

Writing Program Components

Writing in the Middle Grades

Goal

The goal of a writing program in the Middle Grades moves beyond understanding basics to having students become effective communicators of written language and to empowering them with their use of the written word.

Effective Writers

- Conceptualize a message, story, or topic and express it in a more or less complete form of writing.
- Use language with clarity and voice to communicate meaning.
- Think about the reader (audience) while writing.
- Organize a written text in a variety of ways to fit purpose, topic, and audience.
- Demonstrate a command of spelling, punctuation, word usage, and sentence structure.
- Rethink, revise, and edit their writing.



Key Components of Research Based Writing Instruction

Language and Writing

Content and context need to match.

Teaching language and writing as distinct and separate, making the assumption that students will somehow “naturally” transfer isolated language lessons into personal writing creates a common problem....

Over the decades, high school teachers have complained that students entering the ninth grade insist that they have not been taught about propositions, interjections, semi-colons, etc. Middle school teachers report the same strange phenomenon – students claiming to have no clue as to parts of speech, transitional words, active and passive voice, etc. What’s going on?

What has actually happened, is that we’ve been teaching the parts of speech, the use of punctuation marks, active and passive voice, etc., but often we haven’t had the students apply this knowledge in any practical way. Often, we taught the skills in isolation and had students apply their new knowledge to exercises in workbooks. So, transferring these skills into their own “real” writing rarely occurred.

Again, content and context need to match.

Frequency and Time Allotment

Modeling and practice of writing must be “frequent” with variable time allotment. For example, the Four-Blocks Literacy program for upper grades suggests the teacher provides a model of writing each day. Within the context of this writing, the teacher takes the opportunity to teach a mini-lesson or a skill that she feels will benefit most of the class (may be as simple as how to choose a topic, how to connect details to support a statement made about a character in a novel, when to indent, purpose of margins, relevancy of sentence to topic or paragraph, sentence variety, word choice, etc.).

Large blocks of time need to be scheduled for sustained reading (making literary connections to personal writing), writing, talking and sharing.

Continuum of Skills and Forms

Writing programs should not only be well-planned sequencing of re-visiting and extending skills and forms in a single grade, the continuum should be planned over grades.

Focused Practice Within the Writing Process

Central to the continuum is a common understanding and approach to teaching the writing process (Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, Publishing).

Writing does not always have to reach the revising or editing stage; approximately 20-30% of the writing generated might make it through all five stages.

Purpose and Meaning

- Choice and authenticity in writing for a variety of purposes and audiences
- Using writing to make connections between and about new information and ideas.

Balance of Focused Writing With Teacher-Guided Topics and Self-Selected Writing

Focused Writing

To ensure students are exposed to, revisit and practice a necessary range of skills and forms, the writing program needs to have a good balance of focused writing pre-determined by the teacher.

A successful model of focused writing incorporates direct instruction through **modeling** prior to student exploration.

Students still need explicit, direct instruction, and they need it in the context of real writing.

Self-Selected Writing

Not all students have the same instructional needs. Students will need to focus on different skills and set different writing goals. Students also need the opportunity to be in control of topic and form. This is an essential component for developing fluency, a passion for writing, and a level of independence with the writing process.

Consider the Writing Continuum. The continuum from modeled to independent writing provides students with as many “supports or scaffolds” as needed. Supports are withdrawn as the students no longer require them.

Effective Feedback: Students need response to their writing. Can’t get ‘quality’ on their own. Response empowers revision.

Read, Read, Read: Frequent exposure to literary models is essential. Read printed materials of all kinds to illustrate strengths and weakness in writing, provide models and patterns.

Link Curriculum: Cross-curricular planning helps establish context, set purpose and *helps contribute to time spent in writing practice.*

Quality Writing: The teacher needs to have a clear understanding of what quality writing looks like and communicate this clearly to the students.

Non-linguistic Representation: Use of non-linguistic representation (graphics, mental pictures, art, music, kinesthetic) enhances the power of elaboration.

From:

Cawelti (1999) *Handbook of Research on Improving Student Achievement 2nd Edition*

Fountas & Pinnell (2001) *Guiding Readers and Writers*

Gardiner, Edmonton Public School Consultant, 2003 Workshop Materials

Marzani, Pickering & Pollock (2001) *Classroom Instruction That Works*

Sigmon (2001) *Modifying the Four-Blocks for Upper Grades*

The Writing Process

Writing is more than a product; it is a process of thinking and doing. The *process approach* to writing looks at what students need to think about and do as they write.

Stage 1: Planning – thinking about it

- choose a topic
- consider who will read it and why
- discuss ideas with others
- read and observe to get more information about the topic
- brainstorm a list of words and ideas
- think about what will be said
- plan how it will be said

Stage 2: Drafting – writing it down

- organize ideas with
 - a list of key words
 - an outline
 - a web

Note: The pre-writing "organization" of writing is considered part of Stage 1 (Planning) in some descriptions of the Writing Process. Either way, the sequence is the same. Organization follows generation of "ideas"

- write a first draft
 - skip lines (to leave room to make revisions)
 - write on one side of the paper only
 - underline doubtful spellings along the way

Stage 3: Revising – making it better

- read what has been written (aloud and silently)
- have others read and offer suggestions
- rearrange words or ideas
 - use crossouts and other proofreading symbols to indicate changes
 - use scissors and tape to cut apart and rearrange text
 - replace overused or unclear words
 - take out repetitious or unnecessary information
 - add details

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The Writing Continuum

Within some Balanced Literacy Programs, writing moves from total teacher support through scaffolded, supported activities towards independence. It follows an apprenticeship model of learning, wherein the student learns from demonstrations and is always encouraged to write at her "learning edge."

Suggested there is a balance between self-selected writing and focused writing. Focused writing demands usually increase with the grades. Students who have free reign of writing topics, modes and formats may find it difficult to deal with a sudden switch to the confines of assessment with defined topics, time frames, and requirements of the type of pre-writing, writing and final draft that must be produced. However, there still needs to be opportunity for personal writing if a student is to have the opportunity to explore and become instilled with the desire to communicate what is of importance personally. Students can understand the difference.

For lengthy pieces (ex. research), modeling of all the steps is critical. Although mini-lessons divided into small chunks may draw out the lesson over many days, it is time well spent.

Teacher's Role

Explicit instruction occurs during modeling and focused writing. It is critical that it also occur in personal writing while students are engaged in the writing process. This can be accomplished through individual interviews while students are writing.

The Writing Continuum

I. Write Aloud (Modeling)

Support

Write! This means you. Write and think aloud (metacognition). Teacher demonstrates by modeling what writers do when they write. Most often accomplished on an overhead.

Write
Aloud

In the upper grades, the teacher's own compositions and samples are still critical for the students. The variety of techniques, styles and formats that students need to be exposed to will exceed what any one teacher is likely to feel confident in providing. As long as teachers can provide the models and encourage students to explore and experiment with those models, growth in writing is likely to occur. Besides the teacher's own writing, the models may often be the works of published authors or may come from other sources such as students' own writing.

II. Shared Writing (Interactive)

Shared
Writing

The teacher invites participation from the students and it becomes an interactive writing occasion.

III. Guided Writing

Guided
Writing

Follows the writing processes with structures in place for teacher guidance and focus.

-*Planning*: the teacher and class do a whole class plan of the writing topic. The students then plan their own. Graphic organizers frequently used.

-*Drafting/Writing*: Preceded by a shared writing draft. Students complete their own draft (still a focused writing).

-*Revising*: Teacher uses whole class plan to teach mini-lessons on revising ideas following writing. Key concepts will provide the focus for each mini-lesson. For example, students may need to add more interesting descriptive words to their writing. Hence, revisions will emphasize this area using the 'Shared Writing' whole class draft. The students will then revise their personal first draft pieces of writing.

-*Editing/Conferencing*: Teacher uses whole class draft to teach and to demonstrate editing skills (e.g., editing for correct spellings, and for punctuation and capitalization conventions). Students then return to their individual written accounts and edit them.

-*Publishing*: Published version of the class 'Shared Writing' can be created by word processing into a wall chart format. Students can make their own final drafts and publish in book or chart form if desired. Sharing with other students can then occur in a variety of ways.

IV. Independent Writing

Independent
Writing

This work is student initiated and completed. There should be opportunities to self-select topics and write independently. This is often done through a Writers' Workshop approach, although any structure can facilitate the opportunity.

Independence