

# WRITING: COMPOSING TEXT

## 4

### WHY WE WRITE

If reading and writing are two sides of the same basic process, what is this process exactly, and how are its two sides different from or similar to one another? The basic process of literacy is the making of meanings with text, and as we know from previous chapters, this meaning-making is both cognitive—a process of thinking and generating knowledge—and social—a process of sharing and communicating with others (Hull, 1989). Although comprehending and composing are, in this sense, both acts of construction, there is an important difference in the behaviors and outcomes of the two major literacy processes. In reading, we give shape to meanings that are initially composed for us by others. We read this book rather than that one, and that makes all the difference in what we experience through reading. Writing is an activity through which we produce meanings for ourselves and others.

One consequence of this active dimension of writing is that, when it is done for authentic purposes, writing involves effort—because we want to get it right—and risk—because we are delivering our meanings to others for their response and evaluation, and to use according to their own purposes as readers. To make this effort and take these risks, developing writers will not only need competence in the behaviors writers use to produce text, but they will also need to develop considerable comfort

with the process of writing and confidence in their abilities. In order to face the challenges of writing and produce work they can be proud of, they will need, in other words, lots of practice, guidance, and encouragement from their teachers and their peers.

Furthermore, to make writing something students will find to be worth working at, we will need to help them understand, through their experiences with writing in and out of our classrooms, why we write. What is the range of purposes for which people, in school and in the wider society, compose texts and offer them to readers? The following list only begins to suggest the multiplicity of these purposes.

- ▶ **Communication:** Along with talk and visual media, writing is a primary means of sharing our stories and our understandings with others. In schools, the acts of writing together and of reading and responding to each other's drafts help to build communities in classrooms. (Zemelman & Daniels, 1998).
- ▶ **Transactions with wider society and economy:** Writing is a means for participation as critical citizens of a democracy. Writing is also an essential skill in most workplaces, where it serves as a means of posing and solving problems, of making reports, and of persuading others to take a particular action.
- ▶ **Thinking:** Writing makes our thinking visible, for ourselves and others. It converts our thinking into a textual form in which we can develop our ideas, reconsider and extend them, promoting "higher-order" thinking.
- ▶ **Learning:** Writing is the prime medium in which knowledge is produced and communicated in all fields of study. For students, writing is an indispensable tool for learning the content and concepts of academic disciplines across the curriculum.
- ▶ **Self-expression:** It is through writing that we explore our thoughts and feelings, tell our stories and communicate them to ourselves and others. Expression is a powerful motivator of good writing (Daniels & Bizar, 1998).
- ▶ **Creativity:** In what James Britton called "its poetic function", writing is a process of making art, a means of shaping language into poems, fiction, plays, creative nonfiction. "Creative" or "imaginative" writing assumes that writing is a source of pleasure and that the reader will experience the text in part for the qualities of its language (Britton, 1975).

If students are to acquire the comfort and confidence they will need to sustain a lifelong capacity for writing, developing writers will need opportunities to explore the full range of purposes and audiences for writing—including the expressive, the creative, and the critical.

An effective writing curriculum is a rich literacy program that requires students to read and write extensively, and learn about genres and literary conventions. Students need to write and generate content and topics for writing on a daily basis. The writing needs to take place across the curriculum and does not always need to be formal writing, but may include:

- ▶ journals
- ▶ learning logs
- ▶ writer's notebook
- ▶ double-entry journals
- ▶ dialogue journals

Teachers need to model good writing and reading habits to show the importance of these activities. Key strategies in the classroom include:

- ▶ teaching writing as a staged recursive process
- ▶ using quality children's literature
- ▶ reading aloud to students
- ▶ allowing independent reading and writing time
- ▶ stressing higher-order thinking skills
- ▶ modeling
- ▶ coaching
- ▶ making the learning of reading and writing as authentic as possible (Daniels, Zemelman, & Bizar, 1999, p.32)

## HOW WE WRITE

Along with learning—from experience—why we write, students also need to understand and to learn for themselves what writers do: the techniques and strategies through which various texts are produced and shared. For the past twenty-five years, the name we have given to this set of behaviors is "the writing process," a sequence of activities for composing that was developed from research observations of practicing writers at work. Although from the beginning researchers made clear that these activities were both optional and recursive—that is, they may not be useful for every kind of writing, and they may be used in any order in the course of composing a work—this recursive process is typically represented in some version of the following stages or "steps":

- ▶ **Prewriting-** gathering ideas, brainstorming, planning, reading, discussing
- ▶ **Drafting-** sustained writing, dialoguing, conferring, thinking on paper, producing a first version
- ▶ **Revising-** conferring, rethinking and rewriting, adding, cutting, shaping, polishing style
- ▶ **Editing-** proofreading, correcting errors in usage
- ▶ **Publishing-** sharing, performing, evaluating

"Writing process" was a leap forward for writing instruction. It gave us a way to teach writing as an activity that can be learned, as opposed to simply assigning and correcting it. And it gave us access to uses of writing in class other than for purposes of demonstrating and evaluating what students already know, or do not know, about a subject.

Perhaps the most valuable insight of "writing process" pedagogy, for students and

teachers, is the understanding that quality writing takes time, and that when it is given sufficient time, writing can be a genuine process of “coming-to-know” (Perl 1987). If we believe that it is through writing that we make discoveries and synthesize new knowledge, then it is unlikely that a paper written without planning or revision will fulfill that potential. Since thinking is often “messy, tentative, and exploratory” (Lytle & Botel, 1988), the opportunity to take one’s time, try things out, and change one’s mind, makes for writing that is not only better expressed but often more thoughtful, more original, and much more enjoyable to read.

In the 1988 Pennsylvania Framework, Lytle and Botel were concerned about the danger of what has come to be known as “process writing”:

*We need to guard against the possibility that process activities become recipe-like and formulaic, and that students come to view them, as recent research suggests may be the case (Applebee, 1986), as a new set of hoops to jump through rather than as empowering strategies for learning, for generating and refining knowledge, and for creating works of art.*

*(Lytle & Botel, 1988)*

In the research cited by Lytle and Botel (1988), Applebee wrote:

*Our work indicates that in many excellent classrooms the various process activities have been divorced from the purposes they were meant to serve. In the original studies of individual writers, the multitude of specific techniques that writers used to aid their planning, revising, or editing, were strategies or routines that they orchestrated to solve particular problems. The choice of appropriate strategies was driven by the task at hand — not by a generalized conception of the “writing process” that the writers used in all contexts . . . [T]he universe of writing tasks, both in and out of school, is large and diverse. Essay exams require one set of approaches, research papers another. The journalist dictating a late-breaking story over the telephone writes in one way, the short story writer in another. In part because studies of writing processes have ignored this diversity, process-oriented instruction easily degenerates into an inappropriate and lockstep formula.*

While we hear of fewer classrooms in which the “five steps” are run through on the five days of a week, or—at the other end of the spectrum—where revision is delayed until the third quarter of the year, there is still, in many schools, too rigid an adherence to the linear formula. The writing process has been literally turned into a thing called “process writing.” Outside of school there is no such genre as “process writing”: there are, rather, differing processes underlying the production of all forms of writing.

As Lytle & Botel (1988) reminded us,

*What is important here is not the teacher’s mandate to revise, but the provision of a classroom community and climate in which students strive to make their meanings clear. To teach revision it is important that students have a “felt need”... If students write for compelling purposes and caring audiences, have the opportunity to learn about how professional writers write, and have high expectations for their own work, they are more likely to want to revise what they have written.*

### Classroom Implications

Writers use processes determined by the purpose and audience for composing. These are best thought of, not as a sequence of distinct “steps,” but as a repertoire of strategies, whose order and uses vary from writer to writer and task to task.

Since it is often hard to get started, many students will need our help in identifying and developing topics they can care enough about to make the investment of time in the writing process worthwhile. Students also need teacher assistance, and that of their peers, in learning to revise for meaning, and to take responsibility for editing and correcting their

errors in style and conventions. Students need to be able to return to “finished” pieces to improve and build on the quality of their previous writing.

Writers need time, in class and out, to:

- ▶ plan
- ▶ think
- ▶ write
- ▶ confer
- ▶ read
- ▶ change their minds
- ▶ write some more

## FOUR LENSES: CONTEXTS FOR WRITING

Lytle and Botel (1988) offer a framework for understanding the multiple contexts which inform and structure authentic acts of learning. They propose four conceptual “lenses” through which we are invited to critically examine “school and classroom practice in language use across the curriculum” (p. 11). In what follows, we use these four lenses—learning as meaning-centered, social, language-based, and human—to look specifically at the teaching and learning of writing.

### ① Writing as Meaning-Centered

When we look at writing as “meaning-centered” activity, we understand that writing is guided and driven by the will to make sense of things. Composing is an act of putting things together in a quest for new understanding. As Lytle & Botel (1988) explain, “[T]he process of writing is generative of meaning: we do not simply write down or transcribe ideas that are formed before we put them to paper. The act of composing itself brings us ideas and insights” (p. 13). It is in part for this reason that we advocate the use of writing as a tool for learning and thinking

across the curriculum: in writing we bring together our prior knowledge about a topic in science or history, with our new questions and insights, and with the concepts and vocabulary we are learning in class and from our reading. The result is not only better recall of the "content" of the content area but an improved "insider's" understanding of the methods and materials of the discipline. At best, through writing, we can learn to think and work like historians or scientists.

To stress the meaning-centered dimension of writing is not to deny that writing also comprises a set of technical skills to be learned, or to minimize the difficulties of achieving a confident mastery of, for example, handwriting, keyboarding, spelling, syntax, and punctuation. George Hillocks (1986), based on his thorough analysis of decades of research on grammar instruction, concluded "none of the studies reviewed...provides any support for teaching grammar as a means of improving composition skill" (p. 138). Current best practices in writing include teaching the "conventions" of standard written English in short focused "mini"-lessons, as needed, in the context of ongoing writing activities, delaying, but not overlooking, concern with editing to the later stages of the writing process.

One consequence of putting meaning-making first is that it requires us to ask: whose meanings matter most in school-based writing? Writing process advocates, from Graves to Routman, have consistently advocated that students be given a greater degree of choice as to the topics and forms of their writing. We know, in general, that choice is a powerful motivator—we prefer to do that which we have chosen to do over what we have been told to do. In writing, we know that it is only when students have a strong sense of "ownership" that they come to care enough about the intelligence of their thinking-on-paper, and about the quality of their written product, to work hard at revising and editing. It is also true, however, that in every classroom there is "content" to be learned and curriculum to be taught, and that these, like the technical skills of writing, require considerable direct instruction and the fulfillment of teacher-made assignments. The goal here is a balance of self-chosen and assigned work.

The implication of the meaning-centered perspective on writing is that developing writers need, as often as possible, authentic occasions for writing—such as long-term inquiry projects (Short, 1996) and integrative units (Daniels & Bizar, 1999)—not only teacher-made or textbook prompts. Responsible teachers of writing want students to produce

writing that looks and sounds good according to the appropriate conventions of the discourse, but more than anything, they want students to become invested in their writing projects and to mean what they say.

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## Classroom Implications

- **Assignment Design** Assignments can be offered in such a way as to promote students choosing their topics, within the general subject the class has in common; providing interesting problems to work on, clear directions as to purpose, audience, process and fair and open criteria for evaluation (Sloven, 1999, pp. 154-155, adapted from Lytle and Botel).
- **Inquiry Projects** The particular topics to be investigated in "thematic units" are not pre-identified by the teacher, but by groups of students working on the basis of their interests and their reading (Short et al., 1996).
- **Integrative Units** "The curriculum is designed around real concerns students have about themselves and the world" with "the disciplines of knowledge [subject areas] being called upon to support student investigation (Daniels and Bizar, 1999).

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## ② Writing as Social

When we look at writing within a social perspective, it is clear that, although writing well requires a sense of ownership and personal investment, the meanings made by individual writers are not theirs alone. While the composing process, for most writers, requires periods of quiet and solitude, writing becomes meaningful not only in the writer's dialogue with himself or herself on the page, but in the contexts in which the text is produced and received. While real-world exceptions can be found to Lytle & Botel's (1988) claim that "we make meaning in collaboration with others,"

they are correct when they argue that "language is inherently social; writers assume readers, readers imagine writers."

What this means for the writing classroom is that, at several stages of the writing process, the work goes best when it is supported by others, especially peers and teachers in the roles of both fellow-writers and responsive audience. Specifically, **whole-group "brainstorming"** can help the class open up a subject for writing and help individual students find their way to a satisfying topic or a way to organize the paper. **Small group response sessions** can provide feedback on work-in-progress, demonstrating the need for revision and helping the writer hear what the piece says or fails to say. **Peer- or teacher-conferences** can help the writer work through particular difficulties in editing for style or conventions. **Read-arounds** can serve as a form of publishing, affirming what student writers have achieved. Whole-class workshops, in which one or more student papers are carefully read and critiqued, can teach both the author and classmates about effective strategies and aspects of the "craft" of writing. **Pairs or small groups of students** can collaborate on a particular writing project, negotiating together about what to say, and in what order. In every case the act of writing is surrounded by talk to assist the development of meaning within "communities of learners."

Seeing writing as a social practice is also a way of reminding ourselves that writing takes place and finds meaning in a range of social contexts, of which school is only one example. As Applebee (1986) points out "[T]he universe of writing tasks, both in and out of school, is large and diverse." It can be helpful for students to know that what they are learning to do in school will stand them in good stead when they graduate, to know, for example, that "readers and writers in the real world discuss,

plan, research, collaborate, read and edit each others work" (Lytle & Botel, 1988). For this learning to be internalized, Lytle and Botel argue, "as much as possible, classrooms need to provide opportunities for language in the wider social world." This will require some modification of the forms of writing that seem to exist only in and for schools: for example, instead of the book report, experimenting with the book review; instead of the five-paragraph theme, the op-ed essay; instead of the research paper, the informational brochure.

It is important to say again, however, that writing is not always "social." During the writing process, it is often the case that, after some initial talk about topics and ways to get started, writers need sustained solitary time on task, to get their drafts under way. There is another necessary caution, which will be more clear when we look at writing through the "human" or personal lens: if we are asking students to take themselves and their thinking seriously when they write, and especially if we are also asking them to share in their writing thoughts and stories about their personal lives, we are putting them at risk of potentially uncomfortable exposure to the scrutiny, judgment and sometimes even ridicule of others. A mistaken assumption has been prevalent for some time that it is always easier to write about oneself, and that we should always start developing writers off with personal writing before they progress up the "hierarchy of abstraction." While this may be true for some, others suffer and are in effect silenced or driven into subterfuge by the insensitive application of an "expressive writing" pedagogy in classrooms designed as social communities (Finders, 1997).

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### Classroom Implications

Writing goes best when supported by others, with sensitivity to the writer's authentic purposes:

- whole-group brainstorming
  - small-group response session
  - peer- or teacher-conferences
  - collaborative writing (Freedman)
  - workshops of writing-in-progress
  - read-arounds of finished work
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### ③ Writing as Language-based

While proposing that writing is language-based may seem to be stating the obvious, we can learn a great deal about how writing is best learned and taught if we break the proposition into two linked ideas.

- The ways we learn to write are connected to the ways we learn to speak: Writing draws on the basis of oral language development, but writing is also in crucial ways different from speaking.
- Writing is one of the “language arts,”; its development goes hand in hand with the development of reading, speaking and listening.

In the same way that young children learn to talk, we learn to write through years of practice, trial and error, and in the context of social supports (primarily the family and the classroom) that provide both encouragement and motivation for successful communication.

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**Just as talking in young children passes through a sequence of developmental stages, including**

- babbling
- crooning
- approximations of words
- making up words
- rhyming
- joking
- story-telling

**...so writing passes through fairly predictable stages, including:**

- scribbling
- drawing
- forming letters and letter-strings
- temporary spellings
- story-making.

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While both processes require considerable patience and encouragement from caring adults, it is also true that speaking develops much more “naturally” than writing. Writing involves learning complex symbolic code; it requires an ability

to recognize (through reading) the relations of written signs to both sounds and meanings, and an ability to produce meaningful strings of such symbols, on paper, through the interaction of hand and brain. In this sense writing is by comparison a decidedly unnatural act, and one that requires more teaching, coaching, and conscious learning, than does talking.

However, since the ability to compose one’s ideas and tell one’s stories in writing builds directly on the same abilities in talking, it is useful to think of early writing as a form of “speech written down.” Early writing in school will be enhanced to the extent that it draws on the richness and playfulness of children’s oral language, the uses of speech that are most natural to them. But here we run into a challenge from the vastly differing forms of oral language proficiency with which children come to school.

One version of this challenge is young students’ varying levels of preparation, through exposure to books and opportunities for talk with adults. Another version is the challenge presented by the widely differing uses and experiences with language that children develop in their diverse families and communities. Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) extensive study of children’s literacy in Carolina Piedmont culture made clear that both rural working-class white and working-class black children had rich, though quite different, traditions of literacy and story-telling. However, the uses of language that children from both communities learned at home were crucially at odds with the expectations—middle-class and town-based—of their teachers and curriculum once they got to school. Heath proposes that both teachers and students need to become “ethnographers of language”—that is, to study, appreciate and

evaluate their own and other's "ways with words"—if schools are to understand and address the diversity of language that comes into our classrooms as an asset rather a deficit.

When we look at writing as a form of language related to, but different from speaking, we are in a position to recognize the dual and sometimes contradictory implications of the fact that, as discussed earlier, language is a social practice. As a "society" we share a code—standard written American English, whether we name this "the language of power" or "the language of wider communication" (Weaver, 1998)—which every student has a right and a need to learn in the nation's schools. We also need to work with and appreciate in school the rich diversity of oral language and literature we have available as a consequence of belonging to a particularly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.

A major milestone in the development of young readers occurs when they begin to read and re-read their own and each other writings, which they do with as much pleasure as they read their favorite picture story books. According to Routman (1996), "For some children, their first successful reading experiences are with their own written stories. I have found this to be especially true for struggling readers, which is why I often write with them the first books that they read". Thanks to the practice of temporary spelling, young children are no longer essentially held back from writing until they have learned to read or spell. Once students become fluent readers, they are able, and should be expected, to model their own writing on the styles and literary devices of the texts they read.

Readers often use writing to enhance their understanding of school texts and their critical appreciation of literature. Various forms of "response" writing, in journals and "dialectical notebooks," are allowing students to make connections and form questions about what they read, preparing them to participate more thoughtfully in literary discussion, and to write more engaged critical papers. A range of written "extension" activities are available to enable students to give shape to their responses in creative forms that can be shared with classmates. Routman's list includes:

- ▶ dramatic interpretation via Readers Theatre
- ▶ creating a sequel or alternate ending to a story or book

- ▶ journal entries from the point of view of particular characters
- ▶ book jacket end-papers or endorsements
- ▶ letters to the authors (Routman, 2000, p. 73)

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### Classroom Implications

- Use speech to power writing: language experience in the early grades, for dialogue and playwriting in upper grade-levels.
  - Use writing regularly in response to reading from free-response in journals, to recounts and retellings, to composing in the genres of the texts being read in class.
  - Teach spelling through guided practice and assessment, with attention to developmental stages (Routman, 2000, p. 405).
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### 4 Writing as Human

To see writing as a "human" activity is to remind ourselves of all the ways in which writing enacts fundamental human needs, not just school requirements. As we noted above, we write not primarily to demonstrate what we know—the time-honored use of writing in schools— but for a range of more authentic purposes: to express ourselves, to think more clearly, to learn new information, to create works of art, to communicate with others, to take care of necessary business. Schools can enact the same range of purposes in their writing curricula.

Looking through the "human" lens also serves to make visible the "notion that all learners use language to make meaning in unique ways." As Lytle & Botel (1998) explain this fundamental principle: "Students each bring their own fund of prior knowledge and experience. As they progress through school they have the potential to develop their own distinctive styles of reading and writing, their own voices and strategies for learning" .

In teaching writing, we encourage students in this process by helping them to recognize and give shape on paper to their own particular "voice," or "voices." "Writing with voice," according to Peter Elbow, "is writing into which someone has breathed . . . Writing with real voice has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep" (quoted, Fletcher, 1998). Ralph Fletcher & Joanna Portalupi (1998) believe students in third and fourth grade can begin developing the quality of voice in their writing, having recognized its effect—the sense "that the author is a real person talking to us"—in the best children's literature they are reading and experiencing.

We have added the plural "or voices" above, however, because we believe that it is often not helpful, and can indeed be stifling, for children to be told that in their writing they must strive to be totally sincere, to reveal their "true self" expressed in their "authentic voice"—especially when they are then asked to turn their work over to their peers for response or turn it in to their teachers for a grade. The concept of "voice" has been useful in helping to challenge old school-bred myths, such as that one should never use "I" in academic writing, thereby restoring the sense of an author's presence and investment in what is being said. But "voice" in the singular can also be limiting. Instead of always writing in the first person, let us encourage students to write in the second person, addressing their readers rhetorically as "you," or in the third, creating personae through which to explore other ideas and other ways of being in the world. Fiction writing and dramatic monologue are enjoyable ways to expand and play with the notion of voice, and the points of view that lie behind our voices.

Nonfiction, too, need not always be written from a consistent first-person point of view.

Consider, for example, an assignment in which high school students are writing about a car accident, and the teacher invites them to represent the event and its aftermath from multiple perspectives, imagining they are telling the story for: 1. their buddies, 2. their boyfriend/girlfriend, 3. their parent(s), 4. the insurance company's accident report, 5. their priest, 6. the local newspaper, and so on... until we have a nonfiction prose version of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The "facts" of the accident are not falsified, and the writer's "true feelings" may be relatively stable also, but the "voices" in which he or she represents the experiences will be very different, as will the reader's reception and response to the events. This is the rhetorical power of voice in writing, and it takes us well beyond the standard, and intimidating, advice to always "write from the heart" (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998).

Looking at writing through this lens reminds us again that we and our students are "human"—in the colloquial sense that we all make mistakes. It argues for a generous response to the inevitable errors in student writing. Instead of attempting to eradicate errors—something which can be achieved only in the context of safe, bland writing—we need to see errors as, in the words of Lytle & Botel (1998), "efforts after meaning, evidence of some system or concept at work" (p. 14). Instead of correcting them for students, we need to put students in the position, first, of caring enough about their writing and second, of knowing how to go to work on it, to want to shape it into the best possible form when it meets its audience (Hahn, 1995).

Because we are human, when we write, and especially when we turn our work in for evaluation, our feelings are engaged. We know that a great many adults, including teachers, are at least uncomfortable, and at worst downright fearful of writing, either because they were never taught a workable process for getting writing done, or because they were harshly evaluated or over corrected on what they took to be their best efforts. The affective context of writing is clearly very important. Students' attitudes towards writing, and their assumptions about our attitudes towards their work, have as much to do with their success or failure as our attitudes towards and our teaching of processes and strategies (Cleary, 1990).

For this reason, many researchers and practitioners strongly recommend that teachers should write and share their writing with students, in the same way that they expect students to share theirs with each other in collaborative learning groups

(Atwell,1998). By doing so, we as teachers can demonstrate in the most convincing way that writing is valuable, because we do it too, practicing what we teach. We can model for students how we approach the writing process, how we solve the rhetorical problems that always accompany writing. With a draft of our paper on the overhead, they can see how we think on our feet about narrowing our topic, or developing "voice," or reworking a draft full of gaps or contradictions. In this way too, we come to understand the challenges of what we are asking students to do, the rigors of producing text, and the risks and pleasures of sharing our processes and our products.

Finally, it is clear that, because writers develop their abilities at widely differing rates, instruction needs to be individualized to some degree. The "workshop method," whereby students are working on pieces of their own choosing and at varied stages of the writing process, allows for some degree of self-pacing, combined with support from teacher and peers as needed. It is also the case that students' growth in writing abilities can be mapped in broad and overlapping developmental stages. In the next section, we outline the kinds of writing characteristic of the following "literacy stages": early literacy, expanding literacy, enhancing literacy, and lifelong learning. It is important to note that the literacy activities recommended at each level may be introduced or repeated according to the developmental readiness of particular groups of students at any grade level.

will probably have an awareness of language at the early literacy stage (preschool and kindergarten). Their written language is common to their speaking vocabulary and they recognize that writing is talk written down. Students use scribbles and temporary spelling to convey messages. They may be able to tell or read what they have written and sometimes an adult can decipher the writing. Students at this stage also will dictate what they want to say and tell or read it back.

Instruction at the early literacy stage should enable students to:

- ▶ Read daily and discuss what was read
- ▶ Write daily
- ▶ Use drawings, letter strings, scribbles, and letters to convey meaning
- ▶ Gather and share information on a topic
- ▶ Stay on the topic
- ▶ Use own language and storybook language in writing
- ▶ Write phonetically using some correct letter-sound correspondences
- ▶ Draw pictures to tell about what has been written
- ▶ Read what has been written to an audience
- ▶ Use some conventions of the language (capitals, punctuation) to support meaning

## **WRITING IN THE EARLY LITERACY STAGE**

If children have been read aloud to, they

## **WRITING IN THE EXPANDING LITERACY STAGE**

Students need to read and be read to daily, so they can hear and experience a variety of language. As students progress to an expanding literacy stage (grades one through three), they begin to master the print-sound code. They realize that words are made up of letters and the letters correspond to sounds. Most of what students write they can read. They can match what they say to what they read. Recommendations from Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children include:

*Once children learn to write letters, they should be encouraged to write them, use them to begin writing words or parts of words, and use words to begin writing sentences. Beginning writing with invented spelling can be helpful for developing understanding of phoneme identity, phoneme segmentation, and sound-spelling relationships. Conventionally correct spelling should be developed through focused instruction and practice. Primary grade children should be expected to spell previously studied words and spelling patterns correctly in their final writing products. Writing should take place regularly and frequently to encourage children to become more comfortable and familiar with it. (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 2000).*

Much of writing at the expanding literacy stage tends to be narrative because the curriculum tends to focus on narrative. Wray & Lewis (1997) suggest that early genres of writing need to include labels, observational comment, recounts, and narratives.

**Recounts** are written to retell events, to inform, or entertain the audience. They usually include: a "scene setting" opening, a retelling of events as they occurred, and a closing statement. They are usually written in past tense, in chronological order, and focus on individual participants using doing or action clauses.

At the expanding literacy level, students are able to write about things they have learned. They are encouraged to do more informational writing. They can gather, collect, and share information while staying on the topic. Haneda & Wells (2000) argue that writing is a powerful way for developing one's own understanding of the topic and is a tool for knowledge building. Wray & Lewis (1997) identify reports, explanations, and

procedures as the main informative genres at this stage.

**Reports** are written to describe the way things are (or were). A report suggests: an opening general classification, a more technical classification, and a description including qualities, parts and their functions. It is usually written in present tense, in non-chronological order, focuses on generic participants, and uses "being" and "having" clauses.

**Explanations** explain a process involving natural or social phenomena or explain how something works. An explanation includes: a general statement to introduce the topic and a series of logical steps explaining how or why something occurs. It is usually written in simple present tense, using *then*, *next*, *after*, or *because*, *therefore* conjunctions, and uses mainly action clauses.

**Procedures or instructions** explain how something is done through a series of sequenced steps. A procedural text includes: a statement of what is to be achieved, a list of materials or tools needed to achieve the goal, a series of sequenced instructions, and sometimes a diagram or illustration. It usually is written in simple present tense or imperative (*do this*, *do that*), is chronological, focuses on human agents rather than individuals ("first you take" rather than "first I take"), and consist of doing and action clauses.

## Instructional Implications at the

## Expanding Literacy Stage

Instruction at the expanding literacy stage should enable students to do various types of writing.

### Narrative Writing

- ▶ Write stories, poems and plays.
- ▶ Include detailed descriptions of people, places, and things.
- ▶ Use relevant illustrations.
- ▶ Include characters, setting and plot.
- ▶ Use dialogue.
- ▶ Develop a problem and solution.
- ▶ Write clearly a beginning, middle, and end.

### Informational Writing

- ▶ Write descriptions, letters, reports and instructions.
- ▶ Write a well-developed paragraph(s) with relevant details that stays on topic.
- ▶ Use relevant illustrations and graphics.
- ▶ Include cause and effect.
- ▶ Use a journal or learning log to convey learning.

### Conventions

- ▶ Use temporary spelling for unfamiliar words.
- ▶ Spell common, frequently used words correctly.
- ▶ Use appropriate capitalization (first word in sentences, proper nouns, pronoun "I").
- ▶ Use appropriate punctuation (periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes).
- ▶ Use correct parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs).
- ▶ Write complete sentences (simple, compound, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, imperative).

## WRITING IN THE ENHANCING LITERACY STAGE

As students move through the upper elementary and middle school grades, they move into an enhancing literacy stage. At this level, writing should take place daily, with uninterrupted writing time provided. Students should have access to what they have already written so that they can revisit their writing and reflect on their work. At this stage, students know what they want to write about and can address a specific topic.

Students at the enhancing literacy stage have a deepening understanding of narrative, as they include traditional story structure (characters, the problem, events, solution) in their writing. Characters' feelings and actions are reflected in their narrative writing. Students also engage in persuasive writing activities. According to Pennsylvania's Writing Assessment Handbook (2000) persuasive writing "moves the reader to take action or to form or change an opinion." This type of writing requires thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It also requires the writer to take a stand on a situation. The Handbook states that persuasive writing has several functions: "to state and support a position, opinion or issue; or to defend, to refute or to argue." Wray and Lewis (1997) write:

*"Persuasive writing usually consists of an opening statement of position, the arguments, and a summary and restatement of the opening position. It is usually written in the simple present tense, using logical rather than temporal sequence."*

With students required to respond to "high stakes" assessment, teaching them strategies for writing on demand helps them learn how to organize, pace themselves, and take control of their writing to meet required deadlines. On-demand writing requires that students draw on background knowledge and experiences to develop a clear response to a given topic. When students respond to essay test questions, writing persuasive letters, present findings, and compose personal narratives, they are involved in on-demand writing (Downing, 1995, p. 200).

## Instructional Implications at the Enhancing Literacy Stage

Instruction at the enhancing literacy stage should enable students to do various types of writing.

### Narrative Writing

- ▶ Write poems, plays and multi-paragraph short stories.
- ▶ Write detailed descriptions of people, places and things.
- ▶ Use relevant illustrations.
- ▶ Use dialogue.
- ▶ Use figurative language.
- ▶ Include literary elements (characters, setting, plot, theme, point of view).
- ▶ Use literary conflict.

### Informational Writing

- ▶ Use journal writing to convey learning (response journals, double-entry journals and learning logs).
- ▶ Write multi-paragraph essays, descriptions, letters, reports, instructions.
- ▶ Take notes.
- ▶ Use sources to write on a topic for a report.

### Persuasive Writing

- ▶ Write an opinion and support it with facts.
- ▶ Write clearly stated position with supporting details.
- ▶ Cite evidence in writing.

### Conventions

- ▶ Use correct spelling for high frequency, previously studied words, and words following a pattern.
- ▶ Use capital letters correctly.

- ▶ Use correct punctuation (periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes, colon, semicolons, parentheses).
- ▶ Use correct parts of speech (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions, interjections).
- ▶ Use complete sentences (simple, complex, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory, imperative).

## WRITING IN THE LIFELONG LEARNING STAGE

Writing needs to extend across the curriculum and be used as a tool for learning in all content areas. Haneda & Wells (2000) state that "when writing is used as a means of knowledge building, not only do students extend their repertoire of writing strategies but the effort they put into creating functionally effective texts plays a significant role in their learning and enhances the development of shared understanding among all those involved."

Langer's (1986) research suggests writers at the high school level can compose a point of view with a defense. Writers present and elaborate on a thesis. Reasons, explanations, and defenses are given for a point of view. Wray & Lewis (1997) write about students composing discussions:

*Discussions are written to present arguments and information from different viewpoints. Discussions usually consist of a statement of the issue and a preview of the main arguments, arguments for plus supporting evidence, and recommendations given as a summary and conclusion. They are usually written in simple present tense, using logical order rather than temporal conjunctions, and focusing mainly on generic rather than particular participants.*

This type of “real world” writing creates enthusiasm in older students. When students write for an audience beyond the classroom, it usually has a current topic, a subject students know about, and a subject which students have strong feelings about (Styron, 1996). Timeliness, relevance, and passion make writing work.

It is at this stage that educators need to consider the issue of functional writing. Much more attention needs to be directed toward identifying the uses of writing for functional purposes in work places and then finding connections in our classrooms to enable students to practice such writing.

### **Instructional Implications at the Lifelong Literacy Stage**

Instruction at the lifelong literacy stage should enable students to do various types of writing.

#### **Narrative Writing**

- ▶ Write short stories, poems and plays.
- ▶ Use relevant illustration.
- ▶ Use dialogue.
- ▶ Use figurative language.
- ▶ Include literary elements (characters, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone, style).
- ▶ Apply literary conflict.
- ▶ Use literary devices (ex. rhyme, alliteration, personification, irony, foreshadowing).

#### **Informational Writing**

- ▶ Use journal writing to convey learning (response journals, double-entry journals, and learning logs).
- ▶ Write research paper, essays, analyses, evaluations.
- ▶ Use charts, maps, graphs, tables, illustrations, photographs.
- ▶ Use primary and secondary sources.
- ▶ Take notes and make notes.

#### **Persuasive Writing**

- ▶ Write persuasive pieces including clearly stated position or opinion, convincing, elaborated, and properly cited evidence.

## Functional Writing

- ▶ Write a resume and cover letter
- ▶ Complete various types of forms
- ▶ Record activities, experiences, interests, honors.
- ▶ Friendly letter
- ▶ Business letter
- ▶ Advertisements
- ▶ Web pages
- ▶ Manuals
- ▶ Contracts
- ▶ Pamphlets
- ▶ Memos

## NEW CHALLENGES IN WRITING INSTRUCTION

While the core insights of “writing process” theory and the “workshop” method are still valid, there are also significant shifts of emphasis in literacy instruction, with new challenges and opportunities for teachers of writing. In general, the pedagogical pendulum—which in the past twenty-five years had swung all the way from a heavy emphasis on grammar and the formal written product to an emphasis on fluency and personal expression—appears to be settling closer to the middle. Literacy learners are understood to need a rich environment of varied literature to read and varied opportunities to write and discuss; they also need focused instruction in the strategies of good readers and writers. They need choice, but they also need direction; they need to learn at their own pace, but they also need clear expectations; they need to write about “what they know best,” and also to use writing for learning new material. In writing, as in reading, “balanced instruction” is the goal.

In the section that follows, we focus briefly on four new challenges arising from current research and practice: writing quality, focus on skills, multiple genres, and the role of technology.

## Writing Quality

We have been relatively successful in establishing that writing can be taught and in having children writing much more than they used to. The task now focuses on developing the quality of student writing and the range of genres in which, and purposes for which, they can write, in and out of school.

Students need to develop not only fluency, but also knowledge and practice in the craft of writing: what writers do to extend and shape their work. Strategies for invention and revision are the focus of popular recent books by writers-who-teach such as Ralph Fletcher (1993) and Barry Lane (1993). Fletcher’s *What a Writer Needs* offers both writerly advice and strategies for teaching such elements as specificity, character, voice, beginnings and endings, tension, sense of place, use of time, and “unforgettable language.” In Fletcher’s 1998 offering, *Craft Lessons*, these strategies are distilled into “lessons” designed for grades K-2, 3-4, and 5-8.

Clearly, to improve the quality of students’ writing, we will need to improve our teaching of revision. As Lytle & Botel (1988) argue, “What is important here is not the teacher’s mandate to revise, but the provision of a classroom community and climate in which writers strive to make their meanings clear. To teach revision, it is important that students have a ‘felt need’”. Even this will not be enough, however, unless we also provide a repertoire of workable strategies for revising. Lane’s (1993) *After the End* starts from the premise that “revision is more than a stage in a four- five- or seven step process; it is the source

of the entire process” (5). Simply putting students into cooperative learning groups, even armed with a revision checklist, is no guarantee that they will know how to help each other rethink and improve their writing. Lane’s book, which is most appropriate for upper elementary, middle and high school, offers a “toolkit” for teaching and learning the art of revision as part of the ongoing creation of good writing. Exercises address “concepts of craft” such as details, leads, snapshots, “thoughtshots,” scenes, and (again) voice. Both books have more to say about narrative and informational writing than about other genres. In the light of the challenge of “multiple genres,” we still need good resources for revising poetry and for rethinking the traditional school-based forms of the essay.

### Focus on Skills

Another dimension of writing quality is, of course, the one that used to be considered of primary importance: correctness in grammar and mechanics. The prevalence of large-scale assessments of writing, combined perhaps with an emphasis on publication and “demonstration portfolios,” has re-accentuated concern for the quality of finished products and, in particular, their conformity to the conventions of edited American English.

The shift from teaching “grammar” to learning the “conventions” of standard “usage” is promising and important. “Grammar,” which literally refers not to standard usage but to underlying “formal patterns—rules, if you wish—in which words are arranged to convey meanings,” is mastered as we learn to speak our native language (Schuster, 1995).

Instead of teaching isolated grammar lessons—the identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagramming of sentences, etc.—the aim is to teach “conventions” of standard English usage, recognizing that conventions vary from group to group and from discourse to discourse. According to Constance Weaver (1998), current research and practice supports teaching conventions in the context of students’ writing process, as they are needed for the particular forms of writing being learned.

*Peer editing, teacher conferences, and focused skill lessons (“mini-lessons”) are recommended over whole-class instruction extending over several class periods.*

Weaver cautions that “some basic grammatical concepts may need to be taught aside from the writing process itself”. What she calls “a minimum of grammar for maximum benefits ... probably requires no more than a dozen terms”. The goal is to enable students to internalize their knowledge of conventions and, through the practice of careful proofreading, to take responsibility for producing work that is as correct as they know how to make it, at their current stage of development as writers. While they learn the conventions of standard written English, students can also recognize, appreciate and produce in their own writing, the “alternative grammars” (Romano, 2000) and written dialects they will find in much of the best contemporary literature, as well as in the speech of friends and family in their homes and communities. Weaver calls this “teaching the power of dialects [along with] the dialects of power”.

In summary, years of research on grammar and usage exercises have proven that teaching grammar and usage in isolation does not lead to improving students’ writing and speaking skills. Teachers should teach the students the vocabulary of grammar by calling nouns and verbs by their names when writing and reading (Routman, 1996; Schuster, 1999). They should present selected aspects of grammar in the context of students’ writing when they are revising and editing their writing, typically focusing on only one or two concepts at a time (Hahn, 1995). Instruction should address the needs of the student based on samples of his or her work and on teacher observation. Students can also be clustered together for a “focus lesson” or “mini-lesson” to improve a particular skill. Routman (1996) writes “what seems to help students most is teaching and discussing word usage and sentence construction in the context of writing with intention for a specific audience”.

## Multiple Genres

Whereas elementary schools have traditionally emphasized the writing of “stories” drawn from children’s lives and secondary schools the writing of “essays” based on reading or research, recent state and national standards, as well as current best teaching practice, emphasize the varieties of writing in school and in the real world. The Pennsylvania Academic Standards focus on three “types” or “modes” of writing in which students are to become proficient (narrative, informational, and persuasive). This is helpful in extending our thinking about the range of purposes for which people use writing. It is important to note, however, that the modes are not genres. The genres in which real writing takes shape, and in which we encounter it as readers, often creatively combine narrative, informational, or persuasive writing: poetry, playwriting, nonfiction, letters, opinion pieces, diaries, journalism, fiction and so on. Each genre has numerous sub-genres within it—science fiction, mystery, gothic, romance, flash fiction, literary fiction, etc.—which can be enjoyable for students to experiment with.

Routman (1996) notes that “most of us write in multiple genres and formats ...determined by our needs, purposes and interests. Our students’ writing can and should reflect the same authenticity, even within the bounds of required curriculum and standards”. The performance standards for writing developed by the New Standards project require high school students to produce the following: a report, a response to literature, a narrative account (fictional or autobiographical), a narrative procedure (e.g. a set of instructions or rules), a persuasive essay, and a reflective essay. These pieces of writing could be created within the written forms we encounter and produce in our daily lives, including our work lives: manuals, contracts,

pamphlets, Web pages, memos—the genres, in other words, of “real world” writing. But the literary genres need not be neglected, either: in both the Pennsylvania Standards and the New Standards for reading, students are invited to explore the properties of literary genres by writing poems and short fiction. Although it is often represented as “mysterious” and “inspired”—and many teachers lack confidence when it comes to creative writing—poetry-writing can and should be taught, since it is the genre that brings students closest to the texture of language itself, its look and sound and texture.

Beyond learning to write in specific literary and “real world” genres, we can also invite our students to experiment with “multigenre writing.” According to Romano (2000), “A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination . . . [It] is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author’s”.

### **New Possibilities for the Role of Technology in Writing**

The availability of word processing on computers has, on balance, been a blessing for writing instruction, in part because it provides the opportunity to revise and edit without endless recopying. Computers have also made relatively easy the “desktop” publication of attractive individual books and class anthologies, with students not only as authors, but also editors, layout artists and publishers. The newer developments in technology as applied to writing look equally promising: on-line publishing of student writing, with opportunity for written response from fellow writers at remote sites; e-mail and/or chat-room discussions of literature among students in different classrooms; student-written and designed Web sites; and the use of “electronic portfolios,” especially in conjunction with “senior projects.”

On the other hand, the impact of the “digital divide” means that these opportunities are not being equitably distributed; and the use of computers for writing cannot be required of students unless access can be assured for all. This may require the flexible scheduling of Writing Centers and computer labs, with open hours before and after school. For those who do have computers at home and in school, there is the danger of overreliance on the machine—particularly spell-checking and

editing software—to assure quality, in lieu of proofreading. And, as a further caution, teachers who encourage students to use the Internet for research or to pursue inquiry questions are finding that along with the excitement of access to a world of diverse opinion and information comes the difficulty of selecting relevant information and assessing its reliability.

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