



## Writing with Purpose: Supporting Developing Writers

### Action Learning Systems

In 2003, the National Commission on Writing published *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*. While exploring the decline in students’ writing scores across the nation, it discovered that teachers were providing more opportunities for their students to write than ever before. So why wasn’t their writing improving? Students were provided with less feedback, which allowed their errors to fossilize. For students’ writing to improve, they not only need opportunities to write on a daily basis, but they also need to receive explicit instruction to help them improve their fluency, confidence, and writing skills. An effective writing program must do three things: integrate reading, writing, vocabulary, and conventions instruction; explicitly teach and guide students through the stages of the writing process; and provide students with practice in independently applying these stages in an on-demand context.

### Sequencing and Integrating Writing Instruction

A successful writing program provides students with multiple opportunities to write in a variety of genres. One challenge teachers face is how to sequence this instruction. An effective program begins with assignments drawn from the writer’s own experiences, allowing students to develop the writing fluency and confidence that they will need to be successful with subsequent, more challenging assignments.

As students progress through the stages of the writing process, they must also receive explicit instruction in academic language, conventions, and reading comprehension. Writing instruction is most meaningful when it is integrated with the rest of the language arts curriculum. Because the development of listening and speaking skills precedes that of reading and writing skills, students must also be provided with frequent opportunities for structured student interaction.

### The Stages of the Writing Process

#### Prewriting “What do I want to say?”

Prewriting accounts for approximately 85% of the time for a given writing assignment. Many students struggle when responding to a prompt—they may read it quickly and begin writing based on a cursory understanding of the assignment. Therefore, students must be taught to deconstruct the prompt, a process that helps them to identify the audience and purpose for their writing as well as the requisite features for the assignment. Students should also be provided with the scoring guide prior to each writing assignment. This helps to demystify the grading process.

Prewriting activities should be carefully designed to stimulate students’ thinking about a topic. The activities should guide students from selecting a topic to identifying the details that will be incorporated into their first drafts. Graphic organizers can serve as thinking maps to help clarify and organize ideas.

### **Writing** “Here’s what I think.”

Writing, the second stage in the process, is the act of completing a first draft. While prewriting leads the writer into a task, writing serves to narrow and refine the topic at hand. This draft gives the writer a chance to find out what she has to say, yet allows a searching, tentative quality to remain in the writing. There is a commitment in composing a first draft. However, knowing the revision stage is still to follow leaves the writer open to create without the fear of making errors in form or coherence.

For struggling writers, a blank page can be intimidating. Writing frames are one scaffold that can help students gain confidence as they compose their drafts and develop their writing skills. Like any scaffold, frames should be reduced or removed when they are no longer needed, and students should be encouraged to move beyond the frames’ limitations.

### **Revising** “Did I say what I meant to say?”

When asked to revise with little or no instruction, students respond by simply recopying a draft to make it look neater. Few students revise their intended meaning or make decisions regarding audience and voice. For struggling writers, it can even feel disheartening to be asked to revise. However, revision should be celebrated as an opportunity to make sure that the writer said what he really meant to say. Revising should never be considered a punishment for getting it wrong the first time!

When revising, it is critical that students retain a sense of power over their own writing. Asking the writer to read his first draft aloud to a partner serves multiple purposes: it is a first act of publishing; it allows the writer to “catch” errors he may have made; and it helps the partner to focus on the ideas expressed rather than errors in conventions and to gain a better understanding of the process by objectively

viewing another’s work. During revision, a teacher should not attempt to show the student how to get the assignment “right.” If a student is not given absolute changes that must be made, he retains ownership of his piece.

### **Editing** “Can my audience understand me?”

After a writer has clarified what she wants to say, she still needs to place words side by side to convey meaning to her reader. Students must understand that writing is more than just putting spoken ideas into print.

Editing includes careful attention to the conventions of writing (usage, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling). It can be overwhelming for a struggling writer to be told to edit her work, and the results of peer editing can be disastrous, with second drafts appearing worse than the original. However, when students are asked to edit for one thing at a time, especially if they have just been taught the specific convention, the editing process is more successful.

### **Publishing** “Look at what I wrote!”

In some cases an author writes for himself alone, but often writers purposely create their works to be read by a wider audience. Writing for a real audience is an important key for motivating student writers to revise. Knowing peers, parents, and teachers will read a piece of writing motivates students to aim for a higher level of performance. Consider when, where, and to whom students can present their writing.

For a struggling writer, there are few experiences more terrifying than facing a blank page and being told to write. However, through enthusiastic and explicit instruction in the stages of the writing process, a student writer can gain both the skills and confidence needed to help her become an effective writer.