

Our Approach to Teaching Writing

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Being a Writer, Collaborative Literacy, Thought Leadership

We all light up when we see small children express themselves spontaneously, through a drawing, a song, a somersault, a giggle, or a heartfelt sigh. And we all admire the great writers whose texts impart powerful insights, make the bestseller lists, or morph into movies that move us.

What happens in between?

School.

Not every student will become a renowned author, of course—though some most certainly will. But all of our students can and should come to see themselves as writers, experience a love of writing, and grow in their ability to write clearly, creatively, and purposefully.

So exactly how do we nurture that original, expressive spark we celebrate in the very young, while steadily feeding and guiding the flame? How do we develop writers who are able to confidently and effectively communicate through written language, so that they can succeed in school and beyond?

Best Practices in Writing Instruction

According to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) at the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, a successful writing program must:

- Provide time to write daily
- Teach the writing process and have students apply it for a variety of purposes
- Help students develop fluency with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and typing and word-processing
- Create an engaged community of writers¹

The “Strategy Guide for Implementing the Writing Process” published by the International Literacy Association (ILA) echoes IES’s emphasis on teaching the writing process, adding that the process is further enhanced when students coach each other. The ILA guide points out that the writing process empowers students to write in several genres, encourages creativity, incorporates writing conventions, and connects writing to state writing standards. These attributes show up in assessment, as well. As the guide notes, “studies show that students who learn the writing process score better on state writing tests than those who receive only specific instruction in the skills assessed on the test.”²



From Writing Process to Writing Workshop

The writing process approach originated in the seminal work of Donald Graves³ and has been developed into a *writing workshop* model by those following in his footsteps. Thus it's no surprise that contemporary leaders in the field of writing instruction encourage educators to follow essentially the same "best practice" guidelines as those recommended by organizations such as IES and ILA.

Regie Routman advocates that students "write daily, for a sustained time, for authentic audiences and purposes."⁴ Lucy Calkins and her colleagues at the Teachers' College Reading and Writing Project have done an enormous amount to refine Graves' initial writing process approach. Jennifer Serravallo includes, among her ten goals for writing, those of helping students learn conventions of spelling, letter formation, grammar, and punctuation, and that of supporting collaboration and partnership in the writing process.⁵ Ralph Fletcher and Joann Portalupi's classic *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide* discusses the importance of establishing an atmosphere of respect and support in which students exercise choice and are willing to take risks.⁶

Proponents of the writing workshop model advocate for additional practices that operate in harmony with the IES guidelines. These include the use of mentor texts to inspire and motivate students, teacher modeling at various stages of the writing process, one-on-one writing conferences with students, and careful formative and summative assessment of students' development as writers.

Our Approach to Teaching Writing

Following Graves' foundational work, our approach to writing instruction is based on the writing workshop⁷ and incorporates the best practices recommended by IES and ILA. We also stay true to Collaborative Classroom's commitment to educating the whole child, by which we mean addressing students' social-emotional, ethical, and academic development in a deeply integrated way.

In classrooms using our work, teachers provide daily opportunities to write in the context of safe, caring classrooms. They teach and model the writing process from first inspiration to the fixing of punctuation, and include a variety of genres, use mentor texts, and assess student development.

Our approach empowers students and gives them ownership of their writing. They exercise meaningful choice of writing topics and write for authentic purposes. All instruction takes place within the classroom writing community, in which every student is a valued and supported member. Students regularly publish their finished work and share it with their community.

Our approach also supports instructional equity in the teaching of writing by providing a year-long program of grade-specific, fully articulated lessons, allowing teachers, with minimal preparation, to provide robust, consistent, carefully paced K–6 instruction that is grounded in Collaborative Classroom’s four decades of research and practice.

These lessons incorporate highly engaging mentor texts selected to exemplify specific writing strategies and genres, and to both mirror students’ diverse backgrounds and provide windows into the worlds of others.⁸ The accompanying assessment and conferring tools have been assiduously designed to track students’ development, provide data needed to respond in real time to their evolving needs, and help teachers arrive at grades.

How Our Writing Instruction Unfolds

In our approach to writing instruction, students learn at an appropriate developmental pace. In grades K and 1 of our writing curriculum, *Being a Writer*, our youngest students engage in guided writing practice and shared writing in order to learn the basic mechanics and skills of writing, even as they exercise choice and voice through authentic writing. Students in grades K, 1, and the beginning of 2 also use drawing to help express their ideas and as a segue to writing. At these grades, lessons are taught sequentially throughout the year. Our grade K instruction features three days of fully articulated instruction, while grades 1 and 2 feature four days, with suggestions provided for instruction on the additional weekdays.

Students in grades 3–6 receive five days a week of fully articulated instruction with *Being a Writer*. A beginning-of-year unit allows them to try their hand at a range of genres. The emphasis in that unit is on enjoyment and exploration, because we know that students must love to write in order to persevere in the work of getting it right. The second unit introduces students to the remaining stages of the writing process: selecting a draft, revising it, proofreading it for publication, and presenting the final piece from the Author’s Chair. Subsequent units, taught in any order, employ that process as they address genres such as narrative and expository nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and opinion writing.

Skills and conventions in grades 1–6 are taught during the proofreading phase; additional support is provided through flexible, modular skill practice teaching and practice guides. For all grades, the year ends with a unit that helps the students reflect on their growth as writers.

While the writing process itself has been shown to help students prepare for standardized tests, we also offer detailed, grade-specific guides that help students prepare for writing performance tasks and the unique demands of standards-based writing assessments in grades 3–6. Each guide provides explicit instruction toward this goal and can be used between genre units.

The integration of academic and social-emotional learning is fundamental to our pedagogy, and every lesson across grades K–6 braids these strands together through the use of cooperative structures such as “Turn to Your Partner” and “Think, Pair, Share.” These structures provide consistent opportunities for students to practice SEL skills and competencies as they work with partners to provide constructive feedback on one another’s writing. In addition, lesson facilitation tips for teachers are embedded in every lesson, allowing for in-the-moment professional learning and deepening of teachers’ craft.

Writing well is not easy. No worthy task is, whether you're climbing a mountain, playing the drums, or writing code. The teaching of writing requires a careful balancing of freedom and discipline, so that students become equally willing to take creative risks and attend to the nuances of writerly craft. Collaborative Classroom's approach to teaching writing weaves together the many threads of good writing instruction in a seamless and effective way. This allows students to develop their innate capacity for powerful self-expression within a safe, caring environment, and allows teachers to focus on their calling: the teaching of students.

Endnotes:

¹Graham, S., Bollinger, A., Booth Olson, C., D'Aoust, C., MacArthur, C., McCutchen, D., & Olinghouse, N. (2012). *Teaching elementary school students to be effective writers: A practice guide* (NCEE 2012-4058). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications_reviews.aspx#pubsearch

²"Strategy Guide: Implementing the Writing Process," International Literacy Association, <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/implementing-writing-process-30386.html>

³Graves, Donald H., "All Children Can Write," *Learning Disabilities Focus* 1, no. 1 (1985): 36-43. <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6204/>

⁴Regie Routman, "Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success," *Scholastic Reader Leader* (2014), http://www.regieroutman.org/files/3814/0349/5918/Routman_Reader_Leader_May_2014.pdf

⁵Jennifer Serravallo, *The Writing Strategies Book: Your Everything Guide to Developing Skilled Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2017), ix-x.

⁶Ralph Fletcher and Joann Portalupi, *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001), 24-26.

⁷The workshop approach accords perfectly with Collaborative Classroom's grounding in constructivist pedagogy. This pedagogy was first articulated by psychologist Jean Piaget, who observed that children construct their own knowledge, and argued that therefore our job as educators is to place before them the tools they need to do that construction at each phase in their development, and a safe environment in which to do it.

⁸Mariana Souto-Manning et al., eds., *No More Culturally Irrelevant Teaching*, in *Not This But That* series, ed. Ellin Oliver Keene and Nell K. Duke (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2018), 8-9.