

WRITING FUNDAMENTALS: Foundational Research

Because writing matters for success in school, the community, and the workplace, Schoolwide’s Writing Fundamentals has a central mission to improve student writing by increasing the tools teachers can use to teach writing.

Writing Fundamentals is a teaching resource that helps educators raise the quality of their students’ writing. Writing Fundamentals is a series of Units of Study, each consisting of:

- Anchor/Mentor Texts (5–10)
 - High-quality literature and short texts
- Interactive Read-Aloud Lessons (5)
- Mini-Lessons (15–20)
- Conference Questions
- Appendices
- Lesson Extensions
 - Includes ELL Extensions
- Student Benchmark Pieces
- Authentic Assessments and Scoring Rubrics

Writing Fundamentals provides teachers with the instructional support and resources necessary to teach and explore the qualities of good writing with their student writers, from prewriting to revising and publication.

WRITING PROCESS APPROACH

The process approach for teaching writing was developed in the latter part of the twentieth century, primarily from the work of Donald Graves (1983), Donald Murray (1984), Nancie Atwell (1987), and Lucy Calkins (1983, 1986, 1994). Subsequent research in the United States and New Zealand provides further support for the importance of this methodology to improving the quality of writing content, mechanics, and students’ view of themselves as capable writers (Elley, Barham, Lamb, & Wylie, 1979; Smith & Elley, 1997; and Hillocks, 1986).

One of the major findings from the research about teaching writing through the process approach is that student achievement is higher than when students are instructed through a traditional method (Parson, 1985; Holdzkom, et al., 1982; Hillocks, 1984, 1986; Wesdorp, 1983; Amiran, 1982; Keech & Thomas, 1979; ERIC Clearinghouse, 1984). Moreover, research has shown that emphasizing writing improvement and writing to improve learning in all subject areas is crucial to the success of schools with high achievement, high minority enrollment, and high poverty levels (Reeves, 2004).

The ultimate goal of the writing workshop is to “change how writers compose by helping them employ more sophisticated composing processes” (Graham, 2006; see also Graham & Harris, 1996). The writing workshop process approach is advocated across grade levels in order to induce more sustained and thoughtful writing behaviors. The development of more effective writing pedagogies is attained in a writing workshop by carefully structuring the workshop environment as a pleasant, supportive, and collaborative space. It is designed so that writing assignments serve a real purpose. It is a place where students share their work with each other, where choice and ownership are emphasized, where a predictable classroom routine is established, and where students are encouraged to plan, revise, and edit their papers (Graham, 2006). The process approach to writing is recognized in educational theory and practice.

What is most prevalent in writing process research is how the process approach has not only altered how writing is taught but also the age at which writing instruction is introduced (Berninger & Winn, 2006). Furthermore, research has shown early and continued experience with different genres provides a foundation of knowledge about those genres from which children draw upon when reading, writing, and discussing literature (Pappas, 1991). Research conducted by Duke and Kays (1998) found that exposure to and meaningful opportunities with multiple literacy experiences in their earliest schooling experiences provides students with greater literacy knowledge and dexterity within those genres. Data from research indicates that a few rereadings of a particular book can support children’s use of genre characteristics, and continued exposure most likely contributes to even greater facility with those elements in their literacy lives (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006).

Notably, the process approach for the teaching of writing is explicitly mentioned in state and national standards and by national organizations that support education and teachers. The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association “validated the writing process approach in 1992 when they defined Content Standard 5 for the English Language Arts, K–12, stating: Students are expected to use writing process elements strategically” (De La Paz, 1999).

In January 2002, the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was signed into law with the intent to close the educational achievement gaps between students. Students’ progress in the subjects of literacy and

mathematics is now monitored by standardized tests. In response to NCLB, many departments of education across the country designed comprehensive approaches to literacy, defining clear and principled approaches to literacy instruction from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The Department of Education's approach to literacy learning worked to incorporate research-based reading and writing methodologies with best practices informed by effective classroom instruction.

Building on the excellent foundation of standards the states laid, in 2010 the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers published the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. The Common Core State Standards clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade level, allowing teachers to be better equipped to know exactly what they need to help students learn and establish individualized benchmarks for them. The Common Core State Standards focus on core conceptual understandings and procedures starting in the early grades, thus enabling teachers to take the time needed to teach core concepts and procedures well—and to give students the opportunity to master them. The Common Core State Standards for Writing make explicit reference to the writing process approach:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5 – Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach; and
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10 – Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

With the objective in mind of linking standards and best practice with effective classroom instruction, Schoolwide has introduced Writing Fundamentals.

WRITING FUNDAMENTALS

Learning to write is often an intimidating and frustrating process for students and teachers who fear their lack of experience or skill will be a hindrance to success. Many teachers who teach writing are not writers themselves, and they may struggle with the process approach to writing. Strickland and Strickland (2002) report that the “teaching of writing in American schools is still stuck in a traditional mode focused on the alignment of a completed theme or essay with what is considered standard, edited English. This traditional method of teaching writing

focuses on the product—the finished piece, the composition, fixated with the format of the essay and research paper, and obsessed with the polite usage and correct style” (p. 79).

The gap between the process approach to writing and the more traditional approach needs to be filled with powerful instructional materials designed to aid teachers and students in moving forward with writing practice and application.

Writing Fundamentals was designed to provide support materials, including the mentor texts—a key to the instructional parameters of the process approach. It is the goal of Schoolwide, through Writing Fundamentals, to build that vital bridge between research on best practice and implementation in the classroom.

Knowing that writing is a complex, recursive process, experts have described and outlined the writing process in stages that reflect the true nature of the act of writing (Graves, 1983, 1994; Calkins, 1991; Harwayne, 2000; Murray, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; and Atwell, 1985, 1999).

Writing Fundamentals provides students with multiple opportunities for learning (and practicing) writing skills and strategies through a wide variety of instruction in each unit of study. In fact, direct instruction of strategies and guided practice are an important component of Writing Fundamentals, as is explicit focus on, and close readings of, high-quality text (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Cramer, 2001; Honeycutt & Pritchard, 2005; Poindexter & Oliver, 1998–1999).

Teachers are provided with interactive read-aloud lessons, mini-lessons, lesson extensions, and appendices to implement and sustain units of study and are given modeling suggestions for effective instruction and to increase student engagement. The lessons in each unit support a structured environment and routine that is conducive to student writing improvement.

The structure of the process approach used in Writing Fundamentals is: Immersion, Generating Ideas, Collecting (more information), Selecting (an idea), Drafting, Revising, Editing, Publishing, and Assessment (including multiple performance rubrics and a student self-reflection).

Schoolwide recognizes that knowledge about writing is only complete with an understanding of the complexity of the procedural actions in which writers engage as they produce texts. Such understanding is twofold. First,

facility with writing includes the development, through extended practice over years, of a repertoire of routines, skills, strategies, and practices for generating, revising, and editing different kinds of texts. Second, writing skills must grow in concert with the development of reflective abilities and meta-awareness about writing. Living a “writerly life” is, as much as possible, instructionally geared toward making sense within the literacy curriculum so that students have ample room to grow as individuals and writers (NCTE, 2004).

INTERACTIVE READ-ALoud LESSONS, MINI-LESSONS, & MODELING

By providing teachers with interactive read-aloud lessons and mini-lessons to implement and sustain units of study, Writing Fundamentals helps teachers create a structured environment and routine in their classroom that is conducive to student writing improvement. Throughout the read-aloud lessons and mini-lessons in all the units of study, teachers model for students via close readings of mentor texts how to read like writers, use a variety of writing strategies, and interact with texts (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Cramer, 2001; Honeycutt & Pritchard, 2005; Poindexter & Oliver, 1998–1999).

Modeling through the use of sample language to support instruction is a foundational part of Writing Fundamentals. Because the lessons have been developed with effective instruction that encourages deeper study of the writing process, students can learn about a structured process that is broken into manageable pieces through highly scaffolded writing lessons, thus reducing the stress associated with text production. The predictable and recursive (and reflective) components of the Writing Fundamentals writing process mirror the structure of the units from pre-writing generation of ideas through publication and meta-cognition of the work undertaken. The lessons for each unit prompt student thinking and learning about writing and provide plentiful practice through the writing process and over time.

TEACHER TALK & TEACHER WALK

Writing Fundamentals recognizes that not every teacher is an expert in every genre (nor are teachers familiar with every children’s literature author), so the developers have created important introductory materials to support instruction in every unit of study. The “Immersion” section of each study introduces the teacher to the genre or text type through definitions, helpful preparation for teaching,

charts with features of the genre or text type, interactive read-aloud lessons (to support the initial study of a genre during Immersion), and extensions and appendices to create a strong foundation for learning about a genre. Author studies are similarly supported through materials for Immersion—with information about the featured author and connections between the works being studied in that unit.

The developers of Writing Fundamentals believe that when teachers have authentic voices, their students have them, too (Graves, 1993, p. 3). When using Writing Fundamentals, teachers demonstrate their thought process as they model good writing for students. By thinking aloud as they consider the different writing strategies suggested, teachers model the critical thinking skills necessary for students to succeed in all areas of their learning lives.

COLLABORATION & CONFERRING

A collaborative environment in which students can learn—working together in partnerships, small groups, and with teacher-guided practice—is another mainstay of Writing Fundamentals. In fact, in all Writing Fundamentals mini-lessons, time is set aside for students to talk with and listen to one another about their work, to talk in general about their interests (which may lead to self-selected topics for writing), and to engage in discussions with the whole group.

Writing Fundamentals values the fact that writers often converse in order to rehearse the language and content that will go into what they write. Conversation during the writing workshop provides an impetus or occasion for writing. Writing Fundamentals knows it is helpful for writers to discuss with peers what they have done, partly to get ideas from their peers and, to a certain extent, to see what they, the writers, say when they try to explain their thinking.

Writing conferences are also very helpful uses of talk during the writing process as well as opportunities for teachers to informally assess students. Therefore, conference questions, wherein student writers respond to inquiries about their work, provide teachers an opportunity to make suggestions or reorient what the writer is doing through conferring with students individually or in small groups. Conference questions are offered in every mini-lesson to further opportunities for talking one-on-one with students.

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS, SEMINAL RESEARCH, & WRITING FUNDAMENTALS

The authors of Writing Fundamentals have investigated seminal research and, in 2012, completed an analysis of the Common Core State Standards for Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language to ensure that Writing Fundamentals is in compliance with our customers' needs educationally, instructionally, and philosophically.

Our selection of units of study for grades K–8 is expansive and based on the three text types explicitly noted in the CCSS: narrative, informational/explanatory, and opinion/argument. Furthermore, the accompanying mentor texts meet the CCSS criteria with regards to content, cultural diversity, and text complexity.

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