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Writing: A Core Skill Pages 10-14

What Writing Is and Isn't

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Writing instruction has little to do with kits and worksheets. It's messier—and more joyous—than that.

Let's keep this in perspective: The Common Core State Standards are a *guiding* document. Educators must look beyond the artificial boundaries assumed in such a document and dive into pedagogy, process, content knowledge, and research that reveals best practice in teaching writing.

Many attempt to define writing by putting it in a box; developing a checklist, worksheet, or rubric; establishing grade-level performance exemplars; or listing rules or elements of style. In doing so, they organize writing into a neat, restrictive corner, distilling it to a one-way-to-do-it solution. And the step-by-step programs keep moving on, trampling on the varying student needs that exist in each classroom.

The art of teaching writing standards of any kind blossoms from a full understanding of what writing is and isn't. And that's a good place to start.

Writing Isn't ...

In a Kit or Program

Educators who really pay attention to those 32 faces in their classrooms, hour after hour, day after day, know that quick-fix, teach-from-a-kit, pre-made, one-size-fits-all scripted lessons don't convert reluctant writers into independent ones—even if those lessons have a Common Core-aligned sticker on the cover.

Textbooks—whether on paper or viewed on an iPad—don't make students care about writing, much less revise and polish their work. Colorful kits, blossoming with activities passed off as minilessons, won't make students uncover writing's power. And a writing worksheet won't set them on fire, even if it's been repackaged as a grammar video game or an app that incorporates bright colors and movement.

Classrooms across the United States are brimming with voices waiting to be heard. Rather than staying stuck in our anxiety about our last benchmark test or the next standardized test, we teachers need to seize the moment before us. Right now, we have the power to reach our students, to listen to them and create writers.

And that's not contained in a kit. Writing blooms in the messy "now" moment of a free write or conference, in the talk, in the composition of thought.

Test Preparation

With all the focus on tests, pretests, benchmarks, results, and scores, students see that we want to raise scores at all costs. Many children believe that the purpose of writing—of school, for that matter—is to pass tests. As for us teachers, we're encouraged to tutor students for tests before, during, and after school, even on Saturdays. Writing time diminishes in favor of remediation and data mining. Instruction is lost.

And so is the trust that students and teachers have in themselves and their writing abilities. Although test-preparation resources were originally designed to help students, they actually pigeonhole them for remediation, target their weaknesses, and remind them—with pages of evidence—of their flaws, inabilities, and shortcomings.

Does this make writing successful? Or does it cause more problems in a writer's development? According to a *New York Times* article (Dillon, 2010) that discusses recent findings from a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation project on teacher effectiveness,

One notable early finding ... is that teachers who incessantly drill their students to prepare for standardized tests tend to have lower value-added learning gains than those who simply work their way methodically through the key concepts of literacy and mathematics. ...

Teaching to the test makes your students do worse on the tests. It turns out all that "drill and kill" isn't helpful.

If our students aren't trusted to use their own knowledge and abilities to discover and develop ideas, then they'll have difficulty taking a test on their own—any kind of a test, whether at school or at work. Even worse, when writing is seen as an outside-in process of learning and memorizing rules, students are robbed of the beauty of writing as a tool for thinking and discovery. Students are denied experiencing the power of writing to capture a time, a place, a face, a feeling, a story, a thought, an explanation, an argument.

Actually, we can best prepare our students for tests by *not* preparing them for tests. We'd be better off igniting the truth about what makes writing work so that students know how to proceed when a blank page or screen awaits.

Memorizing Parts of Speech

Although a cursory glance at the new Common Core English language arts standards could imply that language is about labeling parts of speech and defining grammatical terms, it's actually the *application* of these grammatical moves that will be tested. A rigorous test won't ask students, "Which word is the adjective in the following sentence?" That's a knowledge-level question, exactly the type of question that the new, more rigorous, standards and assessments are designed to replace.

Take this Common Core language arts standard from grade 3: *Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences* (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). First of all, we can't teach this standard all at once. We'd need to break it down to something more manageable, such as "understand the function of adjectives in general and their functions in particular sentences." A 3rd grader would need to understand that adjectives *describe*, that they answer the questions, *What kind?* and *How many?* But failing to apply that knowledge in the context of a specific sentence and, instead, memorizing a mindless chant just won't help.

Best practice in grammar lessons suggests that we focus on function and practical application. For example, let's look at a sentence from Patrick McDonnell's picture book *Me ... Jane* (2011):

Jane had a stuffed toy chimpanzee named Jubilee.

When I ask students what they notice, some note capital letters, some note rhyming words, and some note the verb in past tense: Jane no longer *has* the stuffed toy. In these discussions, students begin to see the application of grammatical terms as an evaluative exercise rather than rote memorization.

I then display the sentence without any adjectives:

Jane had a chimpanzee named Jubilee.

I follow this up by displaying other versions that contain a single adjective:

Jane had a toy chimpanzee named Jubilee.

Jane had a stuffed chimpanzee.

I ask students what they notice. Students see that in the sentence that has no adjectives—Jane had a chimpanzee named Jubilee—Jubilee is suddenly alive, as opposed to being a "toy" or "stuffed." Unlike having students complete

a worksheet that asks them to circle the adjectives, teaching grammar in context enables young writers to actually see how adjectives function. Now when students compose their own sentences, they'll apply this knowledge and be able to evaluate their own success.

Separate from Reading

Educators often separate writing and reading—not to mention the panicked Henny Pennies who run around squawking "Close reading!" "Grammar!" "Author's purpose!"—but the truth is these activities are inextricably linked. We can teach them as part of one meaning-making endeavor.

When Beyoncé sings, "If I were a boy" in her well-known song by the same name, young writers notice that she says "if I *were*," not "if I *was*." That's close reading. The point of learning about the subjunctive mood, which is targeted in the grade 8 language arts standards, isn't so much to label it as to *use* it. The power of the subjunctive mood is to communicate something that's contrary to fact. Students understand that Beyoncé sings "If I were a boy" precisely because she isn't. And this new understanding that students gleaned from their reading will surface in their writing.

Writing and reading are more than standards—they're meaning-making itself. They are processes that can address the standards. Each application and discussion leads reading back to writing, and reading and writing back to grammar. It's all connected.

Writing Is ...

A Transaction

Writing is a transaction between writers and readers. As writers of text—as humans—we desperately want to be heard, to receive a response, to connect. We think about how we're going to say what we want to say, and we imagine how readers will react in their transaction with our text. We must not dehumanize this most human of expressions.

When students become a number, a subpopulation, a target of intervention, we unintentionally dehumanize them. But when we listen to what they have to say rather than just thinking about fixing every problem, when we understand their intentions and share the next right thing with them, we humanize them. We need to respond to the writer, not the writing. The most powerful information we need if we are to understand our students is right in our classrooms, in our students' written and spoken words.

Groping for power, young writers long to connect to audiences. We can hone students' ability to conquer written expression, just as a video game challenges them to move to the next level at every turn. Breaking the writing process into predictable chunks from time to time gives students a peek into the world of writers.

When students free write or list ideas quickly, they experience the joy of invention from the inside. When we model how to take a sentence from failing to fabulous by adding concrete detail, we give them something they can do, a way to solve a writer's problem. Then we provide the time and the space for them to experiment with the sentence revision, share, and evaluate.

We can help students understand that writing makes things possible, no matter what they choose to do in their lives: Scientists record and report observations; mathematicians explain abstract principles; website owners write content. Find ways to use popular technology or writing on the web to link the writing task to audience interaction. Establish a classroom blog, write a Twitter feed or make a Facebook wall for a literary character, create a Pinterest board for a book's setting, try writing "listicles" using the BuzzFeed structure of numbered lists (such as "Five Lessons Every Middle School Student Must Learn").

Writing is alive and messy. It involves taking risks, which means making mistakes. And mistakes are necessary for growth. As writing and higher-order thinking unfold in tandem in the classroom, so will joy and rigor.

A Skill That Can Be Learned

Writing is a process. We must teach it as one that's responsive to students' needs even as it's mindful of the standards. We have to know our standards well enough to address the struggles that all writers have in the context of their own writing: finding a focus, including pertinent detail, creating cohesion. When we address a student need that also happens to be a standard, we build a writer.

Teaching writing starts with giving students well-written texts. According to a Carnegie Foundation study (Graham & Perin, 2007), one research-proven way of teaching writing is using models; students begin by reading the mentor text, then analyzing it, then emulating it in their own writing.

The importance of using mentor texts is in the analysis that naturally comes through the conversation that follows the reading, in the transaction with the text. When we talk about what works in the writing we read, we become more consciously aware of it (Eagelman, 2012). As students note what a writer does well, they are, at the same time, creating a menu of options they can use in their own writing. For example, when Jasmine notices that Leonard Pitts

starts his editorial with a list of commands in second person, she now has another option for how to begin her essay.

An Igniter of Passion and Freedom

We can't motivate students to write by deluging them with terminology or someone else's bulleted lists. We have to ignite students' passions and let their souls, thoughts, fears, truths, experiences, and arguments shine on the page.

Writers need a writing community that brims with possibility. As their teacher, you need to guide your students to find their own paths, discover their own passions, and put these passions down in writing. We infuse possibility into our writing classroom when we provide a choice of topic and approach, expose students to various genres and styles, and connect assignments to current obsessions and concerns.

So often students cry out, "I can't write!" "I hate writing!" or "I can't think of anything to say!"

But have you ever heard a student say, "I can't think of anything to text to my friends"? They're never at a loss for what to say to their classmates when they're supposed to be listening to their teacher or doing classwork.

Let's plunge into that flow of thinking and passion waiting to be tapped. Writing should be a joyous act and, frankly, so should the teaching of it.

Writing Starts Now

Our student writers need to be heard right now, not in a benchmark, not in the last essay before this one, but right here in their words, discovering and becoming. Meet them there, and no list of standards or high-stakes test will be out of reach. No matter the circumstances, we are duty-bound to float above the din and do what is *write*.

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