

# A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop

Intermediate Grades

Lucy Calkins

*Photographs by Peter Cunningham*

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# Contents

Acknowledgments • iv

A Note to My Readers • vi

1. A New Mission for Schools and Educators • 1
2. What Do the CCSS Say about Writing, and What Does This Mean for Us? • 10
3. The Essentials of Writing Instruction • 19
4. Upper-Elementary-Grade Writers and the Writing Process • 24
5. Provisioning a Writing Workshop • 38
6. Management Systems • 47
7. Inside the Minilesson • 60
8. Differentiated Feedback: Conferring with Individuals and Small Groups • 70
9. Supporting English Language Learners • 78
10. Building Your Own Units of Study • 86



# The Essentials of Writing Instruction



WHENEVER I WORK WITH EDUCATORS IN A SCHOOL, school district, city, or country, I make a point of trying to learn about the vision guiding the approach to teaching writing. I ask, “What is the Bill of Rights that guides your work with your students as writers?” When people look quizzical, I rephrase my question. “When a child enters your school, what is the promise that you make to the child and her parents about the writing education that she will receive?” I point out that chances are good that in math, the school essentially promises that child, “Whether or not your teacher likes math, you’ll be taught math every day. You won’t need to be lucky to get a teacher who teaches math. And the course of study that you receive from one teacher won’t be all that different from what you’ll receive from another teacher.”

Given that writing is one of those subjects that affects a learner’s ability to succeed in every other subject, the promise a school makes to youngsters as writers probably shouldn’t be that different from the promise made to children as mathematicians. In this chapter, I share the essentials—the *bottom line conditions*, as we’ve come to call them—that school systems that provide effective writing instruction to all children have in common. These school districts agree that the following conditions are important.

**Writing needs to be taught like any other basic skill, with explicit instruction and ample opportunity for practice. Almost every day, every student in grades K–5 needs between fifty and sixty minutes for writing instruction and writing.**

Although teachers must make decisions about their own teaching, no teacher on her own can decide not to teach math nor can she decide to teach math by assigning it across every subject area. Asking children to add up the number of pages they’ve read or to count the minutes until school is dismissed wouldn’t suffice as a substitute for a math curriculum. Yet in some districts it is acceptable for teachers to say, “I just teach writing across the curriculum. Kids summarize their *Magic Treehouse* book, for example, or answer questions about a film about sea life, and we call that writing instruction.”

I often point out to administrators that although there is no doubt that writing must be a part of every subject, when a teacher describes her writing instruction by saying, “We do writing across the curriculum,” I know that teacher is probably saying, “I don’t explicitly teach writing.” Assigning children to write texts—a thank-you letter to the visiting scientist or a new ending to the whole-class book—is not the same as providing students with a planned, coherent curriculum in writing.

It has become increasingly clear that children’s success in many disciplines is utterly reliant on their ability to write. And writing, like reading and math, is a skill that develops over time. Because of this, more and more schools are recognizing that children deserve writing to be a subject that is taught and studied just like reading or math; in thousands of schools around the world, writing is a subject that is taught just like any other essential skill. In these schools, in grades 3–5, the day involves an hour for reading, an hour for writing, and more time for language study.

It is necessary that during writing time, children write for stretches of time. Just as learners become skilled at playing an instrument or swimming or playing tennis or reading by doing those things, writing, too, is learned through practice. As my sons’ tennis teacher says, “Success in tennis has everything to do with the number of balls hit.” Similarly, success in reading directly correlates with the number of hours spent reading. John Guthrie’s study (“Teaching for Literacy Engagement,” in *Journal of Literacy Research*, 2004) illustrates that fourth-graders who read at the second-grade level spend a half-hour a day reading, and fourth-graders who read at the eighth-grade level spend four and a half hours a day reading. Success in writing, like success in reading or tennis or swimming, directly relates to the amount of time a person spends writing and rewriting. This means that day after day, children need to write. They need to write for long stretches of time—for something like thirty or forty minutes of each day’s writing workshop. And it means that volume and stamina matter.

Students date each day’s writing, and all the writing stays in the students’ notebooks or folders until the unit of study culminates in a publishing party.

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*“It has become increasingly clear that children’s success in many disciplines is reliant on their ability to write.”*

This allows teachers, literacy coaches, and principals to look through the students’ writer’s notebooks and their folders and see the work any student produced on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so forth.

Writers write. A wonderful thing about writing is it’s immediately visible. This allows a school system to hold itself accountable for ensuring that every child has the opportunity and the responsibility to write every day.

**Youngsters deserve to write for real, to write the kinds of texts that they see in the world—nonfiction chapter books, persuasive letters, stories, lab reports, reviews, poems—and to write for an audience of readers, not just for the teacher’s red pen.**

Donald Murray, the Pulitzer prize-winning writer who is widely regarded as the father of the writing process, recalls the piano lessons he was given as a child. The school system announced that anyone wanting to learn to play the piano should report to the cafeteria after school. Murray recalls his palpable excitement: at last, he was going to learn to make those beautiful melodies! In the cafeteria, children sat in rows, facing the front. Each child was given a cardboard keyboard and shown how to lay his or her hands on it so as to “play” notes. Children pressed their cardboard keyboards, but there was no music, no melody. Murray left and never returned.

Young people deserve opportunities to write real writing; this means that instead of writing merely “pieces” and “assignments,” children need to write in all the genres that exist in the world. A child should know that he or she is writing *something*—a nonfiction book, a book review, an editorial, a lab report, a fantasy—that writers write and readers read. The child needs to know, too, that others have written this same kind of thing and that one of the best ways to learn is to study the work others have made, asking, “What did he do that I could try in my writing?”

Youngsters not only deserve daily opportunities to write particular kinds of things—to write *something* that exists in the world—they also deserve opportunities to write for *someone*—for readers who will respond to what they have written. They deserve to write knowing that their writing stands a good

chance of being read by readers. Otherwise how will young writers learn that writing well involves aiming to create an effect? Craft and deliberate choice in writing are the result of thinking, as one writes, “They’ll laugh at this part!” or “This will make them want to know all about it.” To write with this sense of agency, children need to see readers respond to their writing. They need to share their writing with partners, to read it aloud to small groups, and to have people respond as readers do—laughing at the funny parts, gasping at the sad parts, leaning forward to learn more.

Giving children opportunities to write *something* (a letter, a speech) for *someone* (a younger class, a grandfather) makes it likely that writing will engage children and they will feel what they are doing is real, credible, and substantial. Children should not be asked to learn to play music on cardboard keyboards or to learn to write on ditto sheets.

**Writers write to put meaning onto the page. Young people will especially invest themselves in their writing if they write about subjects that are important to them. The easiest way to support investment in writing is to teach children to choose their own topics most of the time.**

Try this. Pick up a pen and write a few sentences about the sequence of actions you did just before picking up this book. Do it on paper or in your mind.

Now pause and try something different. Think about a moment in your life that for some reason really affected you. It might be the tiniest of moments, but it gave you a lump in your throat; it made your heart skip. The last time you saw someone. The time you realized you could actually do that thing you’d been longing to do. Write (or mentally think through) the story of that indelible moment. On the page (or just in your mind’s eye), try to capture the essence of that bit of life.

Or try this. Think of a subject on which you are an expert. If you were to teach a class on a topic, what would it be? What if that course was done through writing—what would the first lesson be? How would you start it?

You will find that picking up your pen and writing a few sentences about the sequence of actions you just did—a kind of writing in which you throw out any old words—is absolutely unlike the other kind of writing in which you reach for the precise words that will capture something important to you. For children to learn to write and grow as writers, it is absolutely essential that they are invested in their writing and that they care about writing well.

Students (indeed, all of us) are far more apt to be invested if they are writing about subjects they know and care about and if they are writing for real, responsive readers.

It is hard to imagine an argument against letting students choose their own topics for most of the writing they do in the writing workshop. When children are writing as part of a study of floating and sinking or weather, then of course teachers will channel some of their writing to specific subtopics within those units. But if the youngsters are working specifically on their writing skills, they’ll work their hardest if they can choose their own subjects. Although the craft, strategies, and qualities of good writing and the processes of writing vary depending on whether someone is writing an editorial or an information book, good writing does not vary based on whether the information book is teaching about the kinds of stones in a riverbed or the kinds of dogs in a dog show. Teachers can gather the entire class together and teach them about that kind of writing—for example, the importance of detail or elaboration—knowing the instruction will be equally relevant to children who are engaged in writing about a wide array of subjects. (And there are advantages for suggesting that the whole class work for a period of time within a particular shared genre.)

The easiest way to help children love writing is to invite them to write about subjects they care about. When children have the opportunity and responsibility to choose their own subjects, they are not only much more apt to be invested in their writing, but they are also much more likely to know quite a bit about their topics. In addition, they can learn what it means to rediscover subjects through the process of writing about them.

**Children deserve to be explicitly taught how to write. Instruction matters—and this includes instruction in spelling and conventions as well as in the qualities and strategies of good writing.**

It is not enough to simply turn down the lights, turn on the music, and say to students, “Write.” Nor is it okay to take anything that they produce and say, “You are an author!” It is not enough for youngsters to have time each day to crank out genre-less, audience-less, model-less, revision-less journal entries. It is not enough for children to be assigned to do this or that writing task. Writers need instruction. Writing improves in a palpable, dramatic fashion when students are given explicit instruction, lots of time to write, clear goals, and powerful feedback.

For example, if a child is writing an information book about history, that child may not discover on her own that it often helps to take notes in the form of a timeline, ordering the events even in the early stages of the writing. Then again, if a writer is stalled at the starting line of a piece, staring at the blank page, it can make a gigantic difference to teach that writer to rehearse for writing by teaching all about the topic to someone else.

I can walk into a classroom, look over children's writing, and know immediately whether children are being taught to write because strong, clear instruction dramatically and visibly affects student writing. When teachers explicitly teach the qualities, habits, and strategies of effective writing, that writing becomes better—and the improvement is evident within days and weeks, not just months.

One of the powerful things about writing instruction is that a good deal of it is multileveled. Say a writer is writing an information text about weather. If that writer has piled all that he or she knows onto a random assortment of sections, chances are good that it will make an enormous difference to suggest the writer think carefully about what the sections of his text should be and how to arrange them. A child who labors to write a few pages a day and a child who easily writes reams can benefit equally from that instruction. Both children, too, can look at a published information book to notice what the author has done that he or she could emulate. Actually, most strategies and qualities of good writing are multileveled. Some children will spell better than others, some will use more complex sentence structures than others, but many of the skills and strategies of skilled writing are within reach of every writer.

**Children deserve the opportunity and instruction necessary for them to cycle through the writing process as they write: rehearsing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing their writing.**

The scientific method is widely regarded as so fundamental to science that children use it whether they are studying sinking and floating in kindergarten or friction and inertia in high school. In a similar way, the writing process is fundamental to all writing; therefore, it is important that children of every age receive frequent opportunities to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit their writing.

The important thing to realize is that teaching youngsters the process of writing is not the same as teaching them the names of presidents. The point is not for them to be able to parrot back the steps of writing well. The reason it is important for children to know the writing process is that when they

aspire to write something, knowing the process is like knowing the recipe. For example, if a child is going to write an information article about presidential elections, her first concern should probably not be “What is my first sentence?” Instead, she'd do well to think first, “How does an article like this tend to go?” and “What kinds of structures could be good to use to organize this text?”

Of course, becoming at home with the process of writing is not unlike becoming at home with the process of doing long division or of solving word problems. It takes repeated practice. One learns and becomes more efficient over time. Things that once took a long time become quicker, more internalized, and more automatic.

This means that most of the time, it is useful for children to have opportunities to plan for and rehearse writing, to flash-draft, and to reread their rough draft, thinking, “How can I make this even better?” Feedback from a reader can help a writer imagine ways to improve the draft. A writer will always write with the conventions that are easily under his control, but once a text is almost ready for readers, the writer will want to edit it, taking extra care to make the text clearer and more correct. Often the writer will use outside assistance—from a partner or teacher—to edit.

**Writers read. For children to write well, they need opportunities to read and to hear texts read, and to read as insiders, studying what other authors have done that they too could try.**

Any effective writing curriculum acknowledges the importance of writers being immersed in powerful writing—whether in literature or another kind of text. Children learn to write from being engrossed in and affected by texts other authors have written. They need the sounds and power of good literature and strong nonfiction texts to seep into their bones. They need a sense of how an effective bit of persuasion can sway readers, for the way a poem can make a reader gasp and be still.

Children especially need opportunities to read as writers. Imagine that you were asked to write a foreword for this book. My hunch is that you'd likely do what I did when Georgia Heard asked me to write my first foreword ever. I pulled books from my shelf and searched for forewords. I found half a dozen and read them ravenously. “How does a foreword really go?” I asked. Children, too, deserve the chance to read like writers. I'll never forget the first-grader who wrote in the foreword to his own book, “If you like this book, you get a prize. If you don't like it, you get mud.”



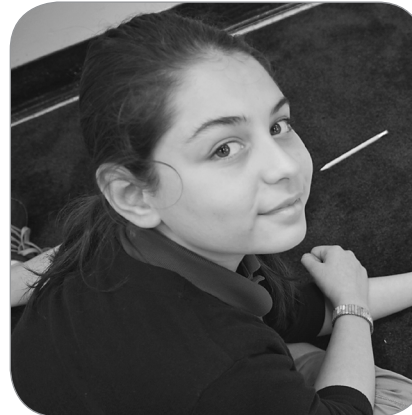
By studying the work of other authors, students not only develop a sense of what it is they are trying to make but also learn the conventions of that particular kind of text. Poets leave white space, how-to writers record steps, storytellers convey the passage of time. All writers care that the sound of their words matches the tone of their meaning. All writers care that they choose precisely right words. By studying texts that resemble those they are trying to write, children learn the tools of their trade.

**Children need clear goals and frequent feedback. They need to hear ways their writing is getting better and to know what their next steps might be.**

Research by John Hattie (*Visible Learning*, 2008) and others has shown that to support learners' progress, it is important to encourage them to work toward crystal clear goals and to give them feedback that shows them what they are doing well and ways they are progressing, as well as letting them know next steps. This is especially true when the feedback is part of a whole system of learning that includes learners working toward goals that are ambitious and yet within grasp.

The bottom line conditions for effective writing instruction are, then:

- Writing needs to be taught like any other basic skill, with explicit instruction and ample opportunity for practice.
- Children deserve to write for real purposes, to write the kinds of texts that they see in the world and to write for an audience of readers.
- Writers write to put meaning onto the page. Children invest themselves in their writing when they choose topics that are important to them.
- Children deserve to be explicitly taught how to write.
- Children deserve the opportunity and instruction to cycle through the writing process.
- To write well, children need opportunities to read and to hear texts read, and to read as writers.
- Children need clear goals and frequent feedback.





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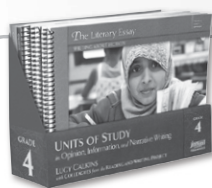
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