



**ENSURING WRITING PROFICIENCY:**

# **Best Practices for Teaching Writing**

# Ensuring Writing Proficiency: Best Practices for Teaching Writing

## Introduction

Writing as a form of communication has become ubiquitous due to the rapid growth in communication technologies. The number of business and consumer emails sent each day of 2017 was estimated at 269 billion, a number that has been growing and will likely continue to grow (The Radicati Group, 2017). Writing is essential to everyday life as a way to maintain interpersonal relationships and as an important tool that can be used to influence others, learn, and communicate. The growing importance and versatility of writing means that all students should develop skills in effective written communication (Graham & Harris, 2019).

However, recent assessment results show that a large proportion of students have not developed the skills necessary to communicate effectively in writing. The 2011 National Assessment of Education Progress assessed students on their ability to write effectively for “situations common to both academic and workplace settings and asked students to write for several purposes and communicate to different audiences” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, p. 1). Only 27% of students assessed performed at or above a proficient level, demonstrating that they had acquired skills enabling them to communicate effectively in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

## Skills for Effective Written Communication

People write for specific purposes and specific audiences. Therefore, they must develop and organize their ideas in a way that meets their communication goals. Current guidelines and standards focus on three major purposes for writing in academic and workplace settings: to persuade, to explain, and to convey experiences whether real or imagined (National Assessment Governing Board, 2017; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Persuasion requires the ability to write arguments that are supported by reason and evidence; explanation requires the ability to write clear, well-organized informational text; and conveying experiences requires students to write adequately detailed, appropriately organized narrative text (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Writing also requires skill in research, ranging from superficial investigation to in-depth study. Writing informative or persuasive text requires a substantial understanding of the subject under discussion, which often involves students gathering relevant information from different sources, evaluating it for credibility, and transforming it into a useful format. The writing and publication process also deserves attention: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and using technology to publish text and to communicate and collaborate with others (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

## Research-Based Teaching Strategies for Writing

Several meta-analyses, referenced below, have reviewed the existing research on effective writing instruction and found effective instructional practices for both elementary and adolescent learners.

1. **Strategy Instruction:** Teaching writing strategies such as planning, revising, and editing improves the quality of writing for typically developing students as well as for struggling writers in elementary and higher grades. The research on writing strategies is among the most robust in the writing instruction literature with the largest effect sizes (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Graham, 2006; Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015; Graham, McKeown, Kihara, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Smedt & van Keer, 2014). In addition, research with students in Grades 2 to 6 has shown that instruction in how to regulate these writing strategies using procedures such as goal setting and self-assessment also has a positive impact on the quality of students’ writing (Graham et al., 2012).

2. **Collaboration:** Research has shown that the quality of students' writing improves when they work together in planning, drafting, revising, and editing. This effect was shown in research with both adolescents and elementary students (Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; Smedt & van Keer, 2014).
3. **Goal Setting:** Setting specific goals has been shown to improve the quality of writing for both adolescent and elementary students and for typically developing students as well as those with learning disabilities. Goal setting may involve general as well as specific goals. For example, students might set a general purpose of persuasion for their writing and set more specific goals for the final product or for what to accomplish when revising (e.g., add a counterargument) (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b).
4. **Pre-writing:** Pre-writing involves activities such as gathering and organizing information and ideas before composing a first draft. Research with both elementary and adolescent students has shown that students' writing improves when they engage in pre-writing activities (Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; Rogers & Graham, 2008).
5. **Word Processing:** Research has shown that using word processing software to write as opposed to writing by hand has a positive effect on writing quality for students in Grades 1–12, including weaker writers and readers (Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; Morphy & Graham, 2012; Smedt & van Keer, 2014).
6. **The Process Approach:** The process approach to writing is an instructional method that includes several components. Although no standard definition for this approach exists, in general it involves students engaging in “cycles of planning (setting goals, generating ideas, organizing ideas), translating (putting a writing plan into action), and reviewing (evaluating, editing, revising)” (Graham & Sandmel, 2011, p. 396). The approach involves a workshop environment where students collaborate and focus on writing for real purposes and audiences, ownership of writing, and self-reflection and evaluation. Personalized writing instruction is provided as needed through mini-lessons and conferences (Graham, & Sandmel, 2011). Although effect sizes for process writing approaches were smaller than for other methods, such as strategy instruction, the process writing approach has shown positive effects on writing quality for both typically developing students in Grades 1–12 and for students with learning disabilities (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; Graham, & Sandmel, 2011).
7. **Reading:** Teaching reading (especially phonics, phonological awareness, and comprehension skills) and increasing students' interaction with text—both through reading and observing others read—has been shown to enhance the quality of students' writing (Graham et al., 2018).
8. **Models:** Reading and analyzing models of good writing has been shown to have a positive effect on writing quality (Graham et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b).

The following additional instructional strategies have had positive effects on the writing of elementary students.

1. **Positive Writing Environment:** Effective teachers create positive writing environments in which (1) writing is seen as a fun, enjoyable activity; (2) writing is shared, displayed, and published; (3) effort is encouraged and success is attributed to learning; (4) positive interactions are promoted; (5) realistic but high expectations are set; (6) writing assignments are appropriate to students' varied skill levels and interests; (7) students are kept engaged; and (8) self-regulation is encouraged (Graham et al., 2015).
2. **Text Structure:** Teaching students narrative and expository text structures has been shown to have a positive impact on the writing quality of typically developing students in Grades 2–6 (Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012).

- 3. Spelling, Handwriting, and Keyboarding:** For students in Grades 1–3, teaching spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding skills has been shown to have a positive impact on writing quality (Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012).
- 4. Vocabulary:** Teaching vocabulary specific to the genre or topic has been shown to improve the quality of students' writing (Graham et al., 2015).
- 5. Feedback:** The writing of students in Grades 1–6 improved significantly when teachers gave feedback on specific aspects of students' writing or on their progress in improving their writing (Graham et al., 2015; Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2015; Graham et al., 2012).
- 6. Amount of Writing:** Increasing the amount that students wrote by at least 15 minutes per day had a small but significant impact on the writing quality of students in Grades 2–6 (Graham et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012).

## Learning A–Z Resources to Support Writing Proficiency

### Writing A–Z

- **Process Writing Lessons and Tools** include lessons and resources to teach informative/explanatory, narrative, and opinion/argument writing as well as transactional (social and business) writing skills such as writing business letters, emails, blog posts, and speeches. Each lesson includes the five steps of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, as well as a focus on the traits of good writing, such as organization, voice, word choice, and conventions. Lessons are provided at four developmental writing levels to match students' range of skills and abilities. Process writing tools include graphic organizers, revision checklists, editing guides, and rubrics, as well as writing samples and connections to leveled books.
- **Skill Lessons** are mini-lessons that teach critical writing skills, including writing conventions; how to create simple, compound, and complex sentences; word choice; and writing openings and endings.
- **Online Writing** allows students to use a computer for their compositions and includes a Process Writing Workshop; a Write Your Way tool for writing short compositions; and Build-A-Book, in which students can create their own full-color online books. Step-by-step prompts that correspond to the writing process appear automatically to help students with their writing and to encourage careful drafting, writing, editing, and revising, including rubrics that ask students to check their own writing for specific features they may have missed. Students then can publish their writings to the class (via the teacher approving the publication).
- **Quick Writing Activities** assist teachers in incorporating writing into their classes every day. Activities include: Writing Prompts containing photographs, illustrations, and written prompts for writing; Writer Response activity sheets, in which students write a response to a leveled book from Reading A–Z; and Write-Aways, which prompt quick compositions in the four major writing genres.
- **Emerging Writer Lessons and Resources** support skill development for emerging writers in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. These resources span six different stages of development, ranging from labeling pictures, to using sight words, nouns, verbs, and adjectives, to crafting sentences with details.

## Raz-Plus and Reading A–Z

- **Leveled Books** are available at 29 different levels of difficulty in printable, projectable, and digital formats. Many of the books have “wordless” versions with just the pictures, which allow students to write their own book based on the images. Many other books include a Writer’s Response, where students are asked to write their answer to a central question about the book they read.
- **Close Reading Packs** include short passages with a key question that students must answer based on evidence from the text. First, students write their answer to the question individually. Then, students work in groups to write an answer to the question as a team, drawing from individual answers and working with graphic organizers to help clarify the final group answer.
- **Content Area Reading** organizes leveled books into featured groups of common content area topics such as art, science, math, and social studies. These resources serve as early sources of information for students doing research for writing purposes.

## Science A–Z

- **Investigation Packs** are group science activities where students apply scientific practices and engage in scientific argumentation. Investigation Files feature high-interest, in-depth informational text. Students do a close reading of the texts and then cite evidence that helps them solve the Mystery File in each pack. While writing their answers, students first craft their own answer, write important vocabulary words and their definitions, and report on the evidence they used to answer the question. Students then work in groups to combine the evidence gathered by all group members and write a final response to the question as a team.
- **Project-Based Learning Packs** include inquiry-based science projects. Students work in teams to investigate an overarching science question or design solutions for an engineering challenge. Throughout the project, students collaborate in their groups to write an answer to the question or the solution to the engineering challenge, and also to write about their learning process:  
1) “What do we know about the topic?”, 2) “What do we want to know about the topic?”,  
3) “What have we learned about the topic?”, and 4) “What do we still want to learn about the topic?”
- **Process Activities** are hands-on science activities and experiments. Students identify and solve problems and communicate their findings through speaking, listening, and writing.

## Vocabulary A–Z

- **Vocabulary A–Z** includes content area vocabulary in the arts, computer technology, health, language arts, mathematics, music, physical education and sports, science, and social studies to help students learn the vocabulary words they need for clearer, more precise writing.

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