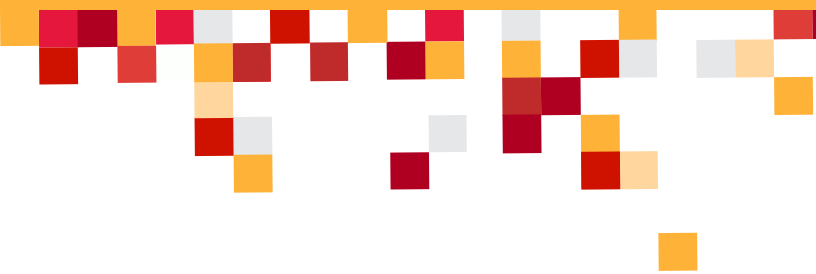




# Laying the Foundation: Why Good Writing Starts with the Teacher



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## Introduction

In the most recent study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) determined that fewer than one-third of surveyed students in the United States performed at or above “proficient” levels on standardized writing assessments. Seven years later, the Common Core Standards, adopted by nearly two-thirds of the nation, placed a new emphasis on writing in order to change what many educators saw as an inevitable decline in literacy skills and achievement. Still, frustration among educators remains and student progress is slower than anticipated. But while the challenges of teaching writing are various and complex, there is every reason to be hopeful. By identifying the root cause of the problem, we can better implement strategies that fundamentally transform the way writing is taught, empowering teachers to feel comfortable and confident in their role as teachers of writing.





## Discovering the Missing Link

After twenty five years of hands-on experience working with teachers, Empowering Writers recognizes the primary reason for lack of growth or improvement in student writing is that teachers are unable to identify key foundational skills and to provide informed classroom instruction. In fairness, most teachers, in their teacher-preparation courses and even at the graduate school level, have not taken a course focused specifically on writing skills and instruction. So, while many teachers are working hard to achieve the desired results, few can proactively and productively model the writing process for students, effectively assess student work, or apply prescriptive strategies to move writing to the next level.

According to a 2016 study of nearly 500 teachers in grades three through eight across the country, conducted by Gary Troia of Michigan State University and Steve Graham of Arizona State University, it was found that **less than half** had taken a college class that devoted significant time to the teaching of writing, while **fewer than a third** had taken a class dedicated solely to how children learn to write.\*

Given the evident lack of preparation, it is perhaps not surprising that little more than half of the teachers surveyed said they enjoyed teaching writing.

Equally problematic is the fact that popular theories and writing programs often overlook the most basic element—teacher practice—by assuming that teachers are prepared to handle the complexity of writing requirements established by today’s standardized assessments.

Extensive research on writing instruction, conducted by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), takes an in-depth look at the studies on instructional practices believed to be the foundation of effective writing instruction. What the panel of educational professionals found supports what Empowering Writers has proposed for the past two decades. Let’s look at the following five recommendations:

### Recommendation 1: Commit to Daily Writing

#### Instruction

If the goal is to teach students to become effective writers, then they must have **dedicated instructional time** to learn the necessary skills and strategies, as well as sufficient time to practice what they have learned. This approach to writing instruction is embedded in the Empowering Writers methodology. All writing instruction begins with whole class instruction that introduces skills defined through the use of text, and then modeled for students. When students move to guided practice “writing time,” they will be practicing the skill that was just taught. As noted by the WWC study, the most common misconception among educators seems to involve daily “writing time.” Writing time in and of itself does not provide significant benefits; students need more than just time to write.

*\*(conducted by Gary Troia of Michigan State University and Steve Graham of Arizona State University)*

Powerful writing is informed by numerous discrete skills that, when practiced over time, will inform and empower the resulting writing.

The idea of simply providing students with a set number of minutes a day for “free writing” can be a panacea for the teacher who is uncertain about how to help them improve. We’ve all heard writers say, “You have to write every day,” and that is certainly true. However, you cannot assume that improvement will evolve through free writing without specific skill instruction or informed teacher direction.

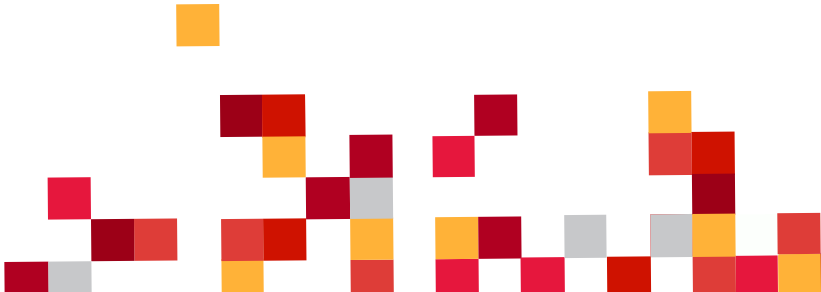
It’s clear that merely providing time for student writing is not sufficient, and that educators must also provide active instruction. What does this approach look like in the Empowering Writers classroom? The whole-class lesson begins with the teacher clearly defining the writing skill and sharing examples in literature/text. After the skill is defined and awareness is developed through the use of actual examples, the teacher then models the skill for students. In that role, the teacher addresses the class out loud—in the role of the author—articulating the thought process behind the writing. In this teaching moment, students observe the teacher applying the skill to which they were just introduced. Finally, students move to guided practice, where they practice each discrete writing skill.

Recommendation 2:  
Teach Genre, Skills and Model  
the Writing Process

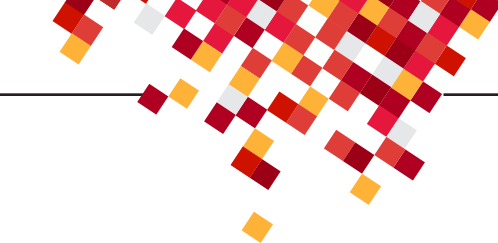
Students need to witness the writing process in action. It starts with the teacher defining the genre and the skill, then modeling the skill while articulating the thought process of the author. This approach to instruction is embedded in the Empowering Writers methodology, which recommends that each skill be **taught explicitly**, then modeled in isolation, as well as in the context of the written piece. Students get the benefit of not only seeing writing take place but also by “hearing” the author talk through the process. WWC notes that teachers should begin by teaching students how writing purposes differ and how specific genres can help students achieve their writing goals.

Empowering Writers’ Methodology

<p>1. Introduce and define the skill through the use of literature/text</p>	<p>2. Model the skill articulating the thought process of the author</p>
<p>3. Guided practice</p>	<p>4. Application</p>







When students understand the connection between genres and writing purposes, they may be more likely to use various genres and think more critically about structure.

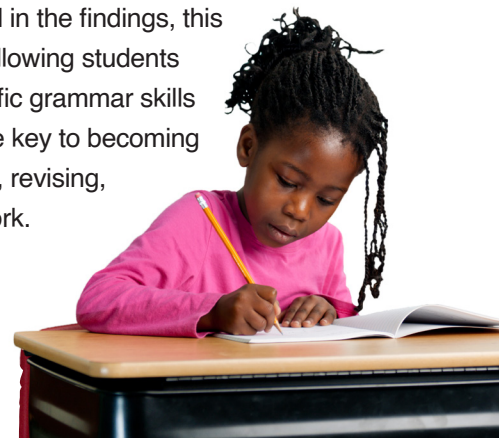
Students must also learn to adjust their writing to have the greatest impact on their intended readers. Examples of good writing and techniques for writing in specific genres can help students write more effectively for different purposes and audiences.

Teachers who are eager to see their students writing often skip this necessary foundational work. Both teachers and students must understand that the writing process begins before writing ever takes place. A good writing plan is the foundation of the text. What is the genre? What is the author's purpose for the piece? What is the organizational framework on which this piece will be written? In order for students to understand these concepts, they must start with good literature and read it carefully with "author's eyes." This requires more than just discussing genre, but rather, involves analyzing, annotating and understanding what techniques the author used to compose the piece. Teachers must know these salient skills in order to identify and model them for students. Skills are taught explicitly, then students employ them during their own writing process, which in turn becomes an opportunity for both skilled guided practice and productive conversation on craft. In effect, it is the writing process with the blueprint exposed.

### Recommendation 3: Teach Students to Become Fluent with Handwriting, Spelling, Sentence Construction, Typing, and Word Processing.

Research shows that basic writing skills need to become relatively effortless for students so they can focus more on developing and communicating their ideas (composition). Instruction for young writers must devote considerable time to handwriting and spelling. A comprehensive phonics program's lessons should have components that address handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction through dictation. It is important that students in early elementary grades have at least 20-30 minutes of their phonics time focused on these foundational writing skills in order to become proficient.

In addition to focusing on these skills during phonics time, Empowering Writers has specific curricula that devotes time to these important foundational writing skills. For grades K-2, Empowering Writers *A Sentence A Day* curriculum provides explicit instruction on how to create complete sentences—teaching students about the subject (who/what) and the predicate (doing/describing), capital letters, and end punctuation. Throughout these younger grades, students are also taught other **grammar and usage skills** through these lessons. For grades 3-7, Empowering Writers *Editing, Revising and More* curriculum equips teachers with a wide array of explicit lessons on different skills involving grammar and usage. Each unit in the curriculum provides lessons on a specific skill that can be taught, then easily applied to students' writing during the revising and editing stages within the Empowering Writers genre-specific curriculum. As mentioned in the findings, this is a critical component, allowing students time to apply these specific grammar skills into their own writing—the key to becoming proficient in proofreading, revising, and editing one's own work.



Additionally, students also need to become fluent with typing and word processing. With an ever-increasing demand to compose language on a computer, students also need instruction on how to type beginning in 1st grade. According to the Educator's Practice Guide, by the end of 2nd-3rd grade, students should be able to type as fast as they can write by hand, so specific time needs to be dedicated to teaching students how to type fluently. Providing instruction on word processing and all the features that can be used when composing on a computer are important for students to learn so they can become proficient at those skills as well. The ability to open and save files, add, move, and delete text, and use grammar and spell checks are vital. Being well-versed in how to use these features will give young writers more confidence when asked to compose on a computer versus writing by hand.

## **Recommendation 4: Create a Writing Community**

Creating a community of engaged writers is considered by educators to be an important part of the writing classroom, many of whom believe this is an intrinsic component of writing instruction. The Empowering Writers K-8 approach builds a community of writers: starting in kindergarten and moving through each grade level with a common vocabulary and assured experiences creates far-reaching benefits and connection for both teachers and students. Subtly and consistently, an authentic and engaged school-wide writing community develops. Let's break down our recommendations into four specific elements:

### **A. Teachers should share their own writing.**

Clearly, this happens most effectively during lesson development. As teachers implement Empowering Writers methodologies, one of the steps they are taught is the importance of modeling good writing for students. Not only does the teacher take on the role of author by

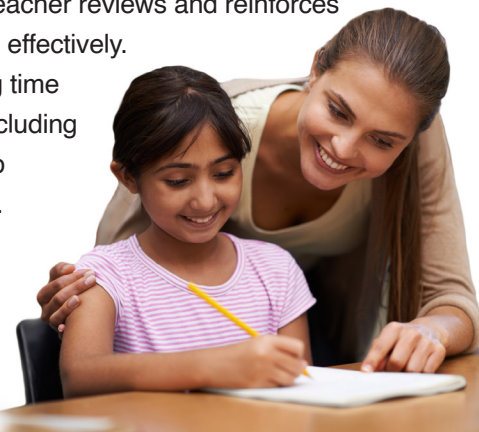
demonstrating good writing, he or she must also verbalize the thought processes of the author so that students can "hear" the process take place.

### **B. Students should be given a variety of writing choices.**

There are many ways for students to write outside of formal instructional time. Student writing notebooks can be used to record and reflect memories of a fun time with friends, a favorite holiday, or a recap of a memorable sporting event. Notebooks can also contain different sections dedicated to audience, purpose, self-reflection, shared writing with peers, writing to an authority or to a larger audience on a specific topic. Teachers must also structure guided practice to ensure that students are applying genre-specific skills—keeping in mind both audience and purpose. When students move to prompted writing, prompts can be broad enough in scope to allow students to pick a topic of interest (i.e., write about a historical figure who you would like to meet) that provides freedom of choice.

### **C. Students should be encouraged to collaborate as writers.**

In the Empowering Writers model, most lessons begin with skill modeling. Effective modeling is not limited to the teacher standing in front of the class and writing, and in fact involves a dynamic exchange between the teacher and the students. As the teacher begins the modeling, she asks a series of specific, thought-provoking questions that encourage students to articulate their ideas, an approach that helps them build vocabulary and formulate ideas into sentences. They also validate suggestions and probes for more details. We call this the "dress rehearsal" before student writers move on to their own work. By first modeling collaborative work, the teacher reviews and reinforces how and why it is written effectively. This collaborative writing time can take many forms, including whole-class, small-group and peer-to-peer editing.





## D. Give and Receive Feedback.

The presence of productive feedback throughout the writing process is critical to student success. When teachers lack mastery of specific skills needed to compose various genres of writing, it follows that they also lack the ability to assess and critique student writing in a way that will allow students to address and resolve weaknesses in any given written piece. Most of us have heard a teacher provide vague feedback like “good start, but you need to write more,” or “add some more details here,” or “expand on that idea.” And while these comments may seem useful at first, the student may not know how to apply the feedback in a way that makes a substantive difference. For students to demonstrate real growth as writers, they need to internalize key skills. Moreover, for students to be able to offer valuable feedback, they need a working knowledge of the skills that are used to craft each piece of writing. Imagine a pianist, for example, who is playing a piece of music for someone who does not play the piano but happens to know and love the selection. When the pianist plays the piece, the listener can either say “that was great,” or “there were parts that I didn’t like,” but that is the extent of what the musical neophyte can offer. Feedback is limited, and the pianist has received no concrete suggestions that will improve the performance. That’s why understanding foundational skills is so important; it helps create meaningful feedback from which both the giver and the receiver can benefit. In fact, writers themselves support the idea of working on discrete skills in order to produce a fine piece of writing—very different from the mistaken notion that one can “just write” successfully in an unstructured creative flow.

## Writing Instruction that Works: What Authors Have to Say

In his classic book, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, author John Gardner, says: “Fiction is made of structural units; it is not one great rush. Every story is built of a number of such units: a passage of description, a passage of dialogue, an action, another passage of description, more dialogue and so forth. The good writer treats each unit individually, developing them one by one.”

Jesse Lee Kercheval, author of *Building Fiction*, says, “Readers and teachers are like visitors who’ve paid money to tour a famous home. Ah, readers say, what lovely rooms. Yes, the teacher says, notice the artful placement of the windows. Writers look at a story the way a carpenter or architect looks at a house: They see the surface but also the structure under the paint. They know how the house is put together and how much work it was to build.”

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead describes art as pattern imposed upon experience. “Real life is chaotic, unpredictable, and random. Fiction, on the other hand, is sequential, deliberate, built on a highly selective series of cause-and-effect events.”

Author/educator Ronald Tobias, in his book *Theme and Strategy*, says: “Patterns are fundamental to human nature. We like to create them (the arts) and we like to discover them (the sciences). In writing, these two powerful forces combine: As artists we create the patterns, but we create them for audiences to find; creativity is fluid and, like water, it is formless and always conforms to the container that holds it. If there’s no vessel to contain the water, then it will run off and drain endlessly.”

William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*, says: “Thinking clearly is a conscious act that writers must force on themselves, as if they were working on any other project that requires logic: making a shopping list or doing an algebra problem.”



## Conclusion

In summary, effective writing instruction that creates both writing proficiency and an engaged community of writers begins by addressing the needs of the teachers. Having teachers become familiar with specific skills, strategies and methodologies is critical to success. Although teachers typically do not receive this training during their teacher preparation courses, they can certainly become empowered in the classroom.

When teachers identify, then model, specific, discrete, genre-specific writing skills through shared writing experiences, then have students emulate those skills through guided practice, students begin to recognize the building blocks of effective writing. They even begin to read differently, with a much sharper awareness in how authors apply techniques that affect their readers. Properly equipped, teachers don't just recognize good writing, but can take the writing apart in terms of the discrete skills that, collectively, make a piece of writing successful. With a shared common vocabulary, the mastery of identifiable skills and craft, and the mutual success that follows, a community of writers emerges that can express themselves powerfully through the written word.

Truly empowered teachers of writing no longer see themselves as facilitators of an unwieldy process that may or may not yield results. Rather, they see themselves as writers, master teachers and role models who students want to emulate. They begin to see, in objective terms, the exciting and satisfying results of their instruction and can align measurable improvement of writing skills directly to their efforts.





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