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<th>Date</th>
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# Writing Instruction in Omaha Public Schools

## Video Review

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minilesson Best Practices</th>
<th>Modeled</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>__ Mentor Text</td>
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<td>___ Focus on Writing Process, Qualities of Good Writing, Editing, or Procedures and Routines</td>
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<td>___ Six Traits language</td>
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<td>___ Think alouds</td>
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<td>Shared</td>
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<td>___ Class-generated anchor charts</td>
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<td>___ Students practice and apply writing strategies with the teacher</td>
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<td>___ Anchor papers</td>
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<th>Student Writing Time/Conferences Best Practices</th>
<th>Guided: Conferring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>___ One-on-one descriptive feedback</td>
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<td>___ Small group or one-on-one minilessons</td>
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<td>___ Peer conferences</td>
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<td>___ Practice and apply writing strategies with teacher support</td>
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<td>Independent</td>
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<td>___ Authentic writing based on choice</td>
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<td>___ Write to build stamina</td>
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<td>___ Write for a variety of purposes</td>
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<td>___ Students write, revise, and edit</td>
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<td>___ Write in a variety of genres</td>
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1st Day of 3rd Grade

Creak! Went the door as I entered 3rd grade.

First, I quietly went to my seat. I walked slowly. I looked around a little bit. I sat by someone I didn’t know.

Second, I quietly said, Hi I like pizza I’m 8, and you are? He responded. I said OK then. I was a bit shy. I was quiet. I was a bit confused.

Then, I saw my friends and waved to them. They waved back. I was surprised. I was so so so excited. I was glad.

Finally, I wish every day was that great. I was so excited.

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>• Using feeling words (shy, confused, surprised, excited)</td>
<td>• More complex transitions</td>
<td>• More advanced transition words enhance your writing. (Try “when I entered the classroom” rather than “first”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Complete sentences</td>
<td>• Editing</td>
<td>• Reading aloud helps you hear your errors. (Example: Then, I saw my friends a waved to them)</td>
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<td>• Effective paragraphing</td>
<td>• Dialogue</td>
<td>• Using quotation marks helps identify what is being said. (Example: I said, “OK then.”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Transitions used to move from one event to another (first, second, then, finally)</td>
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1st day of 3rd grade

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Finally, I wish every day was that great. I was so so so so excited.
I was so happy and excited to go to Worlds Of Fun for my birthday in Kansas City. When I was 7, let me tell you.

First, we packed up and put everything in cases. I could barely pack anything. I was too excited and happy.

Next, we got in the car and drove away. It took us 3 hours to get there. I was so bored that I forgot how happy and excited I was to go to Worlds Of Fun. So I went to sleep.

Then, we finally got there.
I got so energetic that I wanted to ride every single ride. It was a gigantic place that almost every single person was there with hot dogs, pop, hamburgers and more!

Finally, it was late we stayed in a hotel and I did not get to ride every single ride because I was too exhausted. We went to the hotel and went to sleep.

That was my fantastic story of when I went to The Amazing Fun Worlds Of Fun. Have you ever been there? It's a lot of fun.
Keys to Increasing Writing Proficiency and Developing Better Writers

Writer’s Workshop Instructional Model
All teachers, K-6, implement Writing Workshop: 45 minutes (K-2), 60 minutes (3-6).

Components of Writing Workshop:
• Explicit, focused minilessons (10-15 minutes) support student understanding of qualities of good writing specific to writing genres. Lessons include studying mentor texts, student work, and rubrics with the class. Lessons give students clear expectations and information to improve their writing.
• Student Writing Time provides opportunities for students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes and audiences while applying skills and strategies in their writing.
• Individual conferences and small writing groups focus on student needs or the learning objective from the minilesson. Conferring provides a time for teachers to give specific individual feedback.
• Sharing time provides an additional teaching opportunity and reinforces minilesson skills and strategies when specific students share parts of their writing, insights, and experiences (5-10 minutes).

Vertical Grade Alignment and Collaboration
Schedule collaborative opportunities for K-6 teachers and building leadership to discuss writing strategies and resources. This type of teaming opens communication across grade levels allowing for consistency in language, teaching strategies, and instructional resources throughout the school. Time for these important conversations take place at vertical team meetings, staff meetings, TEAM days, etc.

*All teachers, K-6, use the language of the Six Traits in writing instruction. By the time students enter the intermediate grades they are familiar with, and can articulate descriptions of the Six Traits of Writing.

Study of Models and Mentor Texts
The study of teacher-created writing, student-created writing, and authentic pieces of literature, provides students with good models for specific types of writing. Teachers help students analyze these examples and provide instruction on how students can emulate the qualities shown in the model. Teachers do not have to read the entire text; they might choose to read selected portions that demonstrate the teaching point. A list of mentor texts correlated to the Six Traits can be found in the Reading Repository in Angel.

Score Papers Together
As a staff and/or as a grade level team
Collaborating together, teachers and building leadership score and analyze student writing samples using OPS writing rubrics or NDE Rubrics, available in the Reading Repository in Angel. This gives colleagues a chance to calibrate their thinking and align scoring practices with one another using actual student papers and anchor papers provided in Angel. Data from these scoring sessions is used to inform and drive instructional practices.

In the classroom
Scoring anchor papers together, using OPS writing rubrics, helps students understand the expectations for writers at their grade level. Students also gain a better understanding of how to evaluate and improve their own writing. Anchor papers and rubrics can be found in the Reading Repository in Angel.

Practice Prompt Writing
Students need to practice writing in response to a prompt, which requires them to analyze the prompt, plan a response, and compose a writing sample. This process is often completed within a set time limit. While it is not best practice to have students write to a prompt each week, it is suggested that students have multiple opportunities to respond to a writing prompt throughout the year (no more than once a month). It is also important for students are given choice in writing topic throughout the year. Choice fosters engagement and leads to deeper thinking. Beginning in third grade, students will study the genre of test writing to prepare them for the state writing test, as well as, teaching them to craft written responses for content-area assessments.
Targeted Conferences
Conferences provide individualized, descriptive feedback to students to reinforce what they are doing well and reteach skills and strategies as evidenced in student writing. Descriptive feedback is one of the highest yield strategies a teacher can use to increase student achievement. Effective teachers use a variety of conferences to meet students' needs: whole-class, quick shares, one-on-one formal conferences, roving conferences, peer conferences, etc. Teachers focus on one or two skill or strategy for improvement during a conference. It is important to record items discussed during conferences for use in future planning.

Use of Pre-Writing Organizers
Teach students to use pre-writing organizers as needed, making sure to provide a variety of organizers to meet the needs of individual learning styles.

Examples of Pre-Writing Organizers:
- Four Square
- Step Up to Writing Informal Outlines
- Visual representations of ideas before writing

Understand the Importance of the Team
All grades, K-6, are responsible for creating proficient writers. It requires a schoolwide effort to grow writers and increase achievement in the area of writing. Building a strong writing foundation in grades K-3 is essential to prepare students for the demands of the state writing assessment. Working together to provide writing instruction that is consistent throughout the school will raise writing proficiency and achievement. Forming a writing committee to represent all grade levels and specials areas to continue to keep writing in the forefront.

Embedded Grammar Instruction
Students must practice applying grammatical skills in their own writing. Best practices in the teaching of grammar recommend focusing on the usage and practical application of grammar concepts.

Grammar in the Writer’s Workshop:
- Teach grammar explicitly and in context.
  - Mentor texts provide students with examples of how sentence structure and mechanics look in good writing. Choose some text selections with more sophisticated sentence structures than what students would typically read independently as a context for explicitly teaching grammar skills.
  - Teach the grammatical concepts that are critical for revising and editing writing through minilessons and conferences, while helping students to revise or edit an actual piece of writing.
- Demonstrate why grammar concepts are important.
  - Discussing examples and non-examples helps students better understand the importance of grammar.
  - Analyze the grammatical choices authors make (capital letters, past tense verbs, rhyming words, conjunctions, etc.) and why they make them.
- Facilitate transfer of grammar concepts by encouraging students to use them in their own writing.
  - Through shared and guided instruction on various activities in sentence combining, expanding, and manipulating, students will learn to apply grammar skills to their own writing.

*Refer to the Omaha Public Schools Grammar Expectations and Writing Unit Overviews for more detailed information about grammar to embed.

Resources:
- Omaha Public Schools Balanced Literacy Flipbook
- “Facts On the Teaching of Grammar”, Constance Weaver, 1995
- Guiding Readers and Writers, Fountas and Pinnell, 2001
- Mental Models, Grades for English/Language Arts, Grades 1-6, Ruby Payne, 2007
- “The Writer’s Notebook”, Ralph Fletcher, 2001 (National Council of Teachers of English)
- “Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents”
- “What Makes Effective Teams Tick?”, Gary Hopkins, 2009 (Education World)
- “What Writing Is and Isn’t”, Jeff Anderson, 2014 (Educational Leadership)
- Writing Essentials, Regie Routman, 2005
- OPS staff shared strategies that are helping to increase writing proficiency for their students on the District Practice Assessment and NeSA-W
What Writing Is

Writing instruction has little to do with kits and worksheets. It’s messier—and more joyous—than that.

Jeff Anderson

Let’s keep this in perspective: The Common Core State Standards are a guiding document. Educators must look beyond the artificial boundaries assumed in such a document and dive into pedagogy, process, content knowledge, and research that reveals best practice in teaching writing.

Many attempt to define writing by putting it in a box; developing a checklist, worksheet, or rubric; establishing grade-level performance exemplars; or listing rules or elements of style. In doing so, they organize writing into a neat, restrictive corner, distilling it to a one-way-to-do-it solution. And the step-by-step programs keep moving on, trampling on the varying student needs that exist in each classroom.

The art of teaching writing standards of any kind blossoms from a full understanding of what writing is and isn’t. And that’s a good place to start.

Isn’t
Writing Isn’t . . . In a Kit or Program

Educators who really pay attention to those 32 faces in their classrooms, hour after hour, day after day, know that quick-fix, teach-from-a-kit, pre-made, one-size-fits-all scripted lessons don’t convert reluctant writers into independent ones—even if those lessons have a Common Core–aligned sticker on the cover.

Textbooks—whether on paper or viewed on an iPad—don’t make students care about writing, much less revise and polish their work. Colorful kits, blossoming with activities passed off as minilessons, won’t make students uncover writing’s power. And a writing worksheet won’t set them on fire, even if it’s been repackaged as a grammar video game or an app that incorporates bright colors and movement.

Classrooms across the United States are brimming with voices waiting to be heard. Rather than staying stuck in our anxiety about our last benchmark test or the next standardized test, we teachers need to seize the moment before us. Right now, we have the power to reach our students, to listen to them and create writers.

And that’s not contained in a kit. Writing blooms in the messy “now” moment of a free write or conference, in the talk, in the composition of thought.

Test Preparation

With all the focus on tests, pretests, benchmarks, results, and scores, students see that we want to raise scores at all costs. Many children believe that the purpose of writing—of school, for that matter—is to pass tests. As for us teachers, we’re encouraged to tutor students for tests before, during, and after school, even on Saturdays. Writing time diminishes in favor of remediation and data mining. Instruction is lost.

And so is the trust that students and teachers have in themselves and their writing abilities. Although test-preparation resources were originally designed to help students, they actually pigeonhole them for remediation, target their weaknesses, and remind them—with pages of evidence—of their flaws, inabilities, and shortcomings.

Does this make writing successful? Or does it cause more problems in a writer’s development? According to a New York Times article (Dillon, 2010) that discusses recent findings from a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation project on teacher effectiveness, remediation, target their weaknesses, and remind them—with pages of evidence—of their flaws, inabilities, and shortcomings.

Best practice in grammar lessons suggests that we focus on function and practical application.

One notable early finding . . . is that teachers who incessantly drill their students to prepare for standardized tests tend to have lower value-added learning gains than those who simply work their way methodically through the key concepts of literacy and mathematics.

Teaching to the test makes your students do worse on the tests. It turns out all that “drill and kill” isn’t helpful.

If our students aren’t trusted to use their own knowledge and abilities to discover and develop ideas, then they’ll have difficulty taking a test on their own—any kind of a test, whether at school or at work. Even worse, when writing is seen as an outside-in process of learning and memorizing rules, students are robbed of the beauty of writing as a tool for thinking and discovery. Students are denied experiencing the power of writing to capture a time, a place, a face, a feeling, a story, a thought, an explanation, an argument.

Actually, we can best prepare our students for tests by not preparing them for tests. We’d be better off igniting the truth about what makes writing work so that students know how to proceed when a blank page or screen awaits.

Memorizing Parts of Speech

Although a cursory glance at the new Common Core English language arts standards could imply that language is about labeling parts of speech and defining grammatical terms, it’s actually the application of these grammatical moves that will be tested. A rigorous test won’t ask students, “Which word is the adjective in the following sentence?” That’s a knowledge-level question, exactly the type of question that the new, more rigorous, standards and assessments are designed to replace.

Take this Common Core language arts standard from grade 3: Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). First of all, we can’t teach this standard all at once. We’d need to break it down to something more manageable, such as “understand the function of adjectives in general and their functions in particular sentences.” A 3rd grader...
would need to understand that adjectives describe, that they answer the questions, What kind? and How many? But failing to apply that knowledge in the context of a specific sentence and, instead, memorizing a mindless chant just won’t help.

Best practice in grammar lessons suggests that we focus on function and practical application. For example, let’s look at a sentence from Patrick McDonnell’s picture book Me . . . Jane (2011):

Jane had a stuffed toy chimpanzee named Jubilee.

When I ask students what they notice, some note capital letters, some note rhyming words, and some note the verb in past tense: Jane no longer has the stuffed toy. In these discussions, students begin to see the application of grammatical terms as an evaluative exercise rather than rote memorization.

I then display the sentence without any adjectives:

Jane had a chimpanzee named Jubilee.

I follow this up by displaying other versions that contain a single adjective:

Jane had a toy chimpanzee named Jubilee.

Jane had a stuffed chimpanzee.

I ask students what they notice. Students see that in the sentence that has no adjectives—Jane had a chimpanzee named Jubilee—Jubilee is suddenly alive, as opposed to being a “toy” or “stuffed.” Unlike having students complete a worksheet that asks them to circle the adjectives, teaching grammar in context enables young writers to actually see how adjectives function. Now when students compose their own sentences, they’ll apply this knowledge and be able to evaluate their own success.

Separate from Reading

Educators often separate writing and reading—not to mention the panicked Henny Pennies who run around squawking “Close reading!” “Grammar!” “Author’s purpose!”—but the truth is these activities are inextricably linked. We can teach them as part of one meaning-making endeavor.

When Beyoncé sings, “If I were a boy” in her well-known song by the same name, young writers notice that she says “If I were,” not “If I was.” That’s close reading. The point of learning about the subjunctive mood, which is targeted in the grade 8 language arts standards, isn’t so much to label it as to use it. The power of the subjunctive mood is to communicate something that’s contrary to fact. Students understand that Beyoncé sings “If I were a boy” precisely because she isn’t. And this new understanding that students gleaned from their reading will surface in their writing.

Writing and reading are more than standards—they’re meaning-making itself. They are processes that can address the standards. Each application and discussion leads reading back to writing, and reading and writing back to grammar. It’s all connected.

Writing Is . . .

A Transaction

Writing is a transaction between writers and readers. As writers of text—as humans—we desperately want to be heard, to receive a response, to connect. We think about how we’re going to say what we want to say, and we imagine how readers will react in their transaction with our text. We must not dehumanize this most human of expressions.

When students become a number, a subpopulation, a target of intervention, we unintentionally dehumanize them. But when we listen to what they have to say rather than just thinking about fixing every problem, when we understand their intentions and share the next right thing with them, we humanize them. We need to respond to the writer, not the writing. The most powerful information we need if we are to understand our students is right in our classrooms, in our students’ written and spoken words.

Groping for power, young writers long to connect to audiences. We can hone students’ ability to conquer written expression, just as a video game challenges them to move to the next level at every turn. Breaking the writing process into predictable chunks from time to time gives students a peek into the world of writers.

When students free write or list ideas quickly, they experience the joy of invention from the inside. When
we model how to take a sentence from failing to fabulous by adding concrete detail, we give them something they can do, a way to solve a writer’s problem. Then we provide the time and the space for them to experiment with the sentence revision, share, and evaluate.

We can help students understand that writing makes things possible, no matter what they choose to do in their lives: Scientists record and report observations; mathematicians explain abstract principles; website owners write content. Find ways to use popular technology or writing on the web to link the writing task to audience interaction. Establish a classroom blog, write a Twitter feed or make a Facebook wall for a literary character, create a Pinterest board for a book’s setting, try writing “listicles” using the BuzzFeed structure of numbered lists (such as “Five Lessons Every Middle School Student Must Learn”).

Writing is alive and messy. It involves taking risks, which means making mistakes. And mistakes are necessary for growth. As writing and higher-order thinking unfold in tandem in the classroom, so will joy and rigor.

A Skill That Can Be Learned
Writing is a process. We must teach it as one that’s responsive to students’ needs even as it’s mindful of the standards. We have to know our standards well enough to address the struggles that all writers have in the context of their own writing: finding a focus, including pertinent detail, creating cohesion. When we address a student need that also happens to be a standard, we build a writer.

Teaching writing starts with giving students well-written texts. According to a Carnegie Foundation study (Graham & Perin, 2007), one research-proven way of teaching writing is using models; students begin by reading the mentor text, then analyzing it, then emulating it in their own writing.

The importance of using mentor texts is in the analysis that naturally comes through the conversation that follows the reading, in the transaction with the text. When we talk about what works in the writing we read, we become more consciously aware of it (Eagleman, 2012). As students note what a writer does well, they are, at the same time, creating a menu of options they can use in their own writing. For example, when Jasmine notices that Leonard Pitts starts his editorial with a list of commands in second person, she now has another option for how to begin her essay.

An Igniter of Passion and Freedom
We can’t motivate students to write by deluging them with terminology or someone else’s bulleted lists. We have to ignite students’ passions and let their souls, thoughts, fears, truths, experiences, and arguments shine on the page.

Writers need a writing community that brims with possibility. As their teacher, you need to guide your students to find their own paths, discover their own passions, and put these passions down in writing. We infuse possibility into our writing classroom when we provide a choice of topic and approach, expose students to various genres and styles, and connect assignments to current obsessions and concerns.

So often students cry out, “I can’t write!” “I hate writing!” or “I can’t think of anything to say!”

But have you ever heard a student say, “I can’t think of anything to text to my friends”? They’re never at a loss for what to say to their classmates when they’re supposed to be listening to their teacher or doing classwork.

Let’s plunge into that flow of thinking and passion waiting to be tapped. Writing should be a joyous act and, frankly, so should the teaching of it.

Writing Starts Now
Our student writers need to be heard right now, not in a benchmark, not in the last essay before this one, but right here in their words, discovering and becoming. Meet them there, and no list of standards or high-stakes test will be out of reach. No matter the circumstances, we are duty-bound to float above the din and do what is write.

References


Jeff Anderson (jeff@writeguy.net) is a full-time writer and staff developer. His most recent book is 10 Things Every Writer Needs to Know (Stenhouse, 2011).

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