



Building Effective Writing Skills in K-5

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Introduction

Elementary school children commonly rely on content generation as their single composing process when learning to write. They generate text by choosing a relevant idea for their topic, writing it down, and using each preceding idea to stimulate the next one. As they reach the upper elementary grades, children may begin to write text by pattern, using a simple organizing strategy as they write to consider what goes first, second, and so forth. Too often, little effort is directed at evaluating or reworking the ideas generated or considering the needs of the reader, the organization of text, or the constraints imposed by the topic.

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The resulting paper is often a list of topic-related ideas, rather than a coherent examination of the writing topic. While such knowledge-telling approaches to writing may suffice for composing a note to a friend or describing a personal experience, they are not effective for many of the school-related writing tasks students are now asked to undertake, such as defending an opinion, writing an explanation, or creating a story.

It is easy to understand why young writers use knowledge-telling approaches. Even the seemingly simple process of putting words on paper can be demanding for elementary grade students. Their handwriting is slow, and they do not know how to correctly spell many words. On top of this, it takes effort to transform ideas into sentences. Highly-demanding processes like planning, monitoring, evaluating, and revising are beyond their capacity.

As teachers, our goal is to help transition young writers from using knowledge-telling approaches to becoming thoughtful writers who plan, think carefully about purpose and audience, monitor and evaluate what is written, and adjust as needed. Just as importantly, we want to foster a love of writing that turns a child's initial infatuation with it into a life-long love affair. So, how do we make this happen? What are the special ingredients?

The answer involves four concepts captured by the words: **Create, Support, Teach, and Connect.**

Create

To create an effective writing program, we must establish a writing environment in which young, developing writers can flourish and grow. In such an environment, children have ample opportunities to write; because if students in the elementary grades are to grow as writers, they must write.

There is no magic number for how many minutes or hours children should write each day, but we recommend that children in the elementary grades spend *at least* 30 minutes per day writing (and the same amount of time being taught to write). Simply increasing how much time students spend writing by 15 minutes, three times a week can have positive effects. For the average child, this 15-minute increase results in a 12-percentile point jump in writing quality. This positive impact extends beyond writing, as the average student who writes more can make a 14-percentile point jump on standardized measures of reading comprehension. Both writing and reading improve!

What children write matters as much as how often they write. Children need to write for real purposes and for many different audiences. As they begin new writing assignments, they should first identify why they are writing and for whom. They should write short pieces and longer pieces, learning how to use writing to accomplish specific goals. They should engage in a variety of different types of writing, including writing to inform, learn, persuade, entertain, communicate, chronicle, and contemplate.

How children grow and what they think about writing depends greatly on the environment in which they learn to write. An average child working in a pleasant and motivating writing environment, such as Writing Workshop, can make a 16-percentile point jump in writing quality.

Teachers who create classrooms that are supportive of writing tend to

- Foster a stimulating mood during writing time
- Communicate their excitement and demonstrate to students that they enjoy writing and teaching about writing
- Encourage students to try hard, believe what they are learning will help them be better writers, and attribute success to effort
- Make students' writing visible by asking them to share it with others, displaying it on the wall, and/or publishing it in anthologies, books, and other classroom collections
- Build routines that encourage students to plan, draft, revise, and edit their texts
- Develop classroom practices that allow students to share their writing in progress and completed papers with peers
- Promote positive interactions among students as they help each other plan, draft, and revise their papers
- Set high but realistic goals for their students' writing, and encourage them to exceed previous efforts and achievements

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- Offer personalized assistance and feedback as well as brief instructional lessons as needed
 - Adapt writing assignments and instruction that connect with their students' interests and needs
 - Allow students to modify some writing assignments to meet their interests
 - Keep students engaged by involving them in thoughtful activities (e.g., discussing ideas for their papers) versus less thoughtful activities (e.g., completing a worksheet)
 - Encourage students to act in a self-regulated fashion, doing as much as they can on their own (e.g., provide a hint on how to spell a word versus spelling it for the student)

Support

Children are more likely to enjoy writing and produce their best writing when their teacher supports their efforts. They especially need to feel supported as they work through the demanding processes of planning, gathering, and organizing possible writing ideas, evaluating these ideas and the resulting text, and making revisions.

Positive teacher support will:

- **Provide students with specific goals**
Too often, children are asked to complete vague or poorly defined writing tasks. Setting goals helps to define the task. For example, if students are asked to defend an opinion in their paper, the goal might be to specifically state what they believe and provide at least two reasons to support their opinions, providing an explanation for each reason. Similarly, if you want students to add new information to a piece, give them a goal to add three new ideas. Students who are given goals show a 28-percentile point jump in writing quality for an average writer.
- **Engage students in activities prior to writing to help them gather and organize possible ideas for their writing**
This includes asking students to brainstorm what they know about the writing topic, locating possible information by reading pertinent text, or holding a class discussion on the topic. Graphic organizers or semantic webs can be used to help them organize these ideas. Teachers can also lead class activities designed to help students think about ideas and how they connect. Engaging students prior to writing can result in a 21-percentile point jump in writing quality for an average writer.
- **Provide students with feedback as they write**
This may mean providing feedback on their topic choices, plans for writing the text, or texts produced so far. Feedback should always include positive comments on a student's work, and constructive comments should be limited to no more than three points at any time (and less in some instances). Control must not be taken away from the student. In our experience, feedback works best when it involves questions, such as, "What were you trying to say here?" and hints like, "How can you expand on this idea?" Students who receive feedback show a 16-percentile point jump in writing quality.

Students can also support each other as they write. This works best when teachers provide students with specific instructions on what they are to do, model that behavior, and provide practice in carrying out collaborative processes. This will greatly increase the likelihood that peer assistance is a successful enterprise. It is also important to think carefully about who works with whom.

Ask students to work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their papers.

Provide “help sheets” to guide students through these processes, and be sure to provide students with practice in using them. Help sheets should include guiding prompts and questions for revision, such as:

- “Are there any places where what is said is unclear?”
- “Is there any place where more detail might be helpful for the reader?”
- “Do sentences have capital letters and punctuation at the end?”

Encouraging students to work together on their writing assignments has shown to result in a 3-percentile point increase in writing quality for an average writer.

Teach

To advance as writers, children must acquire a variety of writing skills, strategies, and knowledge. So, how can you know what students need to learn the most? These four key areas are critical for helping young writers improve:

1. Spelling and Handwriting

Students need to master basic foundational skills involving handwriting and spelling. Students should be able to execute these skills correctly and with automaticity. Achieving such mastery is important for developing writers, as having to think about handwriting and spelling while composing interferes with other writing processes. Wondering how to spell a word while writing, for example, can lead a child to forget ideas or plans held in working memory. Readers are also more negative about ideas they encounter in text if a paper is hard to read due to legibility issues or misspelled words. While instruction in handwriting is mostly limited to the primary grades, spelling instruction occurs throughout the elementary school years.

2. Sentence Structure

Students need to become facile in constructing sentences that convey their intended ideas in a grammatically correct fashion. Sentence construction is a very demanding task, requiring considerable energy and effort. While sentence construction will never become an automatic, thoughtless process, students should be comfortable enough to write increasingly complex sentences.

3. Planning, Revising, and Editing

Students must learn how to apply a variety of planning, revising, and editing strategies to create and improve what they write. As noted earlier, young children tend to minimize the use of these strategies. While it is important to encourage students to engage in the processes of planning, drafting, revising, and editing, this is not enough. Students need specific strategies for carrying out each of these processes.

4. Understanding Text Structure

Students should become familiar with characteristics of different types of text. It is especially important that they learn how different types of text are crafted. This includes gaining knowledge of the attributes and building blocks of each of type of text they are asked to write. For instance, a simple persuasive text includes a premise, arguments to support this premise, explanations to support each argument, and a concluding statement. Understanding the structure of persuasive text can help a young writer decide what needs to be said and how it will be said.

The most effective way to ensure that students acquire these writing skills, strategies, and knowledge is to

- **Teach handwriting and spelling to your students.** This will improve their handwriting legibility and fluency as well as their spelling and reading skills. More importantly, it will increase the overall quality of their writing. Students who are taught handwriting and spelling show a 21-point percentile jump in writing quality for an average writer.
- **Teach students how to construct more sophisticated sentences.** Students with this skill achieve a 21-point percentile jump in writing quality for an average writer. Start by modeling how to combine two or more smaller sentences into a more complex one. Then ask students to practice combining similar types of sentences and applying their newly learned skill in their own writing.
- **Teach students strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and editing text.** Students who do this jump 35 percentile points in writing quality for an average writer. Young writers must learn how to employ strategies to help them implement and evaluate each of the processes involved in writing. Planning, for example, requires general strategies like brainstorming ideas in advance of writing, or more genre-specific strategies such as generating ideas for the basic parts of a story before drafting begins. Strategy instruction involves describing the strategy and its purpose, modeling how to use it, and providing practice in how to apply it.
- **Teach your students the basic building blocks of specific types of writing.** Understanding building blocks increases writing quality by 22 percentile points for an average writer. One way to do this is through a combination of reading and writing. Stories, for example, have common elements, including characters' goals (e.g., the prince plans to rescue the princess), even if these elements are not explicitly stated. To help students learn about these elements, you can first describe or define them, read stories with your students to locate examples of them, and discuss how the author presents and uses them. Ask students to apply a similar approach when writing their own stories.

Connect

Writing should not occur just during writing time, but should connect to student experiences throughout the school day and at home as well. Teachers can help students make this connection by asking them to write about material they are reading or content that they have presented in class. This provides students with additional opportunities to write for real purposes. Even more importantly, it enhances their learning. When children write about material they are reading, an average student's comprehension of the text jumps by 24 percentile points. While not as dramatic, an average student writing about material presented in class will experience a jump of 9 percentile points on measures assessing the learning of said content.

When children write about material they are reading, an average student's comprehension of the text jumps by 24 percentile points.

Why do extended writing assignments make such a difference in your students' understanding and learning? Writing about material read or information presented in class forces students to decide which ideas are most important. Some types of writing, like creating a summary, can also prompt students to consider how ideas relate to each other. The permanence of writing makes it possible for your students to review, reexamine, critique, and even construct new understandings of ideas after they commit them to paper. When your students put ideas into their own written words, it helps them think more carefully about what the ideas mean.

Writing activities that promote learning can range from writing short answers to questions to taking notes to summarizing information read or presented in class. Students may also be asked to explain how information can be applied or to take a position about a controversial aspect of the targeted information and defend it in their writing.

Summary

The four special ingredients that give students the best start possible start when learning to write—**Create, Support, Teach, and Connect**—are each a necessary part of the process, yet none are sufficient on their own. It is not enough to **create** a writing environment where students can flourish and grow if you do not also **support** them as they write; **teach** them the skills, strategies, and knowledge needed to write effectively; and **connect** writing to their reading and learning. To help young learners become passionate, involved writers, we must use all the tools in our toolbox. Our students deserve nothing less.

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