

Are we teaching our students to write?

Peter Westwood reviews research showing that many teachers feel unprepared and untrained to teach writing and that we need to remedy this situation. The results of meta-analyses and research reviews of effective practice show that there are many effective ways to teach writing, and that explicit instruction, strategy training, and use of technology can create writing success for all students who find writing difficult.

Recently, in the context of American schools, Brenner and McQuirk (2019, p.18) have written: 'Studies of classroom practice suggest that most teachers devote little time to the teaching of writing, and many teachers report they do not feel prepared to teach writing.' This was also a finding from a study by Brindle, Graham, Harris and Hebert (2016). Similarly, Pelkey (2018) concluded from her study that during their initial training teachers are not made sufficiently aware of evidence-based practices that are known to help struggling writers. Experts in teaching children to write have strongly recommended that there be a concerted effort to increase all teachers' knowledge about writing development and to ensure

that they employ evidence-based writing practices (Graham & Harris, 2013; Troia & Graham, 2003). We should be making the same recommendation in Australia, because as the Minister for Education (Tehan, 2019) has pointed out when reporting NAPLAN results for 2018, 'The decline in writing skills in years 5, 6 and 7 since 2011 are concerning.'

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While it is true that most teacher education courses certainly encourage trainee teachers to engage their children in writing activities every day, and to view writing as an 'across the curriculum' subject, few actually instruct teachers in how to teach writing. The belief seems to be that school students will become good writers if they simply

engage in authentic writing every day and receive encouraging feedback. Not too long ago, a similar belief gave us the dubious mantra 'children learn to read by reading', and we were discouraged from attempting to teach directly the sub skills involved in unlocking words in print. However, we eventually found that this mantra was lacking in validity, as evidenced by data on reading standards from large scale surveys.

We now understand that all children need guidance and explicit instruction in all aspects of reading and writing. They need to be taught explicitly how to go about the process of composing text for different purposes and different audiences (Behizadeh, 2019). They need guidance with the mechanical aspects (handwriting, keyboarding, spelling, punctuation and grammar) and they need to be taught self-regulatory strategies for generating ideas, planning and organizing their material, proofreading and editing (Troia & Graham, 2003). Teacher guidance of this type is important for all students, but it is absolutely essential for students with a learning difficulty that affects their ability to write (Harrison & McManus, 2017). Similarly, with the youngest children in school, providing direct guidance appears to be very helpful in advancing their emergent writing skills



(Byington & Kim, 2017). Troia (2014, p.10) has written: 'Younger writers and those who struggle with writing will require greater explicitness, more practice, and enhanced scaffolding (e.g., repetitive modeling, graphic aids, checklists, incremental goals, expectations) than older writers and those who do not struggle with writing.' This is sound advice.

A valuable publication titled *Evidence-based practices for writing instruction* (Troia, 2014) is available online, and is strongly recommended as a resource. It describes 36 evidence-based practices for teaching and assessing writing. Among the practices mentioned are: explicit instruction in strategies for planning written work, selecting the best words to communicate ideas to the audience, using technology as an aid, promoting independence in creating and editing what you write, and using rubrics or other frameworks. In particular, teachers' explicit demonstration of strategies for composing, reviewing and revising written work is found to be a powerful influence on students' performance (Regan & Berkeley, 2012). In recent years much attention has been given to teaching students self-regulatory strategies that can encompass all these aspects, and strategy training has become a recognized evidence-based approach (Liberty & Conderman, 2018). Fletcher et al. (2018) suggest that teaching students to use self-regulatory strategies when writing can produce an effect size as high as 1.17, but usually the ES is at least 0.60.

The challenge for teacher educators now is to ensure that all teachers graduate with a deeper understanding of how best to teach writing, beyond simply setting assignments.

Much useful current research in writing is being conducted with students and adults who are learning English as a second or additional language. Many of the practical implications that are emerging from this work strongly support the use of teacher-direction and guidance (scaffolding, feedback and modelling) in assisting students to develop the necessary skills and understandings (Allen, 2018; Jelodar & Farvardin, 2019). Studies with second

language learners have also reinforced the value of teaching writing within a collaborative learning environment, with opportunities for suggestions and feedback from peers supplementing the guiding input from teachers (Barrot, 2018).

A collaborative approach that has been well studied is the use of 'paired writing' as an option in a supportive classroom environment. This approach encourages students to work together for the sharing of ideas, giving each other feedback, composing stories and reports, and editing the final product (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2018; Yeh, 2017). Graham et al. (2012) report that peer assistance when writing can produce a very acceptable effect size of 0.89. It has also been found that the approach produces even better outcomes when teachers supplement paired writing activities with explicit teaching at appropriate times (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2018).

One of the first educators to recognize the role of sharing ideas and having peer critiquing of written work in regular classrooms was Graves (1983). His 'conference approach to writing' was very popular in Australian primary schools in the 1980s and is still in use in many classrooms. The approach known as Writers' Workshop operates on similar principles in the classroom. Analysis of the effectiveness of these conference approaches to writing has tended to cast some doubt on their overall effectiveness for increasing students' writing performance, with effect sizes reported of no more than 0.32 (Graham & Perrin, 2007; Smithson, 2008). Harris, Graham, Mason and Friedlander (2008) have indicated clearly that a structured, explicit, systematic approach to writing was superior to the Writers' Workshop approach. Reinhart (2014) has found that the impact of Writers' Workshop is increased significantly if the writing activities are deliberately guided by the teacher rather than remaining unstructured and informal. A guided approach to writing includes the teaching of grammar rules and principles as and when needed while students are engaging in authentic writing. This is often referred to as task-based teaching of writing skills (Saraç, 2018). For some struggling writers, it is almost always necessary then to provide additional exercises that allow for extra practice for mastering particular rules or conventions.

Another strategy that produces good results across a wide ability range is the

use of various forms of graphic organizer to provide a visual framework for story or report writing. Graphic organizers can target specific aspects of writing, such as planning, drafting, revising, editing, choice of vocabulary, and grammar use. Meta analyses of studies using graphic organizers have yielded very positive effect sizes (Kansizoglu, 2017; Robinson & Howell, 2008).

Digital technology in the form of a word processor has made the task of writing somewhat more attractive for struggling writers. When producing a report or essay they are able to add to, modify, delete from and check their writing, and correct their spelling. The use of a word processor has an effect size between 0.47 and 0.55 (Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perrin, 2007). The appropriate uses of technology as an aid to writing and editing is now recommended by Troia (2014) as an approach that has been found to raise achievement level and increase students' motivation.

Competent writers have not only mastered the mechanical aspects of writing but also have a deep understanding of the structure and style of expression needed for different purposes. Weaker writers tend to get into a failure cycle wherein they have no confidence in their own ability and avoid writing whenever possible. Through lack of daily practice, they then miss out on useful corrective feedback and encouragement from their teacher. The challenge for teachers is to restore students' lost motivation for writing by always selecting interesting topics and providing the instruction and support necessary for the students to experience success. The challenge for teacher educators now is to ensure that all teachers graduate with a deeper understanding of how best to teach writing, beyond simply setting assignments.

Peter Westwood is a retired academic and teacher who now freelances as an education writer and editor. He is author of Commonsense methods for children with special educational needs (Routledge) and What teachers need to know about reading and writing difficulties (ACER Press).

Useful online resources

www.teachwriting.org/blog/2017/6/15/supporting-writers-at-all-levels

www.teachwriting.org/blog/2017/6/14/12-strategies-to-support-struggling-writers-in-elementary

www.teachwriting.org/blog/2017/3/18/5-strategies-to-build-confidence-in-young-writers

www.readingandwritinghaven.com/14-ways-support-struggling-writers-build-confidence-increase-success/

Examples of graphic organizers for writing: www.dailyteachingtools.com/free-graphic-organizers-w.html

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