

Evidence-Based Writing Practices

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Introduction

Writing is essential. We write to communicate with others, sharing our thoughts through letters, tweets, texts, blogs, and emails. We write to share who we are, composing autobiographies, biographies, and personal narratives. We write to share information through books, newspaper articles, PowerPoints, product labels, and scientific reports. We write to persuade, generating op-eds, reviews, treatises, and advertisements. We write to entertain, creating the words that power the movies, television shows, songs, and plays that capture our imagination. We write to heal, using writing to review and reflect on the physical and psychological pain we encounter. We write to learn, examining and reexamining both new and old ideas and concepts.

There is no shortage of advice on how to teach writing. This makes it difficult for teachers, administrators, and policymakers to make valid and informed decisions on how to teach this versatile and complex skill. The knowledge amassed on evidence-based writing instruction provides a useful source of information for constructing effective writing programs (Harris, 2021). Many teachers, however, report needing further development as writing teachers, including in-service professional development and greater knowledge about teaching writing (Camping et al., 2025). We provide a specific action plan for building a writing program that can help teachers and school leaders implement effective practices and help determine where professional development can be targeted.

Drawing on two distinct types of scientific evidence, we offer nine recommendations for teaching writing to students in kindergarten and the elementary grades. The first form of evidence is derived from true- and quasi-experiments testing the effects of different types of writing instruction (Graham, 2025). True experiments involve randomly assigning schools, classes, or students to a

writing treatment and control condition, whereas quasi-experiments do not involve randomization to conditions. Both of these research designs provide reasonable estimates that a specific writing instructional approach is in fact responsible for observed changes in students' writing. The second form of evidence is derived from studies examining how writing is taught by exceptional literacy teachers (Graham, 2019; Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Pressley et al., 2006, 2004, 1997).

The advantage of meta-analysis is the findings from multiple studies are combined to provide a more reliable and comprehensive estimation of the effects of a particular instructional practice. The advantage of the meta-synthesis is that it identified common practices that exceptional literacy teachers use to teach writing.

Recommendations

1. Students Need to Write

Writing for multiple purposes is critical for developing writers. This provides them with a context where they can apply and experiment with the writing skills, strategies, and processes they are learning. The available scientific evidence reveals that increasing how much young students write, especially within a supportive writing community, improves the quality of their writing and increases their confidence as writers. Students' writing improves even more as additional evidence-based practices are included in instruction (Harris et al., 2023).

2. Use Writing to Enhance Comprehension and Learning

Writing can facilitate learning in multiple ways:

- a) re-examination (Students reengage with material read or presented in class when writing.)
- b) elaboration (Students adjust prior understandings as they explore them through writing.)
- c) explicitness (Students identify which information is most important to include in their writing.)
- d) integration (Students decide how to organize identified ideas into a coherent whole.)
- e) involvement (Students decide how selected information is to be treated.)
- f) transformation (Students translate selected ideas into their own words.)



g) reflection (Students review and reexamine what is written, critiquing and constructing new understandings.).

The available scientific evidence demonstrates that writing about material read or presented in class results in improvements in comprehension and retention of such material (Harris et al., 2023). Learning through reading to learn and then writing across multiple tasks and genres becomes a fundamental tool for educating children.

3. Support Students as They Write

Writing is accomplished by applying the following interactive and reciprocal production processes alone or with a peer(s):

- a) planning (creating a representation of the writing task, what to say, and how to say it)
- b) ideation (accessing ideas for writing from long-term memory or external resources such as a book)
- c) translation (converting ideas into acceptable sentences conveying the writer's intentions)
- d) transcribing (turning sentences into print or digital text)
- e) revising (making changes in any of the production processes described above).

The available scientific evidence shows students' writing can be improved by supporting them through:

- a) goal setting (establishing clear goals for what a writing task is to accomplish)
- b) feedback (providing constructive feedback on what is written)
- c) prewriting activities (gathering information to write about through reading and/or using graphic organizers to generate and organize information)
- d) peer collaborations (having students work together to plan, draft, revise, and/or edit their writing).

4. Teach Foundational Writing Skills

Foundational writing skills include handwriting, typing, spelling, and sentence construction. Until handwriting, typing, and spelling can be executed correctly and with little or no thought, they interfere with other writing production processes such as generating ideas while writing and turning



ideas into acceptable sentences. Sentence construction requires thinking and conscious decision making. Thus, helping students become skilled sentence constructors will allow them to develop further as writers. The available scientific evidence confirms that explicitly teaching handwriting, spelling, typing, and sentence construction improves these skills and results in positive effects on other aspects of writing, such as enhancing the quality of the text students produce.

5. Teach Strategies for Writing and for Reading to Write

Writing strategies are the processes writers use to plan, draft, monitor, evaluate, revise, and/or edit what they write. Some writing strategies, such as brainstorming ideas, can be applied to almost all writing tasks. Other writing strategies are more task and genre specific, such as learning an evidence-based strategy for writing to inform your reader about an interesting or important topic. Starting with close reading of appropriate text to provide students with writing content, as early as 1st grade, enhances student outcomes in writing such as quality, amount written, and impact on the reader. In essence, writing strategies engage students in the thinking processes that make writing so powerful. The available scientific evidence demonstrates that explicitly teaching students writing strategies for specific genres and tasks makes them better writers. The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model (Harris, 2025; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2008) is a particularly effective method for teaching writing strategies, teaching students not only writing strategies but the self-regulation skills and knowledge needed to use them effectively.

6. Enhance Knowledge about Writing

Good writing requires having and using different types of knowledge, including knowledge about the writing process, general characteristics of good writing (consider and catch your reader, effective vocabulary, varied sentence structures, and so on) as well as knowledge about the different genres of writing and their purposes. For example, students' writing can be improved by having them analyze, discuss, and emulate models of good writing, and by teaching them about the characteristics, structure, and basic elements of specific types of text (e.g., an argument). Such knowledge not only serves as a guide for producing text; students with a richer knowledge base about writing have more resources to draw upon as they recursively brainstorm, organize their ideas, plan, draft, revise, and edit. Students with these forms of knowledge are empowered to create better text. The available scientific evidence indicates that practices designed to increase aspects of students' knowledge about writing result in better text.

7. Apply 21st Century Writing Tools



Most of the writing done in schools today involves paper, pencils, and pens, often because many schools (especially those in underserved communities) lack computers and the resources for using them effectively. This is unfortunate, because digital writing tools provide multiple advantages over writing by hand. For instance, word processing makes it is easier to move, remove, add or change text, and so on. Newer digital tools provide even greater advantages, including software to facilitate planning, provide feedback, create multi-modal text, or increase motivation (e.g., incorporating systems into digital writing tools that allow writers to advance from one instructional level to the next and receive rewards for their efforts). The available scientific evidence supports the use of such tools as students create higher quality text when using them (Graham, 2019).

8. Connect Writing and Reading

When writing, students draw on knowledge that overlaps with the knowledge they draw on when reading, including general knowledge (which includes ideas used for writing and knowledge used to comprehend text), meta-knowledge (which includes purposes and functions of text used to create written messages and interpret what is read), pragmatic knowledge (which includes text features, words, syntax and usage used to construct text as well as decode words as well as comprehend text), and procedural knowledge (which is used to set goals, access information, summarize, visualize, and analyze when writing or reading). Scientific studies support these connections demonstrating that teaching writing skills and processes improves reading, teaching reading skills and processes improves writing, and teaching the two together enhances writing and reading. Consequently, a strong literacy program connects writing and reading instruction (Graham, 2019; Harris et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024).

9. Create a Positive, Supportive Writing Community

A common theme that emerged in the meta-synthesis examining the instructional practices of exceptional literacy teachers is they know their students well, create a safe, pleasant and motivating environment for learning to write. This includes showing students they enjoy writing and teaching it (including teachers writing and sharing their writing and how they overcome obstacles, and so on), making students' writing visible by displaying it throughout the classroom, and building a positive classroom writing environment. In addition, these teachers use asset-based approaches that acknowledge students' diverse backgrounds and experiences (e.g., Dunham & Oti, 2025), adapt writing assignments and instruction to meet students where they are, set high but realistic writing goals, and encourage students to take ownership of their actions and writing (Graham & Perin, 2007).



Concluding Comment

It might be tempting to implement just some of recommendations presented here in the hope that that will be all that is needed. We believe this would be a mistake. A thriving writing program should be based on all nine recommendations.

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