
Writing from Sources

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Introduction

Teaching students to write well requires new approaches to instruction. Gone are the days in which teachers can simply assign students a writing prompt and then provide them with feedback based on their responses. Now we have to teach writing, not just assign it. Many educators have always known this, but the new generation of standards demand it. It seems that writing and writing instruction are receiving renewed attention because, as writing professor Leaf Fearn wrote in a personal communication, “Every writer can read, but not every reader can write.”

Graham and Harris (2014, p. 19) note that teaching writing includes four basic writing skills:

1. Learning to write for multiple purposes
2. Producing and publishing well-organized text that is appropriate to the task and purpose by planning, revising, editing, and collaborating with others
3. Using writing to recall, organize, analyze, interpret, and build knowledge about a topic or materials read
4. Applying both extended and shorter writing to facilitate learning of content material

Writing effectively and thoughtfully on substantive topics in the genres of opinion/argument, informative/expository, and narrative are linked directly to college and career readiness (Patterson, 2013).

Each of these skills requires instruction and practice. As Shanahan notes (2014, p. 5) “In many ways, the new writing standards aren’t that different from the old ones,” and continues, “That is not to say there are no changes. Perhaps the biggest change in writing goals is that they have been more closely linked to reading.”

There are different ways in which writing is linked to reading. The most direct is when students write about a selection or the topic of a selection. In primary grades, the emphasis on writing about reading is implied, rather than directly required.

In the upper grades, the expectation that students write from the sources they've read is clear. Throughout the grades, students should write their own narrative selections using the texts they read as a model while applying specific genre features from those texts. In these cases, the texts students read serve to mentor them as writers.

To be successful in school and beyond, students must learn to write using the information they have gleaned from text they have read. This requires that students learn to find information, understand that information, and be able to use that information to support the topic of their writing. In other words, writing is more complex than simply teaching students to locate details in the text. They have to learn to strategically use the information they have found.

Instruction That Builds Students' Ability to Locate and Use Evidence

Fisher and Frey (2014) proposed a model for helping students learn to locate and use evidence in their writing. Each of the phases in this model build sequentially yet are recursive in that earlier components may need to be repeated with new texts. For example, students discussing the evidence from a text may want to go back and read the text more closely. Similarly, when students begin to write from the sources, they may want to revisit their discussions and annotations. For ease in explanation, these steps are presented in a linear fashion, but in practice they can be applied cyclically.

Frame the investigation

The process starts with framing the investigation. That may mean that students are exploring a theme or topic and will produce an explanatory piece of text. For example, third graders may be learning about life cycles. Their reading and writing allow them to learn more about this topic. As evidence of their learning, they write explanatory text in response to a writing prompt, but not before engaging in a number of other learning activities.

Alternatively, framing the investigation may mean that students are exploring an essential question and will be producing original text in which they support their opinion with evidence. For example, a grade 5 class examining the question, "Does equality mean being treated the same?" would read widely on this topic from texts that present divergent views. Students would then choose what view they agreed with and provide evidence for their opinion. Regardless of the source of text, writing begins with the understanding that there is something to learn from the text, which is called the investigation.

Read complex texts closely

Some texts deserve to be read more deeply and carefully (and some do not). Reading closely is a habit that develops over time. Teachers can engage students in close reading lessons that facilitate this habit. Close reading begins with text selection. The text should be appropriately complex. Text complexity is more than the quantitative values. An appropriately complex text also involves the analysis of the qualitative measures within the text, such as density and complexity, levels of meaning, structure and organization, language conventions and clarity, and knowledge demands. Text used for

close reading student lessons should also be short. How short has been debated, but the text should be short enough for students to read and reread. That does not mean only stand-alone texts are used, but rather that strategic selections of longer text have been identified.

Close reading also involves rereading. Initial discussions of the text should focus students on the literal level to ensure that they understand the meaning of the text. As students demonstrate this level of understanding, text-dependent questions should be focused on the structure of the text, or how the text works. Over time, the conversation moves to more inferential understanding, with students exploring the meaning of the text.

Complex texts are not easily understood in terms of meaning. Instruction should systematically move students from the literal level, to the structural level, to the inferential level to help them learn from the text, rather than expecting to be told what the text means (Fisher, Frey, Anderson, & Thayre, 2015).

Given that students are expected to use the text later in their discussion and writing, it's helpful for them to annotate the text as they read (Fisher & Frey, 2012). There are any number of annotation systems that can be used to guide students' habit building.

At the elementary level, three foundational annotation skills seem to be most effective:

- **Underline central ideas.** This requires students to identify key information in the text.
- **Circle words or phrases that are confusing or unclear.** This requires that students monitor their understanding of text and allows teachers to notice areas of confusion.
- **Create margin notes.** This requires that students summarize and synthesize their understanding in phrases rather than sentences as they read.

Discuss texts using evidence

Close reading involves student-to-student discussions about the text. Often, their first use of evidence from the text will occur during these collaborative conversations. As others (e.g., Tierney & Shanahan, 1991) have noted, there is a strong relationship between reading and writing. That relationship can be strengthened when students have the opportunity to discuss their ideas from the text before being asked to write about the text. In fact, the speaking and listening standards provide the often-missing link between reading and writing. Students will more easily learn to write from sources when they have opportunities to discuss their ideas.

Teaching students to discuss complex text requires attention and time. Students need to learn the art of argumentation. In this type of conversation, students learn to make a claim, support their claim with evidence, agree and disagree, offer counterclaims, and reach consensus.

Teachers often use sentence frames to guide students' conversations along this sequence. For example, as part of their discussion of a text about the lifecycle of the butterfly, a third-grade student said, "The butterfly lifecycle is mainly like the spider's because they both start as eggs." Another student commented, "I agree with you because they both have baby and adult stages." Another said,

“I disagree with you because the butterfly comes from a caterpillar and has to change. Spiders grow bigger, but they don’t really change.” The students in this class are exploring the information they have found and are trying to make sense of it before they write. Their discussions are clarifying in nature and include the elements of good opinion and argument writing. They will be able to take the information they have gathered and combine it with the thinking they have developed.

Write from sources using knowledge gained

Armed with information from excellent sources and an understanding of the task, students are ready to write from the sources they have read. However, this does require the development of a writing prompt. The more detail included in the prompt, the more likely students are to respond correctly. Teachers should provide their own composing processes using evidence from the texts they have read so that students can model the thinking processes used by the teacher to compose text.

A Good Draft

This system should result in students producing reasonably good drafts. And drafts can improve, mainly with feedback from peers and teachers. Students need to write a draft in order to edit and rewrite. It also means that they need clear feedback and examples of what good writing looks like. It’s hard to produce something outstanding if you don’t know what constitutes good writing. In part, this is addressed as students closely read complex texts. As they do so, they learn about the convention’s authors use in different disciplines. Writing from sources requires that students first read and understand the source. Students should also develop systems for collecting evidence, discussing the evidence, and then using that evidence. As students develop these habits, they will develop a writerly life that allows them to share their thinking with others.

References

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