



Proven Instructional Practices for High-Quality Writing

In the 2003 report, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, the National Commission on Writing stated: **Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know.** Certainly, these two ideas mirror the philosophy of the Department's implementation of the state writing assessment in 1991. As is evidenced by their increased scores on the FCAT writing assessment over the past few years, Florida's students have, indeed, improved their writing and their understanding of what they know. Now, beginning with the 2004-05 school year, increased accountability standards compel educators to expect Florida's students to write better.

How can teachers continue the dramatic improvement in their students' writing? The purpose of this document is to help answer this question.

Writing Research and Best Practices

What does the latest research say about the teaching of writing? What are best practices? In a five-year research project on excellence in teaching English, Judith Langer found that "In effective schools, learning and instruction related to knowledge and conventions of English and high literacy take place as separated, simulated, and integrated experiences" (Langer, 2002). Separated and simulated activities refer to the introduction of a skill or knowledge item to the class, and the integrated activity is the purposeful application of it. The effective teaching of writing involves all three of these learning experiences, with an emphasis on the writer's craft, the use of high-quality writing exemplars, time for classroom writing practice and thoughtful reflection before, during, and after the writing. The following eight best practices describe the goals and learning environment of successful writing teachers.

Best Practices in Teaching Writing

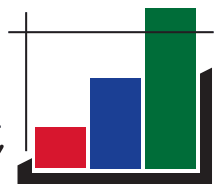
- 1. Establish a positive atmosphere for writing, reading, and learning by:**
 - Creating an inviting classroom with flexible seating, accessible resources, and attractive surroundings
 - Modeling respect
 - Sharing the teacher's own writing with students
 - Establishing routines and expectations
- 2. Organize for writing by:**
 - Setting up a writing workshop routine which convenes every day of the week
 - Using writer's notebooks/portfolios
 - Teaching writer's craft techniques based on an understanding of the writing process and student developmental writing needs
- 3. Provide meaningful student writing activities by:**
 - Promoting student choice and ownership for both fiction and nonfiction writing
 - Providing opportunities for authentic writing, allowing for the recursive nature of writing practice over a period of days and/or weeks
- 4. Ensure that students read, respond to, and use a variety of materials written for a variety of purposes and audiences by:**
 - Giving reading an integral role in the writing classroom
 - Providing diverse reading materials modeling the importance of craft and idea



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5. Write regularly across the curriculum and grade levels by:

- Collaborating on assignments among content area teachers
- Sharing writing rubrics across grade levels and subject areas

6. Arrange for students to have constructive response to their writing and to offer response to other writers by:

- Making teacher and peer response an integral part of writing instruction
- Providing class time for revision after response to the original draft
- Providing selective responses that do not overwhelm the students
- Responding intermittently throughout the writing process, not only after the final draft
- Using many techniques for response, including student-teacher conferences, peer reviews, response forms, class critiques, and self assessments

7. Provide opportunities for students to collaborate as writers, thinkers, and learners by:

- Using collaboration techniques such as furniture placement, modeling collaboration, providing checklists and forms, and organizing writing pairs or small groups
- Providing guidelines and demonstrations of appropriate student interactions and creating specific tasks for students to accomplish during their collaborations

8. Conduct effective mini-lessons on writing by:

- Choosing writer's craft lessons that relate to students' needs as well as curriculum and/or assessment needs
- Structuring mini-lessons so students can observe, discuss, and simulate the targeted writing craft lessons or skills
- Providing specific responses to these simulated practices

(Adapted from *Best Practices in Teaching Writing: An Outline* by Charles Whitaker, from the Annenberg CPG Channel *Write in the Middle* video series (2004), produced by Kentucky Educational Television.)

Four Components of Writer's Workshop

How does a teacher incorporate these eight best practices into writer's workshop? Through direct writing instruction scaffolded within the instructional components of **writing aloud; shared writing; guided writing; and independent writing** (Allen, 1998; Routman, 2000; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). These four components are described below.

1. WRITING ALOUD

- Teacher demonstrates – writing on chart paper, overhead/LCD, board
- Teacher models aloud what she/he is doing, thinking, and rethinking while writing, rereading and revising draft
- Teacher talks aloud about topics such as appropriate writing mode - narrative, expository, persuasive (story, menu, letter, poem, etc.); spacing needs (K-2); organizational patterns and transition words; writer's craft lessons such as persuasive details of statistics and expert opinion; effective repetition
- Teacher points out skills such as spelling conventions, punctuation needs, vocabulary choices, sentence structures, revision techniques

2. SHARED WRITING

- Teacher and class compose aloud, collaboratively
- Both negotiate topics, purposes, and word choice with each other
- Teacher acts as scribe and encourages all students to participate
- Teacher provides explicit questioning and directions, encouraging high-level thinking on focus, support, organization, language use/conventions, writer's craft

3. GUIDED WRITING

- Core of the program – whole class, small group, or individualized
- Student writes and teacher guides
- Explicit teaching in form of mini-lessons for reinforcement of skills depicted in shared writing or for introduction of new writer's craft lessons
- Rubric development and review conferences take place along with peer response and sharing

- Writing may be responses to literature; responses to world or school events; relating of information/reports; description of classroom experiences; personal reflections; writing to learn in content areas
- Writing activities are embedded in ongoing content or literature study on a daily basis

4. INDEPENDENT WRITING

- Students work alone, using their current knowledge of writing process, often choosing own topics
- Occurs daily in writer's workshop format
- Teacher and student monitor through daily log journals, conferences, teacher feedback

- Writing in various modes/genres – producing picture books, recipes, brochures, essays, social studies reports, movie reviews, web site reviews, letters to the editor, book reviews, memoirs
- Emphasis on revision – revising pieces thoughtfully over time—not a new piece of writing each day (much writing will not leave draft form)
- Conference/assessment notes – keeping a log or portfolio on each student's writing progress
- Spelling and vocabulary – connecting both to writing, reading and language use
- Sentence structure and conventions – practicing in context, using mini-lessons, not isolated skills sheets.

Indicators of a Balanced Writing Workshop

How do these four components look in the classroom? What are the indicators of a balanced writing workshop? Classroom seating arrangements and materials may differ depending on the grade level and abilities of the writers. However, the following major indicators will most likely be present.

- Reading-writing connection - tying together books being read aloud and/or studied in class to writing lessons and research reports/projects
- Meaningful print-rich environment – using labels, posters, captions where they catch student's attention *and* serve a purpose for writing; literacy centers at K-5 such as post office, supermarket, bookstore, office, kitchen; real-world assignments and articles of interest posted for middle/high students
- Teacher modeling – regularly demonstrating (modeling aloud) the drafting of narratives, leads, poetry, punctuation conventions, along with writing in response to reading assignments
- Real purposes and audiences – providing K-12 students time to write each day about topics they have knowledge of and care about, using rubrics which describe levels of achievement
- Writer's craft – specifically teaching the techniques of writing such as the importance of audience, the use of dialogue, connotative and sensory language, parallel sentence structures

Suggestions to Improve FCAT Writing Scores

Judith Langer (2000) found that “in schools that beat the odds, test preparation has been integrated into the class time, as part of the ongoing English language arts learning goals.” In high-achieving schools, teachers teach writing as a literacy skill for life-long learning, not merely for passing a test. In the spring of 2000 The Florida Department of Education convened a writing task force to review grades 4, 8, and 10 FCAT writing data from 1993 to 2000. The results of this research were published in *Lessons Learned: FCAT, Sunshine State Standards and Instructional Implications Data through 2000* (2002). Along with providing statewide trends in student achievement, this document provided five instructional strategies for improving writing. The *Lessons Learned* research, reflecting Langer's earlier research findings, emphasized that “including these basic instructional activities in the daily curriculum [would] provide writing practice...and enable students to understand the standards being applied, meet those standards, and improve the overall quality of their writing.” These five strategies are bulleted next, followed by four other strategies based on the best practices discussed in this document.

- *Teach writing as a process, stressing the revision and editing stages. Multiple revisions of one essay or story may be more helpful than writing several essays or stories without revision.*

- *Require students to read and interpret a prompt independently, to organize their thoughts and plan their writing, and to write an elaborated (well-detailed and thorough) response.*
- *Share examples of student writing from each of the score points, and ask students to give suggestions for improving the essay.*
- *Use the Florida rubric to score student writing, and rewrite the rubric in student-friendly language.*
- *Provide oral and written feedback to students, emphasizing all four elements of writing: focus, organization, support, and control of conventions.*
- *Use mini-lessons to emphasize the writer's craft such as leads and conclusions; showing, not telling; anecdotal details; audience awareness; sentence combining.*
- *Score some drafts only on the particular craft element being studied, not every aspect of the paper.*
- *Emphasize that high-quality writing has a clear focus, extensive elaboration of detail, a mature command of language, and appropriate sentence variety.*
- *Provide time periodically before the actual FCAT writing assessment to rehearse "test conditions" and discuss student reflections of the experience.*

Caveats Regarding Two Teaching Practices

Described below are two practices that have *not produced quality writing* for the majority of Florida's students.

Teaching **formulaic writing** is the first area of concern. Barry Lane states in his book *After the End* (1993) that "writers don't need to be given formulas; they need to be shown possibilities." Too often, formulaic writing leads to mediocre, dull writing where student engagement with the text is absent. In the latest edition of *Inside Out*, Dan Kirby asserts "when developing writers are required to focus on forms, they learn to plug lifeless words and mundane ideas into the formula..." (Kirby et al., 2004). It is not that most Florida students who use a form cannot write; it is that they cannot write at the level that today's businesses and colleges expect. Writing which is purposeful, reflects insight into the writing situation,

and demonstrates a mature command of language are rubric descriptors of high-quality writing. **Teachers are encouraged to recognize the limitations of presenting and accepting as correct one organizational plan over all others.** While a formula may be useful for beginning or novice writers who need scaffolding in organizational techniques and in the crafting of elaboration, it should not be an outcome expectation for student writers at any grade level. The results of a research study from the University of Delaware (Albertson, 2003) indicated a lower frequency of 5-paragraph essays at higher score points on a holistic rubric. The researcher concluded "that learning to use a range of available organization and development strategies may be more worthwhile [than formulas], at least for the purpose of passing high stakes writing assessments."

Learning and practicing an array of organizational writing patterns also encourages higher order thinking. Teachers who teach a menu of organizational patterns, along with each pattern's linking expressions and signal words, implicitly help students make sense of the ideas they want to express (Billmeyer et al., 1998). Among these patterns are chronological order, comparison-contrast, description, concept/definition, and process/cause-effect. Creative, thoughtful modes of writing may be developed through the use of these patterns – modes such as the personal essay, research report, autobiography, feature news article or editorial, as well as, the short story or poem.

Rote memorization of an essay component, for example, an introduction or lead paragraph, is a disturbing practice observed during the handscoring of recent FCAT Writing essays. Providing models of sentence styles and techniques by excellent writers for student imitation is considered a best practice (Killgallon, 1998; Noden, 1999). However, some students have been encouraged to memorize another writer's work, such as a lead paragraph, and use it in their FCAT Writing responses. This practice infringes upon the student's ownership of the writing. In effect, it is not the student's original writing, an explicit requirement of FCAT Writing, and may be considered a violation of test administration rules.

Final Comments

The National Commission on Writing recently published a second report *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out* (2004), highlighting the results of a survey of major American corporations regarding written communication. Respondents rated accuracy, clarity, conventions, and conciseness as extremely important characteristics of effective written communication. These corporate leaders' responses reiterated the focus of the Commission's original report: clear writing and clear thinking go hand in hand—each is dependent on the other.

Resources

Video Series on Writing Instruction

The Annenberg/CPG Channel is a free satellite channel for schools. Videos also are streamed on demand at <http://www.learner.org/>. Two new video series are excellent: *Developing Writers: a Workshop for High School Teachers* (2004); and *Write in the Middle: a Workshop for Middle School Teachers* (2004).

Professional Books and Articles

Bomer, R. (1995). *Time for Meaning: Crafting Literate Lives in Middle & High School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fletcher, R. & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of Grammar. (2004). *NCTE Guideline: Some Questions and Answers about Grammar*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

National Writing Project

Information on the five writing professional development sites at the University of Central Florida, University of South Florida, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida State University, and Nova Southeastern University may be accessed at <http://www.writingproject.org>.

NCTE Writing Initiative

NCTE's Writing Initiative to support best practices in the teaching of writing across all disciplines may be accessed at <http://www.ncte.org/prog/writing/>.

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Kirby, D., Kirby, D. L. & Liner, T. (2004). *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3d. ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman.

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National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. (2004). *Writing: A Ticket to Work... Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders*. New York: College Board.

Noden, H. R. (1999). *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Routman, R. (2000). *CONVERSATIONS: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

