Writing: Getting Started

Successful writing instruction calls for helping children experience success as writers—with inspiring writing, use of model texts, and positive feedback.

Every year bright faces pour into our classrooms—curious, happy, talkative, willing, and bubbling with life and potential. This joy of inquiry and experience usually lasts until the moment we ask our students to place a piece of blank paper on their desks and to find a pencil. They know what’s coming: writing. As we begin to give students a writing assignment, often we hear a chorus of groans and requests to go to the bathroom or questions about why they have to write and when is recess.

In fact, though, most children come to kindergarten with an enthusiastic I-can-write attitude—even if they can’t yet hold a pencil or form a letter. If a young child gets hold of a crayon, watch out. Children are ready to express—even if it’s on your walls with what looks like scribbles. Yes, they are ready. This attitude changes year after year, however, as they get more and more writing experience and receive more and more writing instruction and feedback. This fact gives me pause. More schooling and more skill—and yet kids view themselves less as writers. Every year many children show up at school a little less sure about writing, saying things such as “I can’t write,” “I hate writing,” or “I can’t think of anything to write,” and avoiding writing for school any way they can. All defenses.

Children try to protect themselves from not “reaching the mark,” from not spelling this or that correctly, from not using a capital letter where they should or using one where they shouldn’t. Commas! “Don’t even ask me, teacher! You already know, so why do I have to?” Students see a veritable flood of ways to be wrong, and, quite frankly, they’re just swept away by fear, drowning in possible and probable errors. That’s how too many young writers view writing—a fearful place where I can’t do enough right. And there begins the path of a struggling writer.

It doesn’t have to be like this.

We, as teachers of young writers, have incredible opportunities to shape students’ life-long attitudes toward writing. Writing will most definitely serve students’ future academic endeavors and lives. Writing is a skill that will carry students into powerful roles in the 21st Century. No matter what technology can do, writing is and probably always will be an integral requisite to success, especially for those who will serve in roles of power and influence.

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How we start teaching writing in our classes is essential. Turning around attitudes is a large part of how we get started in writing. But it isn’t as much about what we say, though that is important. It is more about the actions we take in our classrooms: the support, the assignments, the feedback, and the steps that convey attitude. Of course the words do matter (Johnston, 2004), but as the maxim states, our actions speak much louder than our words. When students discover the power of writing from the inside out, they gain a power they can carry out of our classrooms and use as a tool for the rest of their lives.

Without a lot of toil and trouble, there are a few key instructional moves we can make that will bolster our young writers’ confidence and competence.

The Support: Scaffolding and Inspiring Young Writers with Mentor Texts and Modeling

Artists have always learned from the masters, imitating patterns and techniques such as brushstrokes and perspective. In much the same way, writers have always used models, powerfully written texts, to inspire their own writing.

Now a flood of literature exists that supports the use of mentor texts—or models—to teach writing (Dorfman and Cappelli, 2007; C. Anderson, 2000; Graham and Perin, 2007; J. Anderson, 2006, 2007). Model texts or mentor texts are powerful teaching tools because as students use them, authors such as Eric Carle, Beverly Cleary, William Steig, Cynthia Rylant, and Andrew Clements become our co-teachers of writing.

Mentor texts have multiple entry points in instruction at varying grade levels. They can even be used before students are able to read. For example, every time we read aloud to children, we share the work of the masters: detail, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and the conventions of text types, as well as language conventions that shape the meaning of text. Each read-aloud that features fiction is a scaffold, building the patterns of story and the literary elements of setting, character, and conflict. Each read-aloud inspires children to make connections to their lives. Good readers connect. Good writers give their readers something with which to connect.

When you read aloud When I Was Little by Jamie Lee Curtis (1993), students connect to eating noodles or taking naps or swimming with floaties. Just watch their faces come alive page after engaging page, picture after appealing picture. Use this moment of power to let the students talk. As educational philosopher James Britton said, “Reading and writing float on a sea of talk.”

Once children realize they have something to say and are enriched by hearing other students’ connections to the text, they are ready to write. Whatever writing looks like for your students at this point, it’s all writing.

• If it’s the first weeks of kindergarten, maybe children draw a picture of a memory sparked by the book or by the ensuing discussion.

As the teacher, I may say, “When I read this book, I thought about so many things from my life. From listening to your discussion, I can see I am not the only one.
Aren’t you glad Jamie Lee Curtis wrote down her ideas so we can read them anytime we want and enjoy them and think about fun times in our lives? We are going to have that power too: the power to share, the power to write. She told the story through words, and the illustrator drew pictures that told a story as well.”

“When I read this book, I was reminded of the time I used to drink out of a red cup that looked like a cowboy boot. What can I do if I want to show my ideas so other people could see them later?”

After a student suggests you can draw them, ask the kids about what kinds of details you might include in your pictures. “Writers always notice details and make sure to share them with the people who will look at their work.”

Children then will be ready to draw their pictures and share and maybe even add sentences and details—revising in non-threatening, natural ways.

• If it’s the first few weeks of second or third grade, using a mentor text could become a sentence imitation exercise.

“Let’s write sentences like Jamie Lee Curtis did. I notice how she starts a lot of her sentences the same way: ‘When I was little’. She follows this with a comma and glues it to a sentence telling something she did. Look at the chart as I borrow her sentence pattern. I write: ‘When I was little, I liked to eat animal crackers with pink icing’. Now you try it. We can note or reread for the comma and its effect. Discuss how the comma tells us to pause when we read it aloud and shows how the two sentence parts are connected and yet separated when we read it with just our eyes.”

• In fourth, fifth, or sixth grade, we may use the author’s sentence pattern as a sentence starter for a brainstorming session.

“You know, I get a lot of ideas for my writing by noticing what other writers do. I liked this book, so I am going to borrow a technique the author used to help me brainstorm a list of ideas.”

Students will practice the use of a subordinate clause or another introductory element set off with a comma, an idea that they can easily apply. I don’t start off by naming the grammatical element and causing confusion. I start off with a natural writing act. As the students write this sophisticated sentence pattern, such as a complex sentence, we can then name what they have done. We reinforce how natural it was and how paying attention to how writers put together sentences can do more than inspire ideas. It can inspire ways for us to put our words together.

“When we were talking about the connections we made to Jamie Lee Curtis’s book, I heard a lot of you talking. Isn’t that fun how we always seem to have things to talk about? Well, writing is kind of like talking and thinking on paper. And one way we use all this talking and thinking to help our writing is by brainstorming. This is a way writers find what they have to say. The funny thing is, if I sit around just trying to think of what I should write, ideas often don’t come, but if I start by jotting down a few ideas of what I might write about, all of a sudden thoughts start to flow out of the end of my pencil.”
Model how we could use Curtis’s sentence pattern as a sentence starter, trying ten sentences that start with *When I was little*. I get students started by listing two or three, naming how I thought back to things Curtis wrote about: foods, school, the grocery store, riding in a car, animals, hair, brushing teeth, and so forth. I can use her ideas to search my life and my world for things to say that are important to me.

Then the students try it and share a few of their memories. As they listen to the sharing, I encourage them to keep adding to their lists. Writing and talking are generative. Children have to see how one feeds the other and how experience is the best teacher. They are becoming writers from the inside out.

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**The Assignments: Inspiring and Showing Versus “Assigning and Telling”**

If I were to stand before you right now and assign you to write a five-paragraph essay about teaching writing, I think I might hear a few groans. Put yourself there for a moment. How do you feel? What questions come to your mind?

We teachers need to put ourselves in the place of our students. How would you feel if you were supposed to write two pages about your life as if you were a soda or pop can? . . . if you were a postage stamp? Seriously, some of us would like it. Others would NOT.

“Assigning and telling” is a holdover. That instructional routine may have worked at one time, though that point could be argued. Today the “assign and tell” method is widely maligned as the least effective instructional strategy (Vacca and Vacca, 1999).

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We can’t do that and motivate and inform 21st century students. As discussed above, children need models and modeling first. An assignment can’t grow out of a vacuum. We need to give the kids some input.

In my book, *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop* (2005), I discuss the linguistic data pool (Harste, Burke, and Woodward, 1985). Basically, everything students hear, everything they see or read flows into a linguistic data pool (see diagram). Brian Cambourne researched what happens when students have a writing experience soon after the input flows into the data pool. He found that the data pool spilled into the students’ writing. In short, if you read one of the Judy Moody books to kids and then they write, they will borrow syntax (sentence flow), word choice (vocabulary), and other elements of author Megan McDonald’s style (McDonald, 2005). Even better, this spillover stays in the students’ writing over time, if the writing occurs quickly after the initial input.

What does this mean to us as elementary writing teachers? It means we need to harness the power of the reading-writing connection. In short, we need to read aloud and have our students write soon after, and the qualities of good writing will spill over into our students’ writing. According to Cambourne, those qualities will stay in their writing over time.

We don’t always have to read a whole book; often times, reading a short segment of text before children write will stimulate and inspire their writing. Perhaps you read a part of a story from *The SOS File*, by Byars, Duffy, and Meyers (2004), in which characters recount their experiences. We can write our own SOS moments, inspired by any chapter in the book. How did the narrator make the story come alive? Together—students and teacher—we can list those strengths on chart paper. Then we try to apply them by writing about our own SOS moments.

Students can try to use the writing techniques by doing a quick “freewrite.” That’s right: they just start writing and see where it takes them. A collection of freewrites over time can be used to inspire eventual longer pieces, but when getting started it is crucial to generate a series of quick assignments where students can develop their fluency and confidence. I have heard author and poet Ralph Fletcher call these quick writings “sneezes.” This is where students build fluency without the anxiety of a whole essay hanging over their heads.


In my workshops for teachers, I always say: “If you can’t see something good in a piece of student writing, then you aren’t looking hard enough.” I mean it to be a bit shocking, but the truth is many teachers are so overwhelmingly programmed to look for what’s wrong with kids’ writing that we forget the most important thing: noticing what’s right with students’ writing.

There are more effective ways to teach writing than just finding what’s wrong with it. As Donald Graves says, “Correcting is not teaching.” Building on strengths, modeling, and telling kids what they are doing well does far more to grow writers and increase their attitude and aptitude, their confidence and competence. How do writers respond to your feedback? They should want to write more. Do they?
It’s been a long-held bit of wisdom that confidence follows a level of competence. Actually, what educators are finding today is that you must have a certain level of confidence to reach any level of competence. What are we doing to build young writers’ confidence? Giving them bite-size assignments and celebrating the direction that they are moving in are more important than an unrealizable goal of perfection.

We probably have to shift how we view error all together. Error is not the worst thing in the world. In fact, to avoid mistakes, we often end up with a blank page. Error often provides evidence of a writer’s thinking, of movement, of risk. I always say we should love the errors and all the thinking they reveal. Honor the error and move the kids forward with what they are doing correctly. Provide them additional models and modeling for those skills that haven’t become fluent yet. Marking errors on papers won’t build young writers, but powerful instruction plumped with models, modeling, and a positive, enthusiastic attitude will.

Getting students started in writing and keeping them going means we find ways for young writers to succeed. That takes support through models and modeling, assignments that are inspired and inspiring, and feedback that builds rather than tears down.

Let’s get started. Are you ready?

Writing is meant to be a joyful expression of the writer’s self. The teaching of writing should be as well. Remember, each day that your students write something is a success. Let’s make this year one of helping our students discover that joy of writing and all they can do.
REFERENCES


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