A Guide to the Common Core Writing Workshop

Primary Grades

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WHENEVER I WORK WITH EDUCATORS in a school, a school district, a city, or a country, I make a point of trying to learn about the vision that guides 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 his or her parents about the writing education that the child 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 luck out and 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 enables a learner to succeed in every other subject, the promise a school makes to youngsters as writers probably shouldn’t be that different than 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 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 K–5 child needs between fifty and sixty minutes for writing and writing instruction.**

Although teachers must make decisions about their own teaching, no teacher can decide not to teach math nor can she decide, “I just teach math by assigning it across every subject area.” Channeling 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 Tree House book, for example, or answer questions about a film about sea life and we call that writing instruction.”

Necessities of Writing Instruction
I often point out to administrators that although there is no doubt that writing needs to be woven into every discipline, 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 across the world, writing is a subject that is taught just like any other essential subject. In these schools, the K–2 day involves an hour for reading, an hour for writing, and more time for read-aloud and for phonics/word study.

It is necessary that during writing time, children write for stretches of time. This means that for young children, the expectation is that they are writing something like a three- or five-page book a day—not writing a lead one day, an ending another day. Those pages might contain lots of labeled pictures for an early kindergartner or just a few lines for a first-grader, but the point is that the writer sustains work. Writing is a skill, like playing the trumpet or swimming or playing tennis or reading. 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 an awful lot 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 writing and rewriting a person does. 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’ folders until the unit of study culminates in a publishing party. This means that teachers, literacy coaches, and principals can look through students’ writing folders and see the work that any student produced on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so forth.

Writers write, and a wonderful thing about writing is that it is 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.

Children 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.

Children 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, a persuasive letter, a lab report, a story—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 that others have made, asking, "What did he do that I could try in my writing?"

Children 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. 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 that they will feel as if the work 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.

Children need to be immersed in a listening and storytelling culture where their voices are valued and heard. Children will become better writing partners and better writers if they are encouraged to contribute their stories, opinions, thoughts, and ideas to a community of writers.

For children to want to put their voices and ideas onto the page, they need to be immersed in a listening culture. Too many children don't have opportunities at home to regale their parents with little narratives from their day, nor do they hear parents retelling the funny, sad, or important moments of their lives. Too often children are not teaching younger siblings how to do something or filling them in on all they know about a topic. It is crucial, then, that schools provide the opportunity for children to use language for a wide array of purposes.

One of the most important places to begin is to create, from the very start, a culture of storytelling.

In all of our classrooms, we have learned the importance of creating a culture where children's stories are valued and told. In some schools, teachers have decided to devote the first ten minutes of the day to create the culture of talk and listening. At the start of the year, this involves creating small circles of storytelling, and later, circles for teaching. When children talk to partners or small groups, they are teaching each other about topics they know well, instructing each other in how to do something, persuading others about opinions they champion.

In some of these classrooms, there are times—sometimes as often as one day a week—when this talking involves interested adults. That is, parents, grandparents, resource room teachers, and specialist teachers are all invited to come into the classroom to sit in small conversation clusters, listening to youngsters and helping them to elaborate, to say more, and to communicate in ways that others can follow. In other classrooms, these opportunities for talk occur during snack time. When the classroom brims with children's ideas, areas of expertise, stories, and opinions, then each child in turn seems to brim with ideas, areas of expertise, stories, and opinions. This is the perfect context for a writing workshop.

Writers write to put meaning onto the page. Children 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 to grow as writers, it is absolutely essential that they are invested in their writing and that they care about writing well. Children (indeed, all of us) are far more apt to be invested in writing 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 children choose their own topics for most of the writing they do during the writing workshop. That is, 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 specifically working on their writing skills, they’ll work the hardest if they are writing on subjects they have chosen. Although the craft, strategies, and qualities of good writing and the processes of writing vary depending on whether someone is writing an editorial or writing an information book (and therefore there are advantages to the teacher suggesting that the whole community work for a time within a particular shared genre), 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 of elaboration—knowing the instruction will be equally relevant to children who are engaged in writing about a wide array of different subjects.

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 apt to be knowledgeable about their topics. In addition, they can learn what it means to rediscover subjects through the process of writing about them.

Children, early in their writing development, need to be taught phonemic awareness and phonics—the instruction that undergirds their language development and that supports and fosters their ability as writers.

The term phonemic awareness refers to the ability to blend sounds together to form spoken words and the ability to segment spoken words into their constituent sounds. Phonemic awareness is necessary for children to use their letter-sound knowledge as they read and write. Phonemic awareness is the beginning of literacy.

Most children develop phonemic awareness from language play and from opportunities to read and write. But some children don’t have these opportunities, or have these opportunities but need more explicit help. Because we don’t necessarily know which child will need what support, teachers are encouraged to plan for and teach a bit of phonemic awareness in kindergarten and first grade. Reading researchers who emphasize the importance of phonemic awareness still suggest that kindergarten teachers spend a total of only twenty hours, spread across the year, teaching phonemic awareness (and less time in first grade). This works out to between five and seven minutes of phonemic awareness per day! That may be a small amount of time, but it is important to assess your children’s developing phonemic awareness and to notice children who need more help with this because it is foundational. You can’t spell sounds you can’t hear.

The term phonics refers to sound-letter correspondences and to children’s abilities to word solve as readers and as writers. Often, teachers structure the phonics component of their curriculum rather like a reading or a writing workshop, with an explicit minilesson followed by time for children to work independently, with partners or in small groups, with the teacher coaching them. In a phonics lesson, children are explicitly taught something, perhaps information about sound-letter correspondence, rhymes, spelling patterns, contractions, possessives, or the like. Then children use this explicit teaching in multilevel activities. For example, the teacher may teach a rhyme—perhaps op—and then children may work in partnerships to generate lists of words that contain that particular sound. Some lists will include operation and helicopter; others will be filled with one-syllable rhymes such as mop, pop, and top. The day’s lesson ends with either a teaching share or another closure activity. Of course, other days the instruction itself will be multilevel and delivered in differentiated groups.

When children are just learning about letter-sound connections, they need to know that when they are trying to spell a word, one of the first things to do is stretch the word out, breaking it into component sounds and recording the
using interactive writing to provide a story structure for children's own writing. be kept quite distinct from the writing workshop and urge teachers to avoid lowercase letters, to listen for and record blends, to leave spaces between words, to use end punctuation, and so forth. I suggest that interactive writing mean lowercase letters, to highlight features of written language and aspects of the writing process. Meanwhile, writes the same text on white boards. This activity allows you to highlight features of written language and aspects of the writing process. Depending on what you decide to highlight, children may be reminded to use lowercase letters, to listen for and record blends, to leave spaces between words, to refer to the name chart as a resource, to rely on high-frequency words, to use end punctuation, and so forth. I suggest that interactive writing be kept quite distinct from the writing workshop and urge teachers to avoid using interactive writing to provide a story structure for children's own writing.

Children deserve to be explicitly taught how to write. Instruction matters—and this includes not just instruction in spelling and conventions but also 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 children, “Write.” Nor is it okay to take anything that children produce and say, “You are an author!” It is not enough for children 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. Young writers are extremely vulnerable to instruction. Writing improves in a palpable, dramatic fashion when children are given explicit instruction and lots of time to write, clear goals, and powerful feedback.

For example, if a child is writing a how-to text or a science information book, that child may not discover on her own that it often helps to use numbered drawings to show readers what to do first, next, and after that. If the child has been shown the power of numbered drawings, however, she presumably can make use of this, and this one little bit of instruction can actually have an important payoff because it can help the youngster begin to order her writing as well as her drawing. There is no reason to wait and hope the youngsters will stumble on the power of numbered drawings. In the same way, the child may squish words together, not leaving spaces between them. Why wait to tell the child that actually, when you are sounding out a word and you come to a place where there are no more sounds, it is important to leave a little space there?

Then, too, a narrative becomes infinitely stronger if the characters talk. A very emergent writer can touch each of the people in her picture and say aloud what each person is saying. It is a small step ahead to add speech bubbles and to write what each character is saying—spelling as best this child can spell. Once a youngster has written a story (“I rode my bike”) and added the speech bubble (“Oh no!”), it is a small step forward for that speech bubble to become dialogue.

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 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. That is, say a writer is writing an information text, teaching all about the weather. If that writer has piled all that he or she knows onto a single page, chances are good that it will make an enormous difference to suggest the writer divide the topic into chapters, each addressing one subtopic. A child who labors to write a few sentences a day and a child who easily writes a few pages a day can benefit equally from that instruction. Both children, too, can look at a published information book to notice what the author has
done that they 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 the continents. The point is not for them to be able to parrot back the steps of writing well. Instead, the only reason that 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 a how-to book to teach someone how to play a game he has invented, his first concern should probably not be “What is my first sentence?” Instead, he’d do well to think first, “How does a how-to book go?” and “What kind of paper would be good to use?”

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 more clear and more correct. Often the writer will use outside assistance—from a partner or a 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 that it is important for writers to be immersed in powerful writing—literature and other kinds of texts. Children learn to write from being immersed in and affected by texts that other authors have written. They need the sounds and power of good literature and strong nonfiction texts to be in their bones. They need a sense for 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 do exactly as 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 my book, you get a prize. If you don’t like it, you get mud.”

“By studying the work of other authors, students develop a sense of what it is they are trying to make, and learn the traditions of that kind of text.”
Effective feedback is not interchangeable with praise; it is not the same as instruction; it is not the same as a grade or score. While each of these may be a part of it, feedback is much more.

Effective feedback includes an understanding of what the learner has done and what the learner is trying to do or could do, a sort of renaming of the situation the learner finds herself in, including some of her history in this work. It is a particular response to exactly the work the learner has done. Effective feedback also includes an outside perspective—a reader's point of view, for example, or a teacher's point of view. Constructive feedback may include suggestions for the learner of strategies to try, obstacles to remove, or a baby steps to aim for toward the larger, more distant goal.

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, to write the kinds of texts that they see in the world, and to write for an audience of readers.
- Children need to be immersed in a listening and storytelling culture where their voices are valued and heard.
- Writers write to put meaning onto the page. Children invest themselves in their writing when they choose topics that are important to them.
- Children need to be taught phonemic awareness and phonics—the instruction that undergirds their language development.
- 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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