

Effective Writing Instruction

Time for a Revolution

by Judith Hochman and Betsy MacDermott-Duffy

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom Of the three “Rs,” writing is clearly the most neglected.

—National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003

The Impetus for Change in Writing Instruction

Why do so many English teachers, college professors, job recruiters, and supervisors in the workplace believe that the writing aptitude of young people across the United States is far below acceptable standards? The most common response is that at every stage of student transition (elementary to middle school, middle to high school, and college into the workplace), the foundational skills required to write well are missing. Many students are unable to write a well-crafted sentence, much less possess the tools to organize and draft a composition about an expository topic (Eberhardt, 2013). According to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; U.S. Department of Education, 2011), approximately 75% of students in the United States are not at the “proficient level” in writing. These results indicate that students have only partial mastery of the prerequisite knowledge and skills required for competency at a given grade level. This problem is precisely what the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), a set of national benchmarks to ensure college and career readiness, attempted to address with increased rigor in writing.

Road to the Writing Revolution—A New Set of Standards

Though the CCSS are not perfect or all encompassing, they are based on sound research and are internationally benchmarked using standards from top-performing countries for their development. The intent is that CCSS will have a positive effect on student preparation for college and careers. According to the expectations of the anchor and grade-level standards, students should demonstrate increasing levels of complexity each year in all aspects of language use, from vocabulary and sentence structure to the development and organization of compositions. Reading sources used for research, and as a springboard for writing, should also become increasingly more complex and demanding with each grade, according to the CCSS.

The Writing standards of the CCSS outline three major text types for writing: 1) opinion/argumentative, 2) informational/

explanatory, and 3) narrative. Importantly, the narrative text description does not include the creative writing exercises that have dominated elementary school assignments for years. Although the CCSS do not exclude such assignments, they leave the inclusion and assessment of these types of tasks to teacher discretion. However, it is clearly noted in Appendix A of the CCSS that, although all three major text types are important, the CCSS place a strong emphasis on students’ ability to critically reason and write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues.

A Bump in the Road

Although much about the standards for writing in the CCSS is positive, many educators have concerns about the reality of meeting the Writing standards in their current form. Unfortunately, the foundational skills required to meet many of the Writing standards are addressed in a fragmented manner. Just as fluent and accurate decoding are required to comprehend text, similarly, there are basic skills in writing required to compose effectively. The Writing standards would greatly benefit from a detailed section on the skills that underpin all good writing. Explicit information about these fundamental skills can be found in CCSS sections other than Writing. For example, a standard under the foundational skills in the Reading standards requires first grade students to demonstrate an understanding of the organization and basic structures of print by recognizing the distinguishing features of a sentence (e.g., first word, capitalization, and ending punctuation). In addition, consider the language standard for grade 5 (CCSS.L.5.3a), which indicates that students should expand, combine, and reduce sentences for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style. These flaws in organization present artificial divisions among the CCSS for Reading, Language, and Writing. Everything from spelling conventions, grammar, syntax, figurative language, and vocabulary to style, tone, editing, revising, paraphrasing, summarizing, making claims, and acknowledging counterclaims are examples from the CCSS that reinforce good writing as well as reading, speaking, and listening. These skills appear throughout the CCSS for English language arts (ELA), albeit in different areas. So, to fully analyze the Writing standards, educators must mine through all of the related ELA CCSS. Even if they spend the time to do this, educators still might not emerge with an understanding of the strategies, amount of practice, and explicit instruction that it takes to teach writing to students.

In addition to these organizational issues, a noticeable omission in the Writing standards is the need to teach and use handwriting beyond the primary grades. Although the Language standards call for legible manuscript writing in grades K–1, the focus shifts to keyboarding in subsequent grades and leaves

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cursive handwriting as an instructional option left up to individual states or school districts. “Handwriting in the 21st Century? An Educational Summit” brought educators and researchers together in Washington, D.C. in 2012. Experts at the summit raised important questions regarding handwriting, cognitive development, and overall academic achievement. Virginia Berninger, a leading researcher on handwriting and the brain and the genetic basis of writing, presented at the summit. She spoke about the research revealing how cursive, in particular, is linked with brain functions around self-regulation and mental organization—the very cognitive tasks necessary to write well. Additional research reveals that students write faster, compose more, and express themselves more comprehensively when essays are written by hand rather than typed on a keyboard. (Berninger, 2012; Graham, 2005; Harris, 2005; Graham; Harris; Fink, 2000).

Although the CCSS clearly pinpoint the important relationship between oral and written language as underlying skills for effective communication, they do not reflect the body of research indicating that handwriting fluency is a critical constituent in setting up brain systems for reading acquisition (James, 2012) and is evidenced to improve oral language, writing quality and quantity, planning, thinking, and learning (Berninger, 2012; Graham & Santangelo, 2012; Peverly, 2012). The evidence was so compelling that a number of state administrators, who had dropped handwriting from their programs based on the CCSS, returned handwriting cursive instruction to their curriculum after attending the summit.

Meeting the CCSS—What will it take?

Given the combination of increased demands on writing in the CCSS and the limited clarity of the skills that underpin good writing within them, teachers’ knowledge and skills to teach writing is of even greater importance. Research suggests that being taught by a well-trained teacher matters most among all school-related factors (Rand Corporation, 2012). Unfortunately, most teacher prep programs ignore the fact that writing is a set of skills that can be successfully taught and improved through explicit instruction using research-based strategies.

In the publication *Effective Writing Instruction for All Students*, Steve Graham (2008) reports that many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach writing. In fact, almost 50% of the teachers reported that they received minimal to no preparation to teach writing. Clearly, the knowledge of validated writing strategies should be included in teacher preparation programs, and teacher certification should require an assessment for proficiency in the teaching of writing.

For the past eight years, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has conducted studies on the quality of teacher preparation programs. The NCTQ modeled their studies after the Flexner report, a 1910 evaluation of medical training programs conducted by the Carnegie Corporation. The Flexner report issued a call to action for American medical schools to require higher admission and graduation standards and to adhere to research-based scientific protocols in their training.

The result of that effort was a revolution in the medical field that transformed sub-standard doctor preparation programs into the premier system for medical training in the world. Teacher prep programs must have a similar revolution.

The NCTQ report has focused national attention on teacher preparation. Arne Duncan (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), United States Secretary of Education, reported that 62% of all new teachers felt unprepared for the realities of their classroom. He also equated this statistic to the practice of medicine: “Imagine what our country would do if 62 percent of our doctors felt unprepared to practice medicine—you would have a revolution in our medical schools.” Clearly this level of unpreparedness serves as a call to action.

Since the 1970s and 1980s, teachers have encouraged students to write without specific strategies and without explicit feedback. This approach causes deficits, not only in writing, but also in clarity of thought and the empathy required to communicate effectively with a reader. If young students are encouraged to focus primarily on their own experiences, they are not going to build the background knowledge, vocabulary, and understanding necessary to write effectively about expository and argumentative topics. To close the achievement gap and meet the needs of all learners, the philosophy that all children will discover how to read and write “naturally” must be dispelled. Beginning with the youngest students through those attending high schools and college, writing assignments need to be focused on a reader—the teacher, other students, or a designated audience—rather than oneself.

After a half-century of advocacy associated with instruction using minimal guidance, it appears that there is no body of research supporting the technique. Insofar as there is any evidence from controlled studies, it almost uniformly supports direct, strong instructional guidance rather than constructivist-based minimal guidance during the instruction of novice to intermediate learners.

—Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006

National scores, school reports, and amount of remediation necessary for most students to achieve success in college and the workplace make it abundantly clear that a major paradigm shift from the writing instruction typical in schools today is required. Although grammar and spelling are important components of writing, effective writing must also include skills necessary for accuracy, precision, summarization, content, and structure. In almost every type of coursework or career, people have to inform, explain, and provide their reasoning in writing. Regardless of a student’s major in school or future occupation, the ability to think clearly and organize information in writing

are the key elements to successful communication. And, it is for that reason the CCSS placed considerable emphasis on writing in the ELA standards and as a means of demonstrating learning in other subject areas.

Knowledge of Validated Writing Strategies Can Change the Trajectory

Given the expectations for writing outlined in the CCSS, the connection between research and practice becomes even more important for educators. As a nation, we are losing ground because of the ever-widening achievement gap among socio-economic groups. The gap begins in infancy and lasts through a student's academic lifetime and beyond. Informed teaching of writing, beginning with specific oral language activities that are embedded in a child's earliest learning and school experiences, could change this trajectory. The rich language exchanges that so many low-income students are not exposed to in their early years can be addressed by enhancing the syntax, vocabulary, and background knowledge of reading and writing activities that students encounter as they proceed through the grades.

High quality professional development in proven writing strategies needs to be a top priority of school administrators for their teachers. Researchers Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) have employed scientific methods to measure the average effects of specific instructional strategies used by teachers. Some of these strategies can be directly applied to writing instruction. For example, strategies such as analyzing complex problems by comparing, contrasting, and organizing information using outlines or graphic organizers greatly facilitate comprehension. Taught correctly, summarizing and note taking can result in large gains in student achievement in both reading and writing.

In the meta-analysis *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007), a considerable number of studies focused on explicitly teaching skills, processes, and knowledge, and all of these studies involved sustained, direct and systematic instruction designed to facilitate student mastery. Summarization skills, specific strategy instruction, and sentence combining yielded positive and reliable results. Sentence combining is supported as a highly effective alternative approach to more traditional grammar instruction, which produced a slight negative effect on student writing.

In the Carnegie Corporation's press release for the 2010 report *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading*, authored by Steve Graham and Michael Hebert (2010), it is stated "though reading and writing are skills closely related, writing is an often-overlooked tool for improving reading skills and content learning." This report provides teachers with research-based information on how writing improves reading and presents proof positive of the essential need for a greater emphasis on writing instruction as an integral part of school instruction.

The report (see pp. 11–21) identifies three closely related writing practices to improve students' reading:

1. **Have Students Write About the Texts They Read.**

Writing about a text enhances comprehension because

it provides students with a tool to visibly and permanently record, connect, analyze, personalize, and manipulate key ideas in text. Students' comprehension of science, social studies, and language arts is improved specifically when they

- Respond to a text in writing;
- Write summaries of a text;
- Write notes about a text; and
- Answer questions about a text in writing, or create and answer written questions about a text.

2. **Teach Students the Writing Skills and Processes That Go into Creating Text.** Students' reading skills and comprehension are improved by learning the skills and processes that go into creating text specifically when teachers

- Teach the process of writing, text structures for writing, paragraph or sentence construction skills;
- Teach spelling and sentence construction skills; and
- Teach spelling skills.

3. **Increase How Much Students Write.** Students' reading comprehension is improved by having them increase how often they produce their own text. The process of creating a text prompts students to be more thoughtful and engaged when reading text produced by others. The act of writing also teaches students about the importance of stating assumptions and premises clearly and observing the rules of logic. Students also benefit from using experience and knowledge to create a text as well as building relationships among words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Writing to Read informs educators about the importance of the reading and writing connection. When students are taught how to take notes from a text, annotate text with questions and connections, summarize important information and then communicate that information to a reader, they process the content on a deeper level. Thus, reading comprehension is enhanced along with writing competence on both the sentence and essay levels.

The Importance of the Sentence

One of the drawbacks of the CCSS is that they set unrealistic expectations for students who have not mastered the fundamentals of writing. One of the most fundamental skills a good writer should have, an essential element of writing, is the ability to develop a good sentence. Before students can make meaning from complex text, they must be able to decipher complex sentences (Eberhardt, 2013). Students are being pushed to write paragraphs and multi-paragraph compositions before they can produce a well-crafted sentence.

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Cheryl Scott (2009), whose research interests include oral and written language in school-age children and adolescents and discourse analysis techniques, supports the concept that teaching children to write more complex sentences may be an effective way to improve sentence-level comprehension in reading. If students are directly taught how to write linguistically complex sentence forms and are provided practice with these forms, it is reasonable to expect that when they encounter the same structures in written text they will be better equipped to comprehend that sentence type (Hochman, 2009). Moreover, analytical thinking can and should begin at the sentence level.

Even if students master writing a simple sentence, comprehending and incorporating expanded sentences into their writing can be challenging. Students often assume that readers possess the same amount of background knowledge they themselves bring to a writing task. In a sentence expansion activity, the essential message to students is placed on the importance of providing more information to the reader. Expansion activities start with an unelaborated sentence kernel (e.g., subject + verb), which is expanded by answering questions. Examples follow:

Example for Developing Writers

Kernel sentence: *They study.*

Who? *students*

When? *before tests*

Why? *because they want good grades*

How? *hard*

Expanded sentence: *Before tests, students study hard because they want good grades.*

Example for Proficient Writers

Kernel sentence: *He ordered secret bombing raids.*

Who? *Richard Nixon*

Where? *Cambodia*

When? *1969*

Why? *to stop movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies*

Expanded sentence: *In 1969, President Nixon ordered secret bombing raids in Cambodia to stop the movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies.*

The CCSS Writing standards reinforce the importance of conjunctions and transitions in developing more complex sentences and connecting ideas. (See Figure 1.) Analyzing the actions of an important figure in history, the impact of a current event, or the influence of a scientific discovery, can reinforce higher-level thinking and writing skills and can be introduced in the elementary grades. For example, conjunctions (e.g., *because*, *but*, and *so*) can be used as sentence starters or sentence completers to support critical thinking and analytical skills (Hochman, 2009).

Examples for Developing Writers

- George Washington is remembered *because* he was the first president of the United States.
- George Washington is remembered, *but* he lost many battles.
- George Washington is remembered, *so* we celebrate him as “the father of our country.”

Examples for Proficient Writers

- The GI bill was eventually passed *because* legislators agreed that something had to be done to help veterans assimilate into civilian life.
- The GI bill was eventually passed, *but* some members of Congress thought it would diminish veterans’ incentive to look for work.
- The GI bill was eventually passed, *so* servicemen gained access to higher education and other benefits.

Graphic organizers that provide a sentence frame scaffold can help developing writers use conjunctions in their writing. See Figures 2 and 3.

Teaching students to use subordinating conjunctions in left-branching clauses, where clause modifiers appear before the independent clause, is a form often seen in syntactically mature writing. Even young students can be provided with instruction on writing sentences using subordinating clauses. This instructional strategy, like most good techniques, can be scaffolded in difficulty throughout the grades. Note that the left-branching clause is italicized in these examples.

Examples for Developing Writers

- *After my class planted the seeds*, green plants started to grow.
- *Although roots help support a plant*, they are also important for taking in water and storing food.
- *Since the plant was placed in the window*, the stems started to lean toward the sun.

Examples for Proficient Writers

- *Even though cells appear to be very small compartments*, they hold all of the biological constituents necessary to keep themselves alive.
- *While the outer membrane of mitochondrion is smooth*, the inner one is folded into tubule structures called cristae.
- *If cells are not actively dividing*, they are said to be in interphase.

Instruction in the use of appositive phrases (i.e., those in italics in the examples that follow) is another important language tool that lifts the linguistic level of the sentence as well as adds information by further describing people, places, things, or concepts. This sentence form is one that reflects written language far more than oral language.

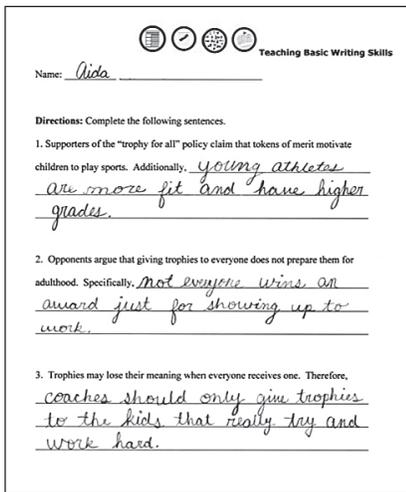


Figure 1. Developing complex sentences

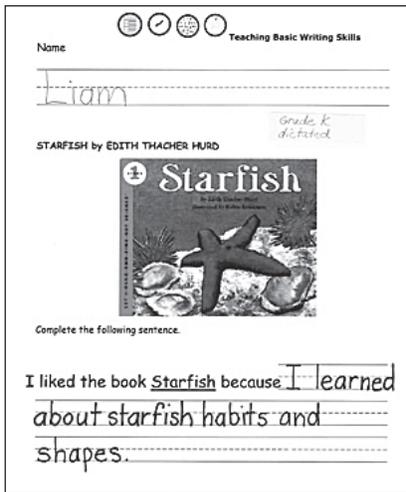


Figure 2. Example of a sentence frame

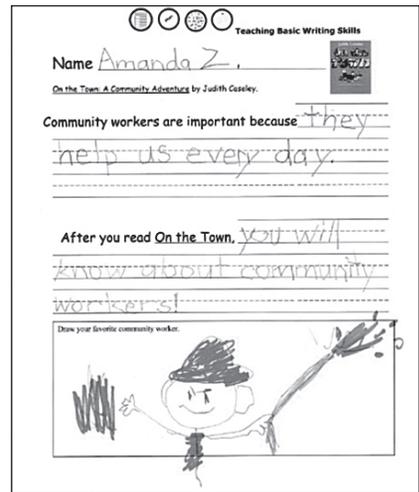


Figure 3. Examples of sentence frames

Examples for Developing Writers

- New York City, *an urban community*, is crowded and busy.
- Niagara Falls, *one of New York's natural wonders*, borders two countries.

Examples for Proficient Writers

- The Etruscans, *Rome's early ruling people*, were eventually overthrown by a revolt.
- The Romans created a republic, *a form of government where citizens have the right to vote for their leaders*, which lasted almost 500 years.

These examples for developing and proficient writers illustrate that research-based sentence strategies can be applied across the grades. As content and complexity become more cognitively demanding through the grades, the expectation for the quality of sentence production increases.

Sentence strategies can be directly taught to students to improve the overall quality of writing, assess their comprehension, and enhance their analytical thinking. Students who have been taught these research-based techniques are likely to display greater clarity in both their written and oral language (Hochman, 2009). Their communication often exhibits enhanced complexity and coherence, and their reading comprehension will show improvement (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991; Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Moats, 2006; Graham & Hebert, 2010). The ability to write effective sentences forms the foundation for writing expository and argumentative essays.

The Importance of an Organizational Frame— Outline to Essay

As students apply the paraphrasing, note taking, outlining, and summarizing strategies that they should learn in any comprehensive and integrated writing curriculum, effective organizational skills can translate into better study skills. A sound writing curriculum should also provide practice in varied writing genres: narrative, expository, and persuasive/

argumentative writing. As outlined in the CCSS, the emphasis should be forming a solid foundation in the writing skills most often required for school assignments, which are expository and argumentative. Writing and thinking are closely linked, and so instruction should, above all, help students enhance clarity and precision to structure their ideas. Writing should not be taught in isolation from content, though some teachers object because they think that writing will slow down their ability to cover the material in their subjects. To the contrary, writing will enhance their students' ability to understand subject matter (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Students, particularly those who struggle in school, should be taught how to write about the content that they are learning so they can comprehend and retain important information. Writing is the final, common pathway of cognition and language (Scott, 1999; 2005). Scott describes the command of linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, and social cognition (i.e., understanding another's point of view) that a proficient writer must bring to the task.

Since presenting expository information to a reader should be done in an ordered, sequential, linear form, outlining a paper as an initial exercise is key. A linear outline helps ensure a clear overall structure, supports analytical thinking, and provides support to the writer in linking related ideas. Essays written from outlines assist the writer in avoiding tangential information and underdeveloped paragraphs and ensure that each paragraph contains sufficient factual support. Although concept maps have a place in vocabulary relationships or concept building, their designs do not convert well into the type of written expression that is needed to effectively organize or convey information about a topic and provide key evidence to support facts or present counterpoints in argumentative writing. See Figure 4.

A good essay depends upon the ability to write effective sentences, but a novice writer also needs direct instruction to organize information and develop an expository composition or argument. Thought and organization are the characteristics

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TEACHING BASIC WRITING SKILLS Multiple Paragraph Outline	
Topic: <u>Should scientists clone the woolly mammoth?</u>	
Thesis Statement: Although cloning this prehistoric creature would be an astounding scientific breakthrough, the process is cruel, impractical and costly.	
Main Idea	Details
Introduction ¶ 1	.. G.S. S.S. Th. St.
(Con) cloning / impractical ↓ T.S.	- strong chance/ failure /recovered cells/ poor condition - implant in surrogate successful/ offspring ? surviving - high risk/ disease/ immune system not evolved - genetic clone = hairier elephant/ not mammoth
(Pro) cloning /benefits ↓ T.S.	- discoveries about history/ animal life - greater biodiversity → enrich ecosystem - learn about past/ ex. Ice Age + factors → mammoth extinction - prevent future extinction
(Con) cloning / inhumane & costly ↓ T.S.	- > 90% attempts fail - procedure → health prob. / ex. birth defects + die within min. or days/ born - natural habitat no longer exists → live in captivity - \$ indefensible/needs of planet/ ex. mil. \$ could be spent/saving endangered animals
Conclusion ¶ 5	.. Th. St. (rephrased) S.S. G.S.

Figure 4. Concept map.

that separate strong expository writing from weak. Good writing is as much about the organization of a writer's thinking as it is about writing itself (Hochman, 2009).

Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years . . .

—National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003

A Successful Revolution Brings About Reform—Call to Action

Although the NAEP results report that approximately three quarters of the nation's students are not at the "proficient level" in writing, research identifying evidence-based strategies in writing instruction gives much cause for hope that this dire statistic can be drastically reduced. The amount of writing research available compared to that on reading is miniscule,

but effective practices for the teaching of writing have now been identified through several comprehensive meta-analyses of writing interventions noted in this article. Meeting the standards set forth by the CCSS must begin with teacher preparation programs grounded in these research-based writing strategies. Explicit instruction in expository writing should commence in the earliest grades and continue through high school to produce young people who are adequately prepared for college and the workforce. Teachers must be cognizant of the demands the writing process places on students and the amount of direct instruction and repetition in specific strategy instruction necessary to produce good writers.

Although recent meta-analyses are promising, further research is needed on the effects of integrating reading, content, and writing instruction. Using effective writing strategies will help advance thinking and writing skills and improve reading comprehension in all content areas. A combination of evidence-based sentence strategies to build linguistic complexity in writing and the use of linear outlines to develop well-structured paragraphs, summaries, and expository and argumentative essays will enable students to master the skills that are essential for close reading, effective communication, and, most importantly, to advance analytical thinking. Students who have learned these skills will have the ability to use writing and classroom discourse to deeply internalize content area concepts, go on to make connections to new understandings, and successfully convey information to others as mandated by the CCSS in literacy. Indeed, these new standards are an impetus for change in writing instruction. However, the CCSS provide a set of goals without a detailed map showing teachers how to reform their practices to achieve these goals. To truly succeed in revolutionizing writing instruction, every teacher in every grade and content area must endeavor to become writing teachers.

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