

# *A Guide to the Writing Workshop*

MIDDLE SCHOOL GRADES



LUCY CALKINS

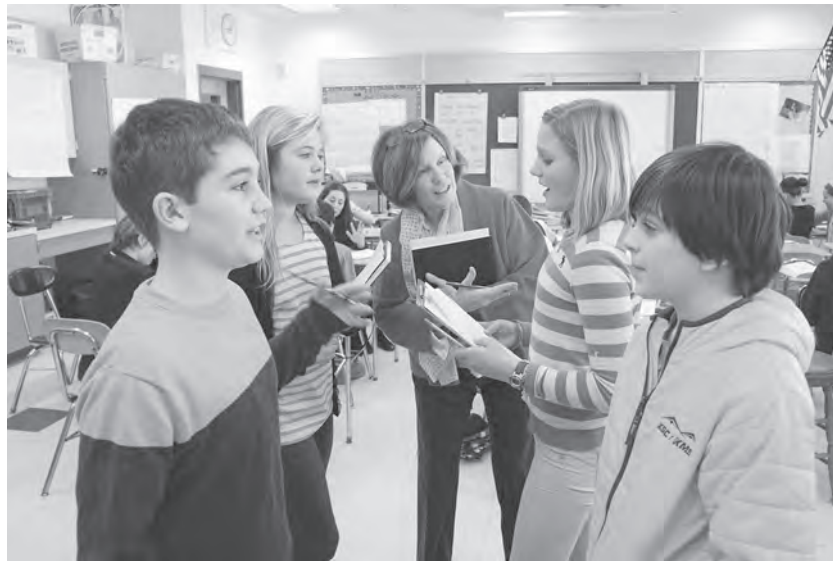
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# A Guide to the Writing Workshop

Middle School Grades

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# The Essentials of Writing Instruction

**W**Henever I work with educators in a school, school district, city, or county, 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. “Think of it this way—when a student enters your school, what is the promise that you make to the student and her parents about the writing education that she will receive?”

Chances are good that in math, the school essentially promises that young person, “Whether your teacher likes math or not, you’ll be taught math every day. You won’t need to *luck out* 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 your friend will receive from another teacher.” Schools should make that same promise to students about writing.

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*“When a student enters your school, what promise do you make about the writing education he or she will receive.”*

The first step a district or school needs to make toward developing a standards-based approach to writing is to decide that the whole school needs to be in on this work together. Writing, like reading and math, is one of those subjects that affect a learner’s ability to succeed in other subjects. So the promise a school makes to students as writers shouldn’t be that different from the promise the school makes to students as mathematicians or as readers. Across a school, there needs to be a shared commitment to teach writing, and

some infrastructure that assures enough of a curriculum that teachers can stand on the shoulders of prior instruction. 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 offer students.

**Writing needs to be taught like any other basic skill, with explicit instruction and ample opportunity for practice. Writing is equally as complicated and as important as reading, so it makes sense to start by assuming that language arts time is equally divided between instruction in writing and reading.**

Sometimes teachers will say, “I don’t really teach writing per se, we do writing across the curriculum.” As important as it is for students to write across the curriculum doing so doesn’t take the place of a coherent, deliberate writing curriculum. Using math and reading across the curriculum are also important, yet no one suggests that the fact that math is used during a science lab means that therefore it is not also important to explicitly teach math. Assigning students to jot notes as they watch a film about colonial America or to trace the characters’ development in their novel doesn’t substitute for a sequential, coherent writing curriculum.

When a teacher describes her writing instruction by saying, “We just weave writing across the curriculum,” she is probably saying, “I don’t explicitly teach writing.” But the problem is that writers, like mathematicians, need sequential, explicit instruction. Like reading and math, writing is a skill that develops over time. Students deserve writing to be a subject that is taught and studied, and this requires allotting time (that most precious resource of all) to the cause.

Furthermore, during writing time, students need to actually write. Just as learners become skilled at playing an instrument or swimming or reading by actually doing those things, writing too is learned through practice. Just as my sons’ tennis

teacher says, “Success in tennis has everything to do with the number of balls hit,” so, too, 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, while 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, is directly related to the amount of time a person spends doing that thing. This means that day after day, students need to write. They need to write for long stretches of time—for something like forty minutes during writing instruction and ideally more time across the day and during homework.

**Writing, like reading and math, is a skill that develops over time. Because of this, more and more schools are recognizing that students deserve writing to be a subject that is taught and studied just like reading or math. In many middle schools, writing is taught as a subject, similarly to reading. In other schools, language arts is equally divided between reading and writing, with writing being taught approximately every other month (and relied upon during alternate months).**

And this means that students will have evidence to show that demonstrates their volume of writing. Accumulating this evidence probably matters, because

if no one notices the volume of writing that students do, it’s all too easy for students to end up writing very little. Because writing stays in a student’s notebook or folder at least until the work culminates with publication, a teacher, coach, or principal can easily look through a student’s collection of recent work and see the volume of work the student has produced on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and so forth.

Of course, it is not only the evidence of a volume of writing that matters; evidence of growth also matters. How has the writing changed since a month

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

ago? The answer to this question is immediately evident when students keep their writing in a notebook, folder, or portfolio.

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

**Students 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, 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 student. 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, students sat in rows, facing the front. Each student was given a cardboard keyboard and shown how to lay his or her hands on it so as to “play” notes. Students 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,” “tasks,” and “assignments,” students need to write in all the genres that exist in the world. A student should know that he or she is writing *something*—a nonfiction book, a book review, an editorial, a lab report, a fantasy story—that writers write and readers read. The types of writing that are highlighted in the CCSS—opinion, information, and narrative writing—need to be regarded as umbrellas, with more specific genres under each umbrella. *Argument writing* is not the term most writers use—they are more apt to say they are writing an editorial, an op-ed column, a blog, or a persuasive letter, and those are the kinds of writing that students need to tackle. The student 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,” “This will build tension and suspense,” or “This will make them want to know all about it.” To write with this sense of agency, students 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 students opportunities to write *something* (a letter, a speech) for *someone* (a younger class, the newspaper) makes it likely that writing will engage the students and they will feel what they are doing is real, credible, and substantial. Young people should not be asked to learn to play music on cardboard keyboards or to learn to write on photocopied work sheets.

**Writers write to put meaning onto the page. Students deserve the opportunity to invest themselves in their writing by choosing to write about subjects that are important to them.**

Try this. Pick up a pen and write a few sentences about the sequence of actions you did today before picking up this book.



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 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.

Try one more. 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—how would you start the first lesson?

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 capture something important to you. For students to learn to write and grow as writers, it is 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. Of course when students are writing as part of a study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or World War II or black holes, you will channel them to write about a specific subtopic related to the cross-disciplinary unit. But during the time in the day when students are working specifically on their writing skills, they'll work their hardest if they can choose their own subjects. Although the craft, strategies, 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 kinds of jazz or the special demands placed on a lacrosse goalie. Teachers can gather the entire class together and teach them a lesson in a particular genre—for example, the importance of detail or elaboration—knowing the instruction will be equally relevant to students who are engaged in writing on any one of an array of subjects.

When students 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 likely to know more about a topic of choice, and writing well requires information and insight on the topic. Of course, writing also requires deeper learning, which means that students will progress from writing about what they know to writing to grow new ideas.

**Students 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 students to be assigned to do this or that writing task. We wouldn't dream of simply turning down the lights, turning up the music, and saying, “Do math,” and then later collecting the

students' work and proclaiming, “You are all mathematicians!” Nor would we dream of simply assigning and collecting a math task in lieu of teaching math. Yet it's common for teachers to think that assigning writing can substitute for teaching. It doesn't.

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 student is writing an information book about diabetes, the student is not going to discover on her own how to choose a logical order—do her subsections proceed chronologically from signs that one has diabetes through diagnosis and onto treatment, or does the text overview kinds of diabetes and discuss each kind in order of severity, from the mildest to the most severe? It's not in students' DNA to naturally evolve as writers that use structure to highlight their meaning. Instead, that needs to be taught.

I can walk into a classroom, look over students' writing, and know immediately whether students 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. Writing is one of very few areas in which a teacher can make a covenant with students saying, “I'm going to teach you something and if you work hard your writing will improve in dramatic ways within just three to four weeks.”

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 student who labors to write a few pages a day and a student who easily writes reams can benefit equally from that instruction. Both students, 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 students will spell better than others, and 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.



**Students 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 students 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 students of every age receive frequent opportunities to rehearse, draft, revise, and edit their writing.

The important thing to realize is that teaching students 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 students 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 student 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 students 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 should 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.

**Students deserve 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. Students 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.

Students 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.

By studying the work of other authors, writers learn the conventions of particular kinds of text. Writers tuck cautionary advice into a series of steps. Storytellers reference the weather to convey the passage of time or to amplify the mood. By studying texts that resemble those they are trying to write, students learn the tools of their trade. The Common Core places a high priority on students learning to read like writers. Thinking about the reasons why an author may have chosen specific language (RL.4), structures (RL.5), or perspectives (RL.6), students learn to be attuned to the deliberate decisions an author seems to have made by making their own similar decisions as they write and revise in hopes of creating particular effects.

**Students deserve 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 for Teachers*, 2012) and others has shown that to support learners’ progress, it is important for them to work toward crystal clear goals and to receive feedback that shows them both what they are doing well and what their next steps are apt to be. Learners across a wide range of fields—people training to be Olympic divers, world-class chess players, or competitive figure skaters—know that it is not practice alone that makes for perfection, it is deliberate, goal-driven practice.

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.
- Aspiring writers 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. Adolescents will invest themselves in their writing when they choose subjects and topics that are important to them.

- Young people deserve to be explicitly taught how to write, both the skills and strategies of writers as well as the conventions.
- Students deserve the opportunity and instruction to cycle through the writing process.
- To write well, adolescents need opportunities to read and to hear texts read, and to read as writers.
- Learners need clear goals and frequent feedback.

