

Chapter 8

BUILDING A SOUND WRITING PROGRAM

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This chapter will:

- Explore writing theory, research, and issues related to instruction.
- Identify guidelines for effective K–8 writing instruction.
- Describe classroom writing practices.
- Suggest directions for future research and practice.

THEORY AND RESEARCH BASE

Writing is a complex interaction of cognitive and physical factors. It allows for the creation of ideas and information with written symbols and words. Writing can be a social process and is one way of communicating with others (e.g., a note to a friend, a letter to the newspaper, a paper for a professor, or a newsletter to a parent). Writing can also be a personal process done just for oneself (e.g., a grocery list, a “to-do” list, entries in a personal journal, or poetry). Many factors affect writing, including conceptual knowledge; vocabulary; knowledge of standard form; grammar, spelling, and punctuation; handwriting ease; small muscle development; and eye–hand coordination.

Although writing provides communication with others and introspection, it is more than transcribing meaning that already exists in one’s head. The transaction that occurs as a writer writes and thinks can foster the creation of new knowledge (Smith, 1994). Also, rereading what is written can give a writer new ideas that did not occur before writing. Unlike spoken language that is limited by memory and attention, writing can be revisited and changed, thus liberating the imagination and providing new understandings and insights.

Theory and research in writing instruction suggest a view of the writing process that includes both social and personal aspects. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that writing is a way of communicating cultural understandings, and children learn to write when they have reasons that make it “relevant to life.” Relevancy is also embedded in Cambourne’s (1988) model of learning applied to literacy. He theorizes that authentic *engagement* accompanied by *immersion* and *demonstration* result in learning. Students learn to write when we surround them with examples and models, give them expectations, allow them to make decisions and mistakes, provide feedback, and give them time to practice in realistic ways.

Graves’s (1983) research with young children resulted in a model of the writing process also based on relevancy and engagement in the recursive steps of *planning*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing*, and *publishing* for a real

audience. Casey and Hemenway (2001) conducted a 10-year study of third graders, up to their graduation from high school, and concluded that a balance between structure and freedom results in “more dynamic writers excited about their abilities” (p. 68). Atwell’s (1998) research with middle school students and Murray’s (1985) work with college students support the use of the writing process in a writing workshop. Hayes and Flower (1986) developed a similar process model based on evidence that college students monitor their writing as they move back and forth among the recursive steps.

However, research on isolating the teaching of grammar and mechanics from the writing process is not encouraging (Weaver, 1996). Studies show that teaching formal grammar to students has “a negligible or even harmful effect on improving students’ writing” (Routman, 1996, p. 119). The only isolated skills teaching that does seem to show a positive effect on writing is teaching students how to combine sentences, and “a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage results in significant losses in overall quality” (Hillocks, 1987, p. 74). But time spent actually engaged in the writing process that includes “. . . teaching and discussing word usage and sentence construction in the context of writing with intention for a specific audience” (Routman, 1996, p. 120) seems to help students most.

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICE

Although a large body of theory and research informs the teaching of writing, new mandates challenge teachers to remain faithful to the relevant and authentic engagement practices supported by this theory and research. Higher standards, mandated assessments, and accountability issues cause some teachers to reduce time for writing, teach writing artificially, and fragment the curriculum (Strickland et al., 2001). In some classrooms, the focus may be away from the writing process, and toward skills and the written product. Proponents of a process approach to writing instruction are sometimes criticized for overlooking direct instruction, form, and legibility, although a skills–product approach, including grammar and punctuation practice, and teacher-provided prompts and rubrics is criticized for its teacher-centeredness that overlooks student motivation, purpose, and voice. But good writers need opportunities to engage in the process while learning the craft and skills of writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998; Harwayne, 2001; Portalupi & Fletcher, 2001; Shanahan, 1997). Thus, this chapter offers glimpses into classrooms in one school where teachers use elements of both a process approach and a product–skills approach.

The five guidelines (depicted in Figure 8.1), drawn from the previous discussion of theory and research, reflect a balance between process and product-focused instruction. Using these guidelines to frame your writing program can help you think about ways to integrate writing with reading, science, and social studies; avoid devoting writing time to test preparation; use formula writing sensibly; and blend writing skills with meaningful teaching.

Writing Goals That Guide Students, Teachers, and Schools

The following quote from Scott, a fourth-grade teacher, shows how he and his faculty are establishing goals and creating a writing curriculum to help their students develop into effective writers:

“We have a school-wide commitment to writing. The writing curriculum we created helps every teacher know what students should be able to do when they leave their grade level. I feel more confident in my teaching because of the conversations we’ve had about writing. I know we’re focused on those state assessments, and sometimes I think we pay too much attention to them. But right now, in education, accountability is forcing this focus.

“I know I have better writers this year because I’ve changed my expectations and practices. For example, I’m more intentional now about helping kids analyze and think in science and social studies,

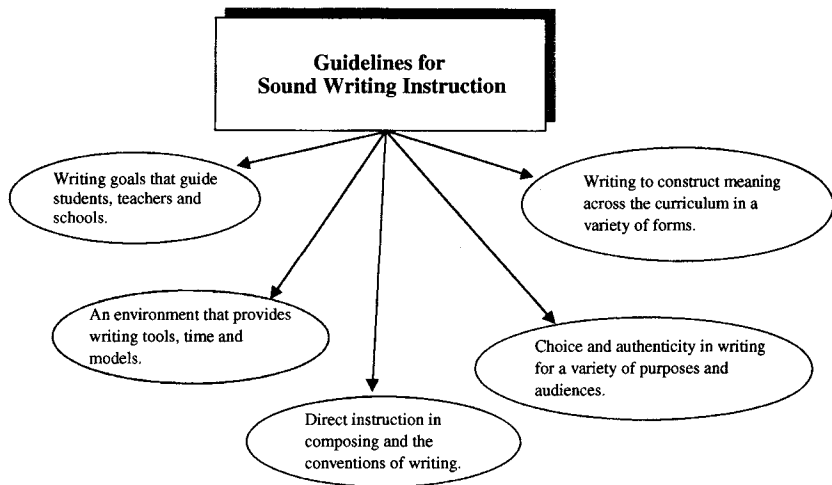


FIGURE 8.1. Use these guidelines to frame your writing program.

and then write about it. I often ask them to compare and contrast things like a poem and a report, and we write in different genres. We talk about what a good finished piece looks like. We create checklists and rubrics students can use to guide their writing and self-evaluate after writing.”

Scott and his faculty are responding to higher standards and mandated assessments with a focus on writing. They have identified school-wide goals for writing in light of the standards adopted by their state, and they continue to have dialogue about developing criteria and rubrics for good writing. They know that good instruction begins with goals and a vision of exemplary student performance. Good instruction also includes self-assessment by teachers and students.

Self-assessment can include answers to questions such as the following (Marino, 1997) which may help you examine and match your beliefs to your practices:

- How do students become good writers?
- For what purposes are students writing?
- Who are the audiences for their writing?
- Are they writing in a variety of forms in all content areas?
- Am I giving students choices in what they write?
- How am I using the writing process?
- What direct instruction am I providing?
- How am I using literature to inspire and model good writing?
- How am I helping students understand the effect of conventions on meaning?

Self-evaluation by students is important, too, because it helps students take responsibility for their writing progress. A writing attitude survey can provide information about how students feel about writing (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000). Questions such as the following help students evaluate their skills and set goals for themselves (Hansen, 1996):

- What do I do well?
- What is the most recent thing I’ve learned as a writer?
- What do I want to learn next to become a better writer?
- What do I plan to do to improve?

As well as evaluating their writing progress, Scott often talks with his students before they write, to decide how a good finished product looks. For example, before writing letters to state Chambers of Commerce as part of a study of the United States, his students listed characteristics of

a good letter and then organized them into categories. Scott added levels of use to his "rubric" to guide their writing (see Figure 8.2).

Creating rubrics and checklists of criteria with students before writing can have a dramatic effect on a finished product. It gives students goals for writing and the characteristics of a good report, essay, letter, or poem, for example, *before* they write, and it gives everyone an objective way to assess the finished product *after* writing. Rubrics and checklists can help you identify students' strengths and needs, so you know what to reteach, and they can help parents understand a student's grade. Of course, you will not use a rubric or checklist for every piece of writing, but this practice can take the mystery out of writing for students and improve the quality of key writing assignments and final projects.

An Environment That Provides Writing Tools, Time, and Models

A visitor to Jan's kindergarten and Farrah's sixth-grade class can tell that they recognize the value of environmental print for teaching reading and writing. In Jan's room, there are printed 5" x 8" labels on the *wastebasket*, the *pencil sharpener*, and other classroom objects. Around each child's neck is a nametag hanging from yarn. Jan finds opportunities daily to use these labels as tools in brief lessons to help build letter knowledge and sight

Letter Rubric

	<i>Needs Work</i>	<i>Getting there</i>	<i>Almost there</i>	<i>Got it</i>
<u>Content</u>				
Message / meaning				
Organization				
Details				
Complete sentences				
Word use				
<u>Mechanics</u>				
Inside address				
Date + greeting				
Body / paragraphs				
Closing + name				
Capitals + punctuation				
Neatness				
Spelling				

FIGURE 8.2. Rubrics guide writing and help make assessment objective.

vocabulary. She says that many of the printed words in the room find their way into the children's daily journals. In Farrah's room, there are large cans filled with pencils, felt-tip markers, calligraphy pens, colored pencils, and ball-point pens. This classroom also has labels affixed to objects, because Farrah uses labels and other environmental print as tools to help the five ESL students in her class learn English. She says Russell, a new immigrant from Russia, eagerly uses this print each day with a buddy, who helps him speak and write English as Russell teaches his buddy Russian.

Scott and other teachers set aside blocks of time when students can write on a topic of their choice during *writing workshop* (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983, 1994). Calkins (1994) suggests use of the following components of writing workshop: minilessons, work time for writing and conferring, peer conferring and/or response groups, share sessions, and publication celebrations. Atwell (1999) spends an hour a day in writing workshop, about one-third of which is brief lessons focused on a demonstrated need of a group of students. She also spends time sharing and discussing well-written pieces of literature to help students improve their writing and learn to respond to each other's work.

Tonya, a third-grade teacher, organizes writing workshop differently each year. She listens to her students, reflects on what does and does not work, and modifies accordingly (Sudol & Sudol, 1995; Zaragoza & Vaughn, 1995). This year, Tonya uses writing workshop 3 days a week and begins with a 5- to 10-minute lesson on a skill, followed by 30 minutes writing and 10 minutes listening to someone share from the Author's Chair (Graves, 1994). Students sign up on a wall calendar to share a finished story twice a month. Student writing is displayed on bulletin boards, and wall posters are visible, such as the following T-chart that resulted from a class discussion about writing workshop and reminded students of good writing workshop behavior:

Writer's Workshop

Looks like	Sounds like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People being polite • Working not talking • Sharing ideas quietly • Cooperation • People writing • People reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quiet but not silent • No put-downs • Clean language • No unpleasant noises • Listening during sharing time • Asking good questions

Stefan's second graders typically spend 45 minutes a day in writing workshop. When he omits or shortens the workshop, students are disappointed. He says groans often accompany the signal to stop writing. In

this school, parent volunteers manage a project called “Books from Boxes” that uses cereal boxes and other materials to make blank books. Students publish only their best work, and every piece of writing does not proceed through the entire writing process.

In her first year using writing workshop in third grade, Karen manages it with a chart that holds five tagboard pockets, one for each step of the process, and student names on tagboard strips (see Figure 8.3). Each day, students place their names in the pocket that shows where they are in the writing process. Then, Karen knows who is ready for a conference with

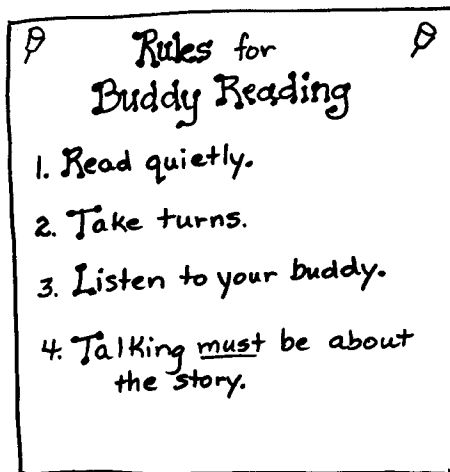
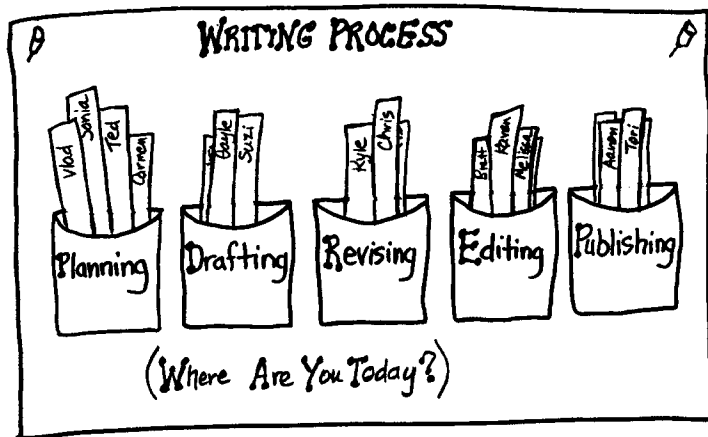


FIGURE 8.3. Charts like these help manage the writing workshop.