

BLOG

Our Approach to Evidence-Based Writing Instruction

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By [Sarah Rosenthal](#) & [Lisa Borah-Geller](#) | Categories: [Writing](#)

How does our [Being a Writer](#) program weave together the many threads of evidence-based writing instruction? In this blog post, veteran educators and Collaborative Classroom curriculum developers Sarah Rosenthal and Lisa Borah-Geller unpack our research-aligned approach to teaching writing in grades K–5.

Introduction: Developing Young Writers

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 and grow in their ability to write clearly, creatively, and purposefully.

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So 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?

Evidence-Based Practices

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 work of numerous experts in the field of writing instruction underscores the importance of the guidelines recommended by IES. Research has demonstrated that “increasing the amount of time students spend writing enhanced the quality of their text” and that “highly effective teachers asked students to write often and for a variety of purposes.”²

Research also indicates that students need authentic opportunities (such as those provided by the writing-process approach) to use grammar, usage, and mechanics skills to improve their writing.³ Studies have made clear that spelling and handwriting need to be taught explicitly and become automatic and fluent so students can focus on conveying meaning through writing.⁴

Studies have also indicated that students who experience a sense of community at school perform better academically, along with a host of other benefits.⁵



Research also supports a number of additional practices that operate in harmony with the IES guidelines. These include providing access to strong mentor texts, modeling and guiding students through the writing process, and providing feedback to students on their writing from both teachers and peers.^{6, 7, 8, 9} Teacher feedback not only benefits students, but serves as a type of formative assessment that helps teachers adjust classroom instruction to target student needs.¹⁰

Writing about reading has been shown to be particularly beneficial, and students who write in response to texts usually improve their reading and writing skills and their content knowledge.¹¹ In addition, the role of culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is crucial in helping create an inclusive learning environment that fosters academic engagement and growth for all students.¹²

Rooted in the Evidence; True to Our Mission

The approach to writing instruction in *Being a Writer*, our comprehensive K–5 writing curriculum, is rooted in these evidence-based practices. We also stay true to Collaborative Classroom’s commitment to educating the whole child by blending social development and academic instruction.

Our approach supports teachers with making their classrooms more culturally and linguistically

responsive. Students draw on their own experiences, knowledge, and linguistic backgrounds, 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, providing teachers with robust, consistent, carefully paced K–5 instruction that is grounded in Collaborative Classroom’s more than four decades of research and practice.

These daily lessons incorporate highly engaging mentor texts selected to exemplify genre characteristics, specific writing strategies and organizational structures, and author’s craft. The texts are also chosen for their capacity to both mirror students’ diverse backgrounds and provide windows into the worlds of others.^{13, 14, 15}

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, one that recognizes that younger students need time to learn foundational aspects of writing, while older students can move more quickly into learning about aspects of genre, author’s craft, and the writing process.

Kindergarten and Grade 1

In grades K and 1 of our writing curriculum, our youngest students informally draft, revise, and publish their writing in preparation for learning the full writing process in grade 2. They engage in guided writing practice and shared writing, learning basic mechanics and skills of writing (including letter formation, punctuation, and spacing), as they exercise voice and choice through writing for authentic purposes. In grades K and 1, lessons are taught sequentially throughout the year, beginning with units on building the classroom community, getting ideas, and telling more.

These units are followed in grade K by units on nonfiction, poetry, and opinion writing, and at grade 1 by units on personal narrative, nonfiction, poetry, and opinion writing.

Grade 2 and Beyond: The Complete Writing Process Introduced

The units in grade 2 are also taught sequentially. In the first unit of the year, students generate ideas for writing. In the second unit, they practice writing longer pieces by telling more and adding details to their writing. In the third unit, students are introduced to the remaining stages in the writing process: selecting a draft, revising it, proofreading it for publication, and presenting the final piece from the Author's Chair. Each subsequent unit employs this process as it addresses a specific genre (fiction, nonfiction, letter writing, opinion writing, and poetry).

In grades 3–5, a beginning-of-year unit introduces the first stages of the writing process—generating ideas and drafting—while allowing students to try their hand at a range of genres. The second unit introduces students to the remaining stages of the writing process. Subsequent units—which focus on the genres of personal narrative, expository nonfiction, fiction, opinion writing, and poetry—incorporate the writing process and can be taught in any order.

At all grades, students also have the opportunity to write in response to reading, for example writing about their connections to and opinions of mentor texts and summarizing what they learn about a topic through shared or individual writing.

Incorporating Spelling, Grammar Skills, and Conventions, K–5

In grades K–2, spelling activities, including strategic spelling, are woven into the lessons. At grade K, age-appropriate grammar and the conventions of written English are taught explicitly during the core lessons, and some skills are reinforced in extensions.

Skills and conventions in grades 1–5 are taught throughout each unit in lessons that focus specifically on grammar, usage, and mechanics. In these lessons, the students analyze model sentences from or about mentor texts; then incorporate what they learn by writing shared sentences as a class and their own sentences with a partner.

The skills and conventions taught are reinforced through teacher modeling and class discussions, during individual writing conferences, and, for grades 2–5, throughout the revision and proofreading phases of the writing process.

Teaching Digital Literacy, K–5

To help students develop the digital literacy skills they need to confidently articulate their ideas in an increasingly digital world, technology extensions at grades K–2 offer suggestions for publishing writing digitally.

In grades 3–5, the use of digital tools is embedded into the writing process: students are taught to revise and proofread writing using word processors and conduct online research for informational reports.

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 end-of-year summative writing assessments in grades 3–5. Each guide provides explicit instruction toward this goal and can be used between genre units.

Braiding Together Social Skills and Academics

The integration of social skills development and academics is fundamental to our pedagogy, and many lessons across grades K–5 braid these strands together through the use of cooperative structures such as “Turn to Your Partner” and “Think, Pair, Share.”

Students also develop social skills by explicitly discussing these skills as a class and through consistent opportunities for students to provide feedback on one another’s writing . Facilitation tips provide techniques teachers can use to encourage student voice and autonomy.

At all grades, lessons early in the year emphasize enjoyment and exploration, because we know that students must feel motivated to write in order to persevere in the ever-evolving journey of developing as writers. And at all grades, the year ends with a culminating week of instruction that helps our young writers reflect on their growth.

Helping Students Write and Teachers Teach with Evidence-Based Writing Instruction

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 evidence-based 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.

Learn more about [Being a Writer](#).

[Read an interview with Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, executive director of National Writing Project](#) and a Collaborative Classroom board member, about why the teaching of writing should be on an equal footing with reading instruction.

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