Amy Gillespie and *Steve Graham* *reveal the techniques that have been proven to work when teaching students to write*

WRITING IS A MULTIFACETED TASK THAT involves the use and coordination of many cognitive processes. Due to its complexities, many students find writing challenging and many teachers struggle to find methods to effectively teach the skill.

Gathering evidence for effectively teaching writing

Advice from professional writers and the experiences of successful writing teachers offer some guidance in developing sound writing practices. However, these accounts are frequently based on testimonials involving the writing development of an individual or a single classroom. This makes it difficult to understand how or why a writing strategy was effective and what elements of the strategy would be essential to make it work in new situations.

Scientific studies of writing interventions provide a more trustworthy approach for identifying effective methods for teaching writing; they supply evidence of the magnitude of the effect of a writing intervention, how confident one can be in the study's results, and how replicable the writing strategy is in new settings with new populations of students.

What does the research show?

The list of recommendations presented below is based on scientific studies of students in grades 4–12. The strategies for teaching writing are listed according to the magnitude of their effects. Practices with the strongest effects are listed first. However, the effects of some writing interventions differ minimally from the effects of others. Therefore, one should not assume that only the first several strategies should be implemented. All of the strategies are potentially useful, and we encourage teachers to use a combination of strategies to best meet the needs of their students.

Evidence of the effectiveness of each strategy or technique was compiled from research studies that met several criteria. First, a recommendation was not made unless there was a minimum of four studies that showed the effectiveness of a writing intervention. Second, in each study reviewed, the performance of one group of students was compared to the performance of another group of students receiving a different writing intervention or no intervention at all. This permitted conclusions that each intervention listed below resulted in better writing performance than other writing strategies or typical writing teaching in the classroom. Third, each study was reviewed to

ensure it met standards for research quality and that study results were reliable (reducing the chance that error in assessment contributed to the results). Fourth, studies were only included if students' overall writing quality was assessed post-intervention. This criterion was used to identify strategies that had a broad impact on writing performance, as opposed to those with a more limited impact on a specific aspect of writing such as spelling or vocabulary.

Effective writing practices

- **Writing strategies:** Explicitly teach students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their written products. This may involve teaching general processes (e.g., brainstorming or editing) or more speci?c elements, such as steps for writing a persuasive essay. In either case, we recommend that teachers model the strategy, provide assistance as students practice using the strategy on their own, and allow for independent practice with the strategy once they have learned it.
- **Summarizing text:** Explicitly teach students procedures for summarizing what they read. Summarization allows students to practice concise, clear writing to convey an accurate message of the main ideas in a text. Teaching summary writing can involve explicit strategies for producing effective summaries or gradual fading of models of a good summary as students become more proficient with the skill.
- **Collaborative writing:** Allow students to work together to plan, write, edit, and revise their writing. We recommend that teachers provide a structure for cooperative writing and explicit expectations for individual performance within their cooperative groups or partnerships. For example, if the class is working on using descriptive adjectives in their compositions, one student could be assigned to review another's writing. He or she could provide positive feedback, noting several instances of using descriptive vocabulary, and provide constructive feedback, identifying several sentences that could be enhanced with additional adjectives. After this, the students could switch roles and repeat the process.
- **Goals:** Set specific goals for the writing assignments that students are to complete. The goals can be established by the teacher or created by the class themselves, with review from the teacher to ensure they are appropriate and attainable. Goals can include (but are not limited to) adding more ideas to a paper or including specific elements of a writing genre (e.g., in an opinion essay include at least three reasons supporting your belief). Setting specific product goals can foster motivation, and teachers can continue to motivate students by providing reinforcement when they reach their goals.
- **Word processing:** Allow students to use a computer for completing written tasks. With a computer, text can be added, deleted, and moved easily. Furthermore, students can access tools, such as spell check, to enhance their written compositions. As with any technology, teachers should provide guidance on proper use of the computer and any relevant software before students use the computer to compose independently.
- **Sentence combining:** Explicitly teach students to write more complex and sophisticated sentences. Sentence combining involves teacher modeling of how to combine two or more related sentences to create a more complex one. Students should be encouraged to apply the sentence construction skills as they write or revise.
- **Process writing:** Implement flexible, but practical classroom routines that provide students with extended opportunities for practicing the cycle of planning, writing, and reviewing their compositions. The process approach also involves: writing for authentic audiences, personal responsibility for written work, student-to-student interactions throughout the writing process, and self-evaluation of writing.
- **Inquiry:** Set writing assignments that require use of inquiry skills. Successful inquiry activities include establishing a clear goal for writing (e.g., write a story about conflict in the playground), examination of concrete data using specific strategies (e.g., observation of students arguing in the playground and

recording their reactions), and translation of what was learned into one or more compositions.

- **Prewriting:** Engage students in activities prior to writing that help them produce and organize their ideas. Prewriting can involve tasks that encourage students to access what they already know, do research about a topic they are not familiar with, or arrange their ideas visually (e.g., graphic organizer) before writing.
- **Models:** Provide students with good models of the type of writing they are expected to produce. Teachers should analyze the models with their class, encouraging students to imitate in their own writing the critical and effective elements shown in the models.

What we know

- Evidence-based practices for teaching writing include:
- Teaching strategies for planning, revising, and editing
- Having students write summaries of texts
- Permitting students to write collaboratively with peers
- Setting goals for student writing
- Allowing students to use a word processor
- Teaching sentence combining skills
- Using the process writing approach
- Having students participate in inquiry activities for writing
- Involving students in prewriting activities
- Providing models of good writing

Additional suggestions

With any combination of teaching strategies a teacher chooses to use, students must be given ample time to write. Writing cannot be a subject that is short-changed or glossed over due to time constraints. Moreover, for weaker writers, additional time, individualized support, and explicit teaching of transcription skills (i.e., handwriting, spelling, typing) may be necessary. For all students, teachers should promote the development of self-regulation skills. Having students set goals for their writing and learning, monitoring and evaluating their success in meeting these goals, and self-reinforcing their learning and writing efforts puts them in charge, increasing independence and efficacy.

Teachers should supplement their current writing practices and curricula with a combination of evidence-based practices that best meets the needs of their students.

A combination of effective writing practices

No single strategy for teaching writing will prove effective for all students. Furthermore, the above strategies do not constitute a writing curriculum. Teachers should aim to supplement their current writing practices and curricula with a mix of the aforementioned evidence-based writing practices. The optimal mixture of practices should be tailored to best meet the writing needs of the class, as well as the needs of individual students. It is especially important to monitor the success of each technique implemented to be sure that it is working as intended, and to make adjustments as needed.

About the authors

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Further reading

Graham S (2010), Teaching Writing. P Hogan (Ed), Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language Sciences (pp. 848–851). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.Graham S & Perin D (2007),

Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools – A Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.www.all4ed.org/? les/WritingNext.pdf