in K-12 education. (See www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/2/topsyn2.html for a full accounting of their findings.)

Key points from the synopsis include:

1. Traditional writing instruction, in which the teacher selects a topic, assigns a paper, marks and edits the paper for student correction, and assigns a grade, has proven ineffective as a method of writing instruction.
2. Writing needs to be viewed and treated as an ongoing learning process rather than as a student product.
3. The focus for writing needs to be on meaningful communication of ideas rather than on proper structures and mechanics.
4. Grammar instruction should be embedded into the process of writing rather than treated as a separate entity of drill and practice.
5. Sentence combining is a proven method for developing writing skills.
6. Frequency and amount of time devoted to writing in school, writing across all curricular areas, and literature-rich classroom environments all strongly benefit writing results.
7. Technology as a tool for writing builds student motivation, attitude, and length and quality of student work, especially once basic keyboarding skills are developed.

NWREL's findings are not surprising to experienced teachers of writing. Research findings have not wavered over three decades of study. Nevertheless, many classrooms are mired in the old traditions: grammar books and student papers marked up with corrections. Why is that? Some say it is merely the entrenchment that occurs with tradition. Perhaps it is due to the ease of control and paper handling. Teachers can wield strong control in a traditionally based writing program. A writing process-oriented classroom requires more flexibility and reflection on the part of both students and the teacher. This kind of change is uncomfortable for many.

Fortunately, the use of technology in writing instruction can combine the best of both old and new methods. Technology brings the ease and control of traditional writing programs (through easy filing and storing mechanisms, quick teacher access, and format control features) and the flexibility and process orientation of research-proven methods of writing instruction (through student access and flexibility, freedom, and organization for multiple lists and drafts).

This book is focused on applying research-based approaches to writing instruction through the use of technology. Handheld computers provide the technology focus for the lessons, but everything that is included could be done using other technologies and media, even paper and pencil. All the lessons and activities in this book focus on student writing and the writing process.



Writing With Handhelds

Handhelds offer the opportunity to integrate technology seamlessly with writing through every stage of the writing process.

Many people wonder how such a small device can be used for writing instruction. The answer lies largely in computing power, screen resolution, and ease of use. Handhelds are computers and are capable of the same tasks that desktop or laptop computers can perform. The big advantage of handhelds is their low cost, which makes 1:1 student-to-computer ratios feasible for the first time. This has a very significant impact on how these small computers can be used in writing instruction.

Some are concerned about the smallness of the screen, but newer models of handhelds allow easy reading and writing due to the high resolution and clarity of their screens. Handhelds are versatile and easy to use. They require no constant connection to a power outlet and no complex instructions, and they are easy to troubleshoot. When a portable keyboard is added to the handheld, speed of typing rivals any desktop. And anything written on the handheld can be transferred to a desktop computer or server with the push of a button! Furthermore, with the addition of brainstorming software and other resources like a thesaurus, dictionary, and encyclopedia, the handheld becomes a palm-sized research and writing tool.

When a classroom is fortunate enough to have a 1:1 student-to-handheld ratio, the just-in-time learning possibilities are rich and numerous. Imagine every student at every desk busily writing or typing as a teacher gives instruction and support.

In a classroom with a set of handhelds enough for small-group instruction or a 4:1 ratio, the learning possibilities are still impressive. Imagine small groups using handhelds to brainstorm together and then printing out their ideas to share and use for further writing.

Handhelds can also be used to meet special needs without disrupting the flow of regular classroom instruction. Imagine allowing a special needs student to type his or her work directly on a handheld, thereby avoiding the usual dread and struggle that accompanies using paper and pencil.

Handhelds allow flexible use of technology that readily fits into a classroom and is instantly available for full-class, small-group, or individual instruction. See the classroom management section on pages 159-166 to gain insights and ideas for use of handhelds in your classroom.

The Writing Process

The writing process is the menu of activities that writers go through as they produce written pieces for publication. Writing activities have been grouped into five key stages and put in the order that journalists, novelists, poets, and other writers most often use as they produce work.

These writing stages are prewriting, writing (or drafting), revising, editing, and publishing. Some educators further divide or rename these stages. You might encounter prewriting renamed as brainstorming and organizing or writing referred to as first and second drafts.

Some argue that writing is not a “process” at all, and it is important for teachers-of-writers to understand that the writing process is not clean and linear. Sometimes writers brainstorm and do nothing with the ideas generated. Sometimes they start right from the beginning by drafting words on a page without brainstorming or organizing in any way. Often writers do some revision and editing as they are prewriting or producing a first draft. Many times writing is never published in a formal way.

Hence, teachers should not treat these five writing stages as absolute boundaries between activities, nor as rules that must be followed in exact order with every written piece. Separating the various writing stages and putting them into a formal order simply makes it easier for teachers to instruct students. It provides teachers with the confidence that they



are addressing all aspects of writing explicitly within their instruction and in a manner that makes sense to the process of writing.

Sequence of the Lessons

The writing process guides the order of the lessons in this book. Lessons are provided for each stage in the process: prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing.

As mentioned above, while the writing process most often follows this order, it is nevertheless fluid and dynamic and should not be treated as a rule-bound recipe for all writing. Writers move from drafting to revision and back to drafting again. They may brainstorm and organize a piece, write a draft, revise, and then go back to brainstorming again. Similarly, you may find that as you work with your students in writing, you will need to jump around to various lessons and sections of this book as your students' needs demand. Initially it is recommended that you introduce the steps of the writing process in the order provided, but remember that the lessons also may stand alone.

For best use of the lessons and materials in this book, remain flexible. Skip lessons that seem unnecessary for your students and jump ahead when a lesson meets a pressing need. You will want to go through the whole writing process at least once with your students, but not by using every lesson on every writing piece. Peruse and become familiar with the different types of lessons available in all the different stages of the writing process. In this way, you can quickly pull out just the right lesson at just the right time for your students.

You may choose to use some of the lessons to cover activities you need teach more than once in order for students to have more time to practice. This is particularly true of the convention and skills lessons in the editing section of the book. Some of these lessons will need a number of repetitions.

About Assessment Structures

Assessment is a measurement of how students are moving toward any particular learning goal. Grades and tests are one final form of assessment, but the most important assessments occur prior to grading and involve diagnosing student learning needs. Diagnostic assessments help teachers determine what areas of instruction are most needed. For each lesson in this book, recommendations are made regarding how a teacher might track or grade the assignment, but in many cases the best assessment would be teacher judgment on overall class progress and individual student needs.

Some options for assessment and class accounting include the following:

Quick assessment checks – These can give the teacher a quick idea about how students are performing on a particular assignment. One option for this is the quick *teacher-look-around-the-room*, where a teacher quickly wanders to see how student work is progressing. A *raise-hands check* works for occasions in which students are likely to volunteer information about their personal progress. *Peer checks*, where a group leader checks work, can provide an easy answer for teachers who want a check sheet made without much class or teacher time spent. *Quick rubrics*, included with many of the lessons in this book, allow the teacher to set quick parameters for how work will be evaluated and graded. (Many of the quick rubrics include a 3-point 3-2-1 scale. For these, a 0 may be used if the student does not complete or turn in the assignment.)

Full assessment checks – These often provide grades for a teacher's grade book as well as greater detail on student progress in particular areas. *Full rubrics* take a little longer but allow for a more thorough and multifaceted look at student work. Specific full rubrics are provided for many lessons in this book. Using these is likely to require a more complete student product than the activities that can be assessed with quick rubrics. Be sure to share the rubric (by beaming or other methods) with students prior to giving the assignment. *Quizzes* or *tests* can be used to give a grade in a particular area and to help teachers to see where more instruction is needed. *Checklists* can be used both for individual projects and an overall look at a collection of student work.

You will find rubrics and checklists in this book that you may want to change to fit your own personal style of teaching, the development of your students, and the aims of your individual assignments. The rubrics, checklists, and quizzes



provided can be edited and changed to suit your needs. Keep this in mind as you select lessons to teach and adapt them to your own needs.

Using Handhelds in Writing Instruction

Handhelds require some teacher preparation and forethought for management. General issues regarding home use, syncing, charging, and other management issues are covered on pages 159-166. There are also some specific issues related to using handhelds in the writing process that merit discussion.

First is the issue of keyboards. Many teachers feel that keyboards are essential to the effective use of handhelds in writing. While they are nice to have, they are not a “must,” and in fact, we have seen middle school and high school students do extensive theme writing without keyboards. One advantage of using keyboards with handhelds is that student keyboarding almost inevitably improves as a result.

Another tool that is very useful to writing instruction with handhelds is the use of an LCD projector. Handheld screens can be connected to projectors through document cameras, presentation peripherals (cables or accessories that let the handheld interface directly with the projector), or software that projects the handheld screen through a desktop or laptop computer. Having this kind of arrangement allows you to facilitate whole-class brainstorming. You can also project sample work for class discussion as well as to model the editing and revision process. (We suggest using samples from past years of your own assignments, but sample student work is also provided in the Handheld Writing Toolkit.) Another wonderful use of the projector is to facilitate students sharing their own work.

Finally, how you manage handhelds for writing instruction will depend a great deal on your ratio of students to handhelds, as well as on whether you have a projection system for full-class instruction. When the ratio of students to handhelds is less than 3:1, you may find it easiest to instruct in small groups while other students work independently. This is also the case if you don’t have a projection system. Keeping students close by and in small groups allows you to demonstrate and show the screen of the handheld to the students as you instruct.

Extensions Ideas and Meeting Special Needs

Many of the lessons in this book include “Extension ideas” and “Meeting individual student needs” features.

Extensions are options for continuing the writing development activity on a deeper level or for using the writing activity in other content areas.

Meeting individual student needs suggestions are designed to help differentiate instruction and provide lesson adaptations for a variety of learners. Some are for students who need more practice, some add structure for less mature writers, and others provide alternatives for English language learners or students with specific learning difficulties.