

School-Wide Strategies for Managing... WRITING

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The act of writing contains its own inner tensions. Writers must abide by a host of rules that govern the mechanics and conventions of writing yet are also expected—within the constraints of those rules-- to formulate original, even creative, thoughts. It is no wonder that many students find writing to be a baffling exercise and have little sense of how to break larger writing assignments into predictable, achievable subtasks. But of course writing can be taught and writing can be mastered. The best writing instruction places the process of written expression on a timeline: Good writers first plan their writing. Then they write. Once a draft has been created, good writers review and revise their work. While the stages of the writing process are generally sequential, good writers also find themselves jumping frequently between these stages (for example, collecting additional notes and writing new sections of a paper as part of the revision process). Depending upon their stage of development as writers, struggling student writers may benefit from the following strategies:

Content: Memorize a Story Grammar Checklist (*Reid & Lienemann, 2006*). Students write lengthier stories that include greater detail when they use a memorized strategy to judge their writing-in-progress. These young writers are taught a simple mnemonic device with 7 elements: 'WWW, What=2, How = 2'. This mnemonic translates into a story grammar checklist: WHO the main character is; WHERE the story takes place; WHEN the story occurs; WHAT the main character(s) do or plan to do; WHAT happens next; HOW the story concludes; and HOW the character(s) feel about their experiences. Students are taught this strategy through teacher demonstration, discussion, teacher modeling; and student use of the strategy with gradually fading teacher support. When students use the 'WWW, What=2, How = 2' tactic independently, they may still need occasional prompting to use it in their writing. NOTE: Teachers can apply this intervention idea to any genre of writing (e.g., persuasive essay), distilling its essential elements into a similar short, easily memorized checklist to teach to students.

Fluency: Have Students Write Every Day (*Graham, Harris & Larsen, 2001*). Short daily writing assignments can build student writing fluency and make writing a more motivating activity. For struggling writers, formal writing can feel much like a foreign language, with its own set of obscure grammatical rules and intimidating vocabulary. Just as people learn another language more quickly and gain confidence when they use it frequently, however, poor writers gradually develop into better writers when they are prompted to write daily—and receive rapid feedback and encouragement about that writing. The teacher can encourage daily writing by giving short writing assignments, allowing time for students to journal about their learning activities, requiring that they correspond daily with pen pals via email, or even posting a question on the board as a bell-ringer activity that students can respond to in writing for extra credit. Short daily writing tasks have the potential to lower students' aversion to writing and boost their confidence in using the written word.

Fluency: Self-Monitor and Graph Results to Increase Writing Fluency (*Rathvon, 1999*). Students gain motivation to write through daily monitoring and charting of their own and classwide rates of writing fluency. At least several times per week, assign your students timed periods of 'freewriting' when they write in their personal journals. Freewriting periods all the same amount of time each day. After each freewriting period, direct each student to count up the number of words he or she has written in the daily journal entry (whether spelled correctly or not). Next, tell students to record their personal writing-fluency score in their journal and also chart the score on their own time-series graph for visual feedback. Then collect the day's writing-fluency scores of all students in the class, sum those scores, and chart the results on a large time-series graph posted at the front of the room. At the start of each week, calculate that week's goal of increasing total class words written by taking last week's score and increasing by five percent. At the end of each week, review the class score and praise students if they have shown good effort.

Instruction: Essentials of Good Teaching Benefit Struggling Writers (*Gersten, Baker, & Edwards, 1999*). Teachers are most successful in reaching students with writing delays when their instruction emphasizes the full writing process, provides strategy sheets, offers lots of models of good writing, and gives students

timely editorial feedback. Good instructors build their written expression lessons around the 3 stages of writing—planning, writing, and revision—and make those stages clear and explicit. Skilled instructors also provide students with 'think sheets' that outline step-by-step strategies for tackle the different phases of a writing assignment (e.g., taking concise notes from research material; building an outline; proofreading a draft). Students become stronger writers when exposed to different kinds of expressive text, such as persuasive, narrative, and expository writing. Teachers can make students more confident and self-sufficient as writers when they give them access to plentiful examples of good prose models that the student can review when completing a writing assignment. Finally, strong writing teachers provide supportive and timely feedback to students about their writing. When teachers or classmates offer writing feedback to the student, they are honest but also maintain an encouraging tone.

Motivation: Stimulate Interest With an Autobiography Assignment (*Bos & Vaughn, 2002*). Assigning the class to write their own autobiographies can motivate hard-to-reach students who seem uninterested in most writing assignments. Have students read a series of autobiographies of people who interest them. Discuss these biographies with the class. Then assign students to write their own autobiographies. (With the class, create a short questionnaire that students can use to interview their parents and other family members to collect information about their past.) Allow students to read their finished autobiographies for the class.

Organization: Build an Outline by Talking Through the Topic (*The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d./ 23 December 2006*). Students who struggle to organize their notes into a coherent outline can tell others what they know about the topic—and then capture the informal logical structure of that conversation to create a working outline. The student studies notes from the topic and describes what he or she knows about the topic and its significance to a listener. (The student may want to audio-record this conversation for later playback.) After the conversation, the student jots down an outline from memory to capture the structure and main ideas of the discussion. This outline 'kernel' can then be expanded and refined into the framework for a paper.

Organization: 'Reverse Outline' the Draft (*The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d./ 23 December 2006*). Students can improve the internal flow of their compositions through 'reverse outlining'. The student writes a draft of the composition. Next, the student reads through the draft, jotting notes in the margins that signify the main idea of each paragraph or section. Then the student organizes the margin notes into an outline to reveal the organizational structure of the paper. This 'reverse outline' allows the student to note whether sections of the draft are repetitious, are out of order, or do not logically connect with one another.

Planning: Brainstorm to Break the 'Idea' Logjam (*The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d./ 28 December 2006*). Brainstorming is a time-tested method that can help students to generate motivating topics for writing assignments and uncover new ideas to expand and improve their compositions. Here are four brainstorming strategies to teach to students: **FREEWRITING**: The student sets a time limit (e.g., 15 minutes) or length limit (e.g., one hand-written page) and spontaneously writes until the limit is reached. The writer does not judge the writing but simply writes as rapidly as possible, capturing any thought that comes to mind on the topic. Later, the student reviews the freewriting to pick out any ideas, terms, or phrasing that might be incorporated into the writing assignment. **LISTING**: The student selects a topic based on an idea or key term related to the writing assignment. The writer then rapidly brainstorms a list of any items that might possibly relate to the topic. Finally, the writer reviews the list to select items that might be useful in the assigned composition or trigger additional writing ideas. **SIMILES**: The student selects a series of key terms or concepts linked to the writing assignment. The student brainstorms, using the framework of a simile: " 1 is like 2 ." The student plugs a key term into the first blank and then generates as many similes as possible (e.g., "A SHIP is like a CITY ON THE SEA."). **REFERENCES**: The student jots down key ideas or terms from the writing assignment. He or she then browses through various reference works (dictionaries, encyclopedias, specialized reference works on specific subjects) looking randomly for entries that trigger useful ideas. (Writers might try a variation of this strategy by typing assignment-related search terms into GOOGLE or another online search engine.)

Proofreading: Teach A Memory Strategy (*Bos & Vaughn, 2002*). When students regularly use a simple, portable, easily memorized plan for proofreading, the quality of their writing can improve significantly.

Create a poster to be put up in the classroom summarizing the SCOPE proofreading elements: (1) SPELLING: Are my words spelled correctly; (2) CAPITALIZATION: Have I capitalized all appropriate words, including first words of sentences, proper nouns, and proper names?; (3) ORDER of words: Is my word order (syntax) correct?; (4) PUNCTUATION: Did I use end punctuation and other punctuation marks appropriately? (5) EXPRESSION of complete thoughts: Do all of my sentences contain a noun and verb to convey a complete thought? Review the SCOPE proofreading steps by copying a first-draft writing sample onto an overhead and evaluating the sample with the class using each item from the SCOPE poster. Then direct students to pair off and together evaluate their own writing samples using SCOPE. When students appear to understand the use of the SCOPE plan, require that they use this strategy to proofread all written assignments before turning them in.

Proofreading: Use Selective Proofreading With Highlighting of Errors (*Frus, n.d./18 November 2006*). To prevent struggling writers from becoming overwhelmed by teacher proofreading corrections, focus on only 1 or 2 proofreading areas when correcting a writing assignment. Create a student 'writing skills checklist' that inventories key writing competencies (e.g., grammar/syntax, spelling, vocabulary, etc.). For each writing assignment, announce to students that you will grade the assignment for overall content but will make proofreading corrections on only 1-2 areas chosen from the writing skills checklist. (Select different proofreading targets for each assignment matched to common writing weaknesses in your classroom.) Also, to prevent cluttering the student's paper with potentially discouraging teacher comments and editing marks, underline problems in the student's text with a highlighter and number the highlighted errors sequentially at the left margin of the student paper. Then (if necessary) write teacher comments on a separate feedback sheet to explain the writing errors. (Identify each comment with the matching error-number from the left margin of the student's worksheet.) With fewer proofreading comments, the student can better attend to the teacher feedback. Also, even a heavily edited student assignment looks neat and tidy when teachers use the highlighting/numbering technique—preventing students from becoming disheartened at the site of an assignment scribbled over with corrective comments.

Spelling: Leverage the Power of Memory Through Cover-Copy-Compare (*Murphy, Hern, Williams, & McLaughlin, 1990*). Students increase their spelling knowledge by copying a spelling word from a correct model and then recopying the same word from memory. Give students a list of 10-20 spelling words, an index card, and a blank sheet of paper. For each word on the spelling list, the student (1) copies the spelling list item onto a sheet of paper, (2) covers the newly copied word with the index card, (3) writes the spelling word again on the sheet (spelling it from memory), and (4) uncovers the copied word and checks to ensure that the word copied from memory is spelled correctly. If that word is spelled incorrectly, the student repeats the sequence above until the word copied from memory is spelled correctly--then moves to the next word on the spelling list.

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