Fostering Budding Writers

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"Easy reading is damn hard writing," Nathaniel Hawthorne famously said.

Indeed, writing text that is clear and engaging for the reader is no simple task. Learning the craft is a lifelong process, but the fundamentals should begin early. Acquiring strong writing skills is not an option for young people today, it is a necessity. It is critical to success at school, in the workplace, and in the community.

Meta-analyses of the writing-intervention literature provides convincing evidence that we have effective tools for helping beginning writers become more skillful writers. One challenge at this point is how to put these tools into the right hands — those of teachers. But up to 50% of teachers in national surveys report that they are not adequately prepared to teach writing (Harris, Graham, & Adkins, in press; Harris et al., 2012).

In a 2009 study, University of Utah researchers Sharlene A. Kiuhara and Leanne Hawken joined Steve Graham in randomly surveying more than 360 high school teachers about writing instruction and student performance. Specifically, we asked teachers in language arts, social studies, and science about what their students wrote, their use of evidence-based writing practices, what adaptations they made for weaker writers, how they assessed writing, their preparation for teaching writing, their beliefs about the importance of writing, and their judgments about their students' writing capabilities. We found that the teachers typically assigned writing activities that involved little analysis and interpretation. Nearly half of the survey participants said they did not assign at least one writing assignment every month. And most said they used most of the evidence-based practices for writing instruction, but they employed them infrequently.

Steve Graham led a separate survey of primary grade teachers from across the United States about their writing instruction practices, and found that they also were inconsistent in their use of empirically supported practices.

The impact is borne out in assessments of student performance. A 2012 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that only a quarter of eighth and 12th grade students demonstrated solid writing skills, even when allowed to use spell check and other computer word-processing tools. Twenty-seven percent of students at each grade level were able to write essays that were well developed, organized and included proper language and grammar. The remainder showed just partial mastery of these skills.

So how can educators raise those proficiency levels? According to decades of studies, effective writing instruction includes increasing the time students spend writing, fostering students' motivation for writing, and improving professional development for writing in teacher-education programs.

How Beginners Write

Writing requires the use of a variety of motor, cognitive, and affective skills, as we must decide what to say and how to say it; apply handwriting (or keyboarding) to construct a visible representation of our intentions; make multiple decisions on how to frame these intentions into sentences; select just the right words to convey the intended meaning; ensure that sentences are grammatically correct and words are correctly spelled; constantly evaluate and possibly revise the emerging message so it is clear and forceful, and keep working on the message until it is viewed as suitable and persuasive. Such evaluations are difficult, as the inclinations and knowledge of the intended audience are not fully known, and their understanding of the message as a whole evolves as they read it.

This description of skilled writing differs considerably from the way beginning writers compose. They basically convert the writing problem into a task of telling what one knows. We often describe this as the "Vulcan mind dump." They deposit a relevant idea from memory onto paper, and this idea serves as the stimulus for the next idea, and so on. For example, a young child writing about dogs might start by composing, "Dogs like people," moving to "They like to lick you," followed by "My dog loves me." Little effort is made to evaluate or rework these ideas, consider the needs of the reader, or organize the text. The resulting paper is a list of topic-related ideas, rather than a coherent discussion or examination of the topic.

So how do beginning writers become more skilled at the craft? The first step is a viewpoint we call "Setting the Stage"; writing develops naturally when beginning writers have plenty of opportunities to write for real purposes, such as writing a story that will be shared with others or a letter to persuade the school principal about the merits of physical education for all students. Instruction in how to write is periodically provided based on what the writer needs at that time.

Beyond providing a conductive writing environment, educators should systematically and explicitly teach beginning writers the same skills, strategies, and knowledge used by more accomplished writers. While this "Explicit Teaching" approach values frequent writing for real purposes, it places much more emphasis on methodically and directly teaching students how to write.

In fact, Setting the Stage and Explicit Teaching both facilitate writing development. Findings from meta-analyses of the writing intervention literature that we have conducted with colleagues over the last 10 years demonstrate that implementing basic concepts from each approach leads to better writing. This is the case for typically developing writers as well as those who find learning to write challenging.

Setting the Stage

Consistent with the maxim that one learns by doing, the quality of developing writers' papers improves when teachers increase how much students write. Ensuring that youngsters write is critical but only the first step in Setting the Stage. The quality of students' writing is also enhanced when teachers support students as they write.

One effective procedure for supporting developing writers is to provide specific goals for writing assignments (e.g., add three new ideas when revising your paper). This makes a poorly defined problem

more specific. Another is to engage writers in activities that help them gather and organize possible ideas for writing, such as reading for information or using a semantic web to organize ideas for writing. A third is to have students work together as they plan, draft, revise, and edit their papers. The key to the success with this approach is to structure how they work together.

Developing writers benefit from feedback. This includes feedback from teachers about their writing progress as well as feedback about what they write. Having students give *each other* feedback about their writing is also effective. For example, in a study Steve Graham coauthored, upper-elementary grade students who were struggling writers not only gave other students feedback on their writing, but received feedback from them, too. Specifically, the students indicated what they liked about a classmate's composition as well as pointing out places where something was unclear or more detail was needed. Students who gave and received feedback developed stronger revising skills than students in the control condition, as they made more revisions overall and more revisions that addressed the substance of their text. They also wrote better compositions than students who did not engage in these activities, as measured by a general evaluation that asked scorers to judge the overall quality of compositions on an 8-point scale as well as an evaluation where scorers judged if the postinstruction revised papers were better than preinstruction revised papers. Scorers were not aware of the identity of the writer, the instructional condition, or when the composition was written.

Making computers a more integral part of any writing program is also critical. Most writing at school, though, is done with paper and pencil (or pen). Twenty-first century writing tools, such as word processors, have many advantages over writing by hand. Word-processed text is legible, and it can easily be deleted, added, rewritten, or moved. Word processors are bundled with software, such as spell check or speech synthesis, that can support the writer, and they can be connected to the Web and other programs where students can gather material for what they write, as well as share what they write with others. For developing writers, these affordances produce better writing and greater motivation to write.

Explicit Teaching

Skilled writers rarely think about handwriting, typing, or spelling, executing each skill correctly with little to no conscious effort. Achieving such mastery is important for developing writers, as having to devote attention to these transcription skills can (1) interfere with other writing processes such as generating ideas or (2) consume cognitive resources that could be applied to other composing processes like planning text or sentence construction. Explicitly teaching these transcription skills not only improves handwriting, typing, and spelling but also enhances the quality of young children's text.

Skilled writers invest considerable energy into transforming their ideas into grammatically correct sentences that convey their intended meanings. Quality of writing and sentence construction skills of developing writers can be enhanced by teaching them how to combine simpler sentences into more complex ones. In a 2005 study Steve Graham conducted with University of Albany researcher Bruce Saddler, for example, teachers modeled how to combine two or more smaller sentences into a more complex one. To illustrate, the teacher modeled how to combine "They tried to put the worm in their bag" with "The worm did not fit in their bag" using the connector "but." Stronger and weaker fourth grade writers then practiced combining similar types of sentences and applied their newly learned skills to revising previously written text. In comparison to peers who received traditional grammar instruction, students in the sentence-combining group evidenced gains in sentence construction as measured by a

standardized norm-referenced test involving sentence combining, making more revisions between first and second drafts of papers that involved the sentence-combining skills taught, and overall quality of written text as determined by an 8-point scale that included representative papers for low- to high-quality scores. All identifying information was removed from these assessments prior to scoring.

Skilled writers draw on a variety of different types of knowledge when writing, including knowledge about the attributes of good writing and the basic elements of specific types of writing such as a story or an opinion essay. One way of acquiring such knowledge and improving the quality of students' writing is to provide them with examples or models of good writing, discussing the attributes of such text with students, and asking them to emulate these attributes in their own writing. Another approach is to directly target a specific element such as the protagonist's goals in a story, defining the element, reading text to locate such elements, discussing how the author presented and used this element, and asking students to apply a similar approach in their own stories.

Lastly, skilled writers employ a variety of strategies to help them carry out and regulate the processes involved in planning, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing text. Explicitly teaching developing writers strategies for carrying out and regulating these processes markedly improves the quality of their writing. To illustrate, Susan De La Paz and Steve Graham conducted a study in which teachers taught middle-school students how to plan and write expository text. Students were taught how to set goals for their writing and generate an initial and flexible plan for what they planned to say, modifying it as needed while writing. The quality of these students' essays as measured by an 8-point quality scale evidenced greater improvement than those of peers who were also taught how to write expository text but received much less instruction in how to plan and regulate their writing.

Putting the Pieces Together

Another challenge in writing instructions concerns dosage and interactions. While we know that each of the instructional procedures we've described produce better writing, we do not know precisely how much of each practice is best and what combinations of these practices maximize writing development.

It is obvious, though, that for beginning writers to become skilled writers, they must write and teachers must teach.

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