A Classroom Teacher’s Guide to Struggling Writers

How to Provide Differentiated Support and Ongoing Assessment

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Teaching Struggling Writers

Some Underlying Principles

Learning to produce written language effectively is among the important achievements of a developing person, whether that person is a child at an early stage of learning to write or an adult struggling with similar aspects of the process.


Thanks largely to the groundbreaking work of Donald Graves and Lucy Calkins, their students, and their colleagues, the teaching of writing enjoys a prominent place in many elementary classrooms. Key elements of writing workshop—minilessons, conferences, revision, published work, student ownership—influence the teaching of writing in elementary classrooms across the English-speaking world and are backed by the support of a significant body of theory and research (e.g., Britton et al. 1975; Emig 1971; Farnan and Dahl 2003; Graves 1983; Hoewisch 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics 2002; Perry and Drummond 2002; Shaughnessy 1977). Practitioner journals such as Language Arts and The Reading Teacher regularly feature articles, sometimes entire issues, on the teaching of writing. Similarly, professional books and videos on the teaching of writing continue to be popular with teachers. Yet there is widespread concern that the national obsession with early reading instruction may be squeezing writing out of many elementary classrooms (Manzo 2003). There is also evidence that many teachers are being pressured to teach writing as it is assessed on high-stakes tests, with the result that in some classrooms writing instruction has been reduced to practicing timed responses to various writing prompts.
It is also noteworthy that, compared to the needs of struggling readers, the needs of struggling writers have received relatively little attention in the educational literature. This dearth of guidance for classroom teachers who work with struggling writers inspired us to write this book, which complements our earlier text on struggling readers, *A Classroom Teacher’s Guide to Teaching Struggling Readers* (2004). We begin by sharing the key assumptions that underpin our orientation to working with struggling writers (see also Dudley-Marling and Paugh 2004).

### Instructional Needs of Struggling Writers

It is usually assumed that struggling learners, particularly students with special needs, have “unique” instructional requirements—that is, deficits—that require specialized instruction. However, we do not believe this to be true of struggling writers, including remedial or special education students. There is no evidence that persuades us that struggling writers have *unique* instructional needs that require a form of writing instruction that is qualitatively different from the instruction provided to their more academically successful peers (Rhodes and Dudley-Marling 1996). Specifically, there isn’t a pool of instructional interventions specific to struggling writers. On the contrary, differential instruction that denies struggling learners access to the same high-quality writing instruction provided to their more academically successful peers can have the effect of exacerbating learning problems (Dudley-Marling and Paugh 2005; Oakes 2005). Often this differential instruction takes the form of an *overemphasis* on the mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization) at the expense of instruction in writing purposeful texts (Dyson and Freedman 2003; Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, and MacArthur 2003; Tomkins 2002).

Still, it is undeniable that many poor writers struggle with mechanics. Others have difficulty with planning and fluency (Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Schwartz 1991). Struggling writers may also have difficulty anticipating the needs of their audience, “the constraints imposed by the topic, the development of rhetorical goals, [and] the organization of text” (Graham, Harris, and Larsen 2001, 75). Struggling writers frequently have trouble with word choice and
revising their writing. Generally, they are less aware of the processes employed by more able writers (Graham, Harris, and Larsen 2001). None of these issues are unique to struggling writers, but they are much more likely than their peers to require writing instruction that is *frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized* (Dudley-Marling and Paugh 2004). Illustrating what *frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized* support and direction look like for struggling writers is the primary purpose of this book.

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**Organizing Instruction for Struggling Writers**

Whole-class, one-size-fits-all approaches to writing instruction will never be congenial to the needs of individual, struggling writers, whose needs are widely varied. The key to meeting the instructional needs of struggling writers—in fact, of meeting the particular needs of even the most successful students—is individualized support and direction, informed by appropriate, ongoing assessment. To support struggling writers, teachers must be able to organize their classroom with structures that permit them to collect routine, in-depth assessment data and to work with students individually and in small groups.

Our preferred structure for organizing writing instruction is writing workshop (Atwell 1998; Calkins 1994; Fletcher and Portalupi 2001; Graves 1983). Writing workshop, with its emphasis on whole-class minilessons, independent writing time, and writing conferences, provides instructional spaces for teachers to assess the needs of individual students and provide *frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized support and direction* as needed. As teachers work with students individually or in small groups, other students engage productively in purposeful writing, putting to use what they’ve learned about the craft of writing with the support of their teachers and peers. In the context of writing workshop, teachers push all students, including their least and most able students, as far as they can go as writers. Going as “far as they can” means learning to write effectively for a wide range of purposes and audiences.

It is important to emphasize the role of explicit support and direction in the context of the writing workshop. One of the most frequent criticisms of writing workshop is the assumption that, in the
context of the workshop, “writing processes are self-learned” (Englert and Raphael 1988, 516), as if teachers just pass out the pencils and paper, stand back, and then wait for students to learn how to write well. This is a gross misrepresentation of the role of teachers in writing workshop. All students require some measure of explicit instruction tailored to their individual needs. Laissez-faire teaching is never good teaching. For struggling writers, explicit, individualized instructional support is crucial. However,

explicit instruction need not imply a rigid, structuralist approach. Rather, it can entail a conscious attempt to focus students’ attention on particular aspects of writing rather than expecting students to discover them on their own. The degree of explicit instruction we provide then is something with which each of us must struggle on an ongoing basis with every new group of students—indeed with each writing situation. (Chapman 1999, 488)

In other words, explicit instruction should not be equated with the mindless drill and practice of fragmented, decontextualized writing skills. Still, all students will require some measure of explicit teaching to help them learn the craft of writing effectively for particular audiences and purposes.

There Is Not a Writing Process

Closely linked to the structure of the writing workshop is a pedagogy that emphasizes the processes skilled writers use as they write for various purposes and audiences. This emphasis on process builds upon a significant body of research that has identified a range of practices skilled writers follow as they craft texts toward some purpose (e.g., personal communications, narrative and expository texts) and audience. These processes include selecting a topic, planning, rehearsing, accessing information, reading, organizing, editing, revising, considering the reader’s point of view, attending to spelling and punctuation, and so on (Farnan and Dahl 2003; Englert and Raphael 1988). Struggling writers, almost by definition, have difficulty with one or more of these processes, such as planning or taking the perspective of intended audiences (Englert and Raphael 1988; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Schwartz 1991).
There have been serious misunderstandings about how theory and research on writing processes translate into writing instruction, however. In many of the elementary classrooms we have visited over the years, teachers had posted writing guidelines for their students (e.g., Brainstorm—Prewrite—Write—Revise—Publish) as if there is a single, linear writing process followed by all writers for all kinds of writing. Certainly, writers plan, write, edit, revise, and so on, but not in any fixed order; nor does every piece of writing require planning, editing, or revision. Moreover, the processes that writers use are a function of purpose, audience, and context (Dyson and Freedman 2003). Therefore, teachers of writing ought to focus their students’ attention on processes used by effective writers, but not on a prescribed process. “Any classroom structures that demand that all students plan, write and revise on cue or in that order are likely to run into difficulty” (Dyson and Freedman 2003, 975).

The emphasis on process among teachers of writing has led some critics to question whether this focus has devalued the products of writing. For example, some critics suggest there is a long-term danger of making final drafts secondary to the process of drafting. We’ve all read articles in the newspaper criticizing teachers who, the writers claim, no longer care about spelling, punctuation, or grammar. Again, this is a misreading of writing process pedagogy. In reality, processes matter only insofar as they enable writers to fulfill their intentions, with particular audiences. Writing conventions matter precisely because they assist writers in fulfilling their intentions, but how these conventions work is a function of purpose, audience, and context. For example, how the conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation support writers’ intentions is different in a formal essay than in an Instant Message (IM) or text message. In this book, we emphasize genre: writing content, forms, structures, and vocabulary appropriate for particular purposes, audiences, and social situations.

**Goals for Writing Instruction**

The overriding goal for writing instruction in elementary classrooms is to push all students to write effectively for as wide a range of purposes.

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and for as wide a range of audiences as possible. The purposes for which people write include:

- Telling fictional stories (often with a secondary purpose of sharing some emotion, such as sadness or humor).
- Sharing experiences (e.g., journals, autobiographies).
- Recording and retelling events (diaries, biographies, historical records).
- Aiding memory (e.g., notes, lists, reminders).
- Writing research reports (and other academic forms of writing).
- Persuading (e.g., essays, editorials, advertising).
- Thinking and reflecting (e.g., notes to clarify their own thinking).
- Filling out forms.
- Labeling.
- Interacting or communicating with others (e.g., letters, notes, email, Instant Messaging).
- Giving directions (e.g., recipes, driving directions).
- Organizing (e.g., charts, PowerPoint presentations).
- Documenting learning (e.g., tests, including timed writing in response to prompts).
- Building and maintaining social relationships.

One additional purpose for writing that has become increasingly important is writing for testing situations, and teachers need to account for this purpose, too.

Purpose affects both the form and content of writing, but so does audience. Effective writers always write for an audience—even if the audience is oneself—and the audiences for whom people write vary according to their physical, temporal, and social distance. Writers may write to someone who is physically—or virtually—present (e.g., jotting a note to oneself, passing a note to a classmate, Instant Messaging) or geographically distant. They may write for an unknown audience or to people they know well. Writers may write to people with whom they share lots of background knowledge or to people relatively uninformed on the topic of their writing. Their writing may be read immediately (e.g., Instant Messaging) or weeks or years in the future (letters, books). All of these variables affect both the form and content of writing, reinforcing the advice that struggling readers must be chal-
Challenged to write for a wide range of purposes (in and out of school) and audiences (not just the teacher).

The important point here is that writers don’t learn to write “once and for all” (Gee 1996) as much as they learn to write particular texts for particular purposes and audiences. Writers’ choices regarding style (formal vs. informal), vocabulary, grammar, content (degree of explicitness), form (poem vs. essay), and conventions such as spelling and punctuation are directly tied to purposes and audiences. The kind of text considered most appropriate for a high school English paper, for example, would be completely inappropriate for Instant Messaging (and visa versa). The challenge for young writers (and their teachers) is to learn how particular purposes—and audiences—give rise to particular textual, or genre, features (Chapman 1999). Again, this is why it is so important for teachers to challenge students to write and read as wide a range of genres as possible. An overemphasis on narrative texts, which is a common complaint about many writing workshops, denies students opportunities to learn how to use various textual features and conventions appropriate to write other kinds of texts. Similarly, students who learn only to write in response to writing prompts with imagined audiences learn only the genre of writing for timed tests and imaginary audiences.

To set goals for individual struggling writers, teachers must assess and determine how successfully students achieve their purposes in their writing. If a struggling writer produces unsuccessful pieces of writing (i.e., writing that fails to achieve its communicative purposes), the teacher asks, “What does this student need to learn to fulfill her intentions with her intended audience?” The ultimate evaluation of any piece of writing is this: Does it work? Writing skills matter, but only in the service of the writer’s intentions. We’ll have much more to say about this later.

Writing Is a Social Act

Writing is an inherently social activity. Writers always endeavor to achieve particular effects with particular audiences, even if that
audience is oneself. Dyson (2001) puts it this way: “The process of becoming literate is an inherently social one; it entails learning to differentiate and manipulate the elements of the written system (e.g., letters and words) in order to engage with, and manipulate, the social world” (126).

Struggling students—indeed all students—must learn to write in genuinely social contexts. Students need to write routinely for real audiences (not just their teachers or hypothetical audiences) who will respond to the effectiveness of their writing—that is, who will determine whether it works to achieve the students’ intentions. Students must have frequent opportunities to share their writing with other young writers who can offer feedback on the efficacy of their writing. Students also benefit from writing collaboratively—and playfully—with peers, which can increase attention to writing decisions (Dyson and Freedman 2003). Writing prospers when it is “a valued part of a social network, i.e., when it helps to mediate social relationships” (Dyson and Freedman 2003, 968). In Curt Dudley-Marling’s third-grade class, for example, his students frequently wrote on topics that had the effect of building and maintaining relationships (Dudley-Marling 1997). The boys in his class, for example, often wrote adventure stories like “The Four Amigos” that featured characters named after friends or classmates they wanted to have as friends. In this context, writing becomes a natural part of the “social work” that goes on in any classroom (Dyson 1989, 1993).

The Importance of Student Voice

Students who have a personal investment in their writing are more likely to be motivated to learn and use the processes of skilled writing. Students are more likely to edit and revise their work, for example, if they have some control over the topics for which they write (Englert and Raphael 1988; Graves 1983). Don Graves (1994) put it this way: “When voice is strong, writing improves, along with the skills that help to improve writing” (81). Graves (1979) reported that young writers found it easier to revise when they wrote about their own experiences.
He argues, “Voice is the engine that sustains writers through the hard work of drafting and redrafting” (1994, 81–82).

The practice of assigned writing topics and story starters can have a detrimental effect on students’ writing and their willingness to engage in the hard work of learning to write (Dudley-Marling and Oppenheimer 1995; Hansen 2003). Tom Newkirk (2002), for example, argues that topics that are often of interest to boys (e.g., popular culture) are often prohibited by teachers, which has an adverse effect on boys’ enthusiasm for writing. In general, student writing flourishes when students exercise control over the topics, purposes, and audiences for their writing. As a group, struggling writers often have much less control over the form and content of their writing in school.

Of course, this does not mean that students need to exercise complete control over the content and form of their writing. The overriding goal of encouraging students to write a range of different kinds of texts means that teachers will sometimes push students away from certain topics (e.g., “What I did last weekend”) to get them to work in different genres. It also seems reasonable for teachers to engage students periodically in genre studies in which there is an expectation that students will write for similar purposes and, perhaps, audiences. Still, there is no reason that teachers and students can’t work together to identify topics of interest to students.

The reality of high-stakes tests, which frequently use assigned topics and story starters in timed writing formats, indicates a need to give students experience writing in these formats (Sudol and Sudol 1991). Although many educators see little value in this kind of writing, it would be grossly unfair not to help students learn how to succeed on high-stakes writing tests using these formats. Still, an overemphasis on preparing students to “write for the test” undermines the overarching goal of teaching students to write for a wide range of purposes and audiences. Teaching students to write for high-stakes testing formats does not prepare them for other kinds of writing.

Honoring students’ voices, by allowing them to use writing to fulfill personal intentions, helps students discover the power of writing to make a difference in the world. For example, writing has the power to convey information, entertain, forge relationships, and influence
how people think about the world in which they live. In this kind of instructional environment, students learn the skills of writing (i.e., genre features) for particular audiences across a range of social and academic purposes.

Finally, young writers’ ability to find their voices is a function of their developing competence. Writers who are invested in their writing may be motivated to learn the skills of good writing, but learning the skills of writing will also have an effect on students’ ability to take control of their writing. “Students who do not perceive themselves as being competent writers, who cannot successfully control the many cognitive and physical demands of most writing tasks, may be unwilling, or even unable, to take ownership of their writing tasks” (Spaulding 1989, 417).

The Reading-Writing Connection

Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing processes. Reading plays an important role in learning to write—and, no doubt, learning to write has a positive effect on reading development. Arguably, the principal source of data for young writers on spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, organization, and other genre conventions is reading (Smith 1981; Templeton 2003). The critical reading of texts in order to uncover an author’s purpose(s), intended audience, and rhetorical strategies will, for example, prod students to consider the rhetoric of composition in their own writing. (For more on this subject and a discussion of the value of “Questioning the Author,” see McKeown, Hamilton, Kucan, and Beck 1997.)

Similarly, students who are encouraged to generate their own spellings in the process of writing may simultaneously develop phonemic awareness and phonetic skills that have been linked to early reading development (Richgels 2001). Teachers who make reading-writing connections explicit strengthen the literacy development of all their students, especially their struggling writers. The reading-writing connection also suggests some level of integration of reading and writing instruction, a point we’ll return to later.
Writing is hard work. Even the most accomplished writers sometimes find they have nothing to write about and struggle to find their voice. Skilled writers sometimes get stuck; they may decide to abandon a writing topic altogether. The processes they use also vary according to their purposes and audiences. For example, even the most skilled writers will not revise every piece of writing they produce. And different writers employ different processes. Some writers may painstakingly revise each sentence and paragraph as they write; other writers are satisfied to get their words down on paper, postponing revision until later.

Teachers who do not write themselves may have difficulty appreciating the struggles of novice writers. They may be more likely to insist on a writing process for all students, such as demanding that all writing be revised. Some may require students to complete every piece of writing they start. Furthermore, these teachers may be impatient with students who get stuck. It will always be difficult for anyone who does not write to be an effective teacher of writing. Teachers who write—and attend to their writing processes—are better able to anticipate the needs of novice and struggling writers.

This doesn’t mean that teachers need to write for publication, only that they make an effort to write regularly, perhaps alongside their students during writing workshop. It is equally important for teachers to take the time to reflect on what they do in the process of writing. As writers knowledgeable about the writing process, teachers will have a much better sense of what they are aiming for as teachers of writing. They will also be able to share with their students their own writing processes as well as their struggles as writers. And they’ll be able to illustrate how the demands of writing vary according to their purposes and audiences. On the other hand, as Frank Smith (1981) observed, teachers who dislike or fear writing “will demonstrate that writing is to be disliked or feared, just as a teacher who is only seen writing comments on children’s work, reports for parents, or notes and exercises for classroom activities will demonstrate that writing is simply for administrative and classroom purposes” (240).
The teaching of writing is a principled process underpinned by sound theory, thoughtful research, and good pedagogy. The following list of principles summarizes what we have detailed in this chapter.

- The goal of writing instruction is not for students to learn a single process but a range of processes used by effective writers.
- Learning to write one genre is inadequate preparation for writing in other genres.
- Teachers must push all students, including struggling writers, to write effectively for as wide a range of purposes and for as wide a range of audiences as possible.
- Writing is most likely to flourish when students have some measure of control over the topics, purposes, and audiences for their writing.
- Struggling writers need the same high-quality writing instruction that is offered to the most able writers.
- Struggling writers are more likely than their peers to require writing instruction that is frequent, intensive, explicit, and individualized.
- An overemphasis on writing conventions often has the effect of exacerbating the problems of struggling writers.
- Reading is a crucial source of data for students about the features of effective writing.
- The fundamental question when assessing students' writing is: Does it work to fulfill the writer's intention(s) with the targeted audience?
- Teachers who write and reflect on their own writing processes will have a better sense of what they're aiming for as teachers of writing.
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