

RESEARCH ADVISORY

Teaching Writing to Improve Reading Skills

International Literacy Association | 2020

Reading is seen by many as an essential ingredient for learning to write. American author William Faulkner advised that the road to good writing is to “read, read, read.” English poet and critic Samuel Johnson advocated that one must turn over half of a library in order to write a single book. Novelist Toni Morrison argued that writing requires learning to read your own work critically.

These esteemed authors were not mistaken. Reading contributes to learning how to write. Scientific evidence provides ample support for this vital contention. Elementary and secondary students become better writers by reading as well as by analyzing text. For example, when teachers guide students in the analysis of mentor texts, students better understand the purposes and construction of specific genres, including the attributes of strong writing (e.g., ideation, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice). This knowledge provides students with schemas that help them read as well as produce better text.

Is this relationship between reading and writing reciprocal? Does the path to better reading involve becoming a good writer? The answer to these questions presents a paradox. One does not have to learn to write in order to learn to read, as learning how to write or type words in order to read them is not necessary. Even so, writing and the teaching of writing contributes to students’ growth as readers. Collectively, writing and the teaching of writing enhance not only students’ comprehension and fluency when reading but also their recognition and decoding of words in text.¹

This connection makes writing an essential ingredient in learning to read. “Write, write, write and teach writing” must become a more integral part of the equation. We use writing to communicate, persuade, learn, record information, create imaginary worlds, express feelings, entertain, heal psychological wounds, chronicle experiences, and explore the meaning of events and situations.

Let Students Write

“Writing is really fun!”

This second grader’s enthusiasm for writing is not misplaced. The more students write, the better they become at creating their own text.²

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Writing also allows students to become more comfortable with the act of writing and to hone their skills as writers. As students write, they learn by doing. They try out different forms of writing, apply different strategies and approaches for producing text, and gain fluency with basic writing skills such as handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction.

In the elementary grades, students should write for at least 30 minutes a day, and they should write for even longer periods in middle school and high school. Students' writing in middle and high school should be across the subject areas and should include longer and shorter writing tasks (e.g., brief response to reading or a report on a specific topic synthesis). The effects of writing are more likely to be maximized if students write for real purposes and audiences. To master specific forms of writing, students need multiple opportunities to practice each type of text.

Let Students Write About What They Read

Writing about material students have read enhances their comprehension and retention.³ Writing can facilitate students' comprehension of text through the following:

- Fostering explicitness
- Promoting integration of information
- Creating a personal involvement with text
- Encouraging thinking about ideas
- Facilitating new understandings

A range of effective writing activities can be used to improve students' comprehension of text, such as the following:

- Writing answers to teacher-posed questions about text
- Creating and answering in writing personal questions about text

- Taking notes about material read
- Creating a brief written summary of the text
- Producing a written story about the material read
- Describing in writing how to apply ideas from text
- Building an argument to support or refute ideas presented in text

Students can begin using writing as a tool to support comprehension and learning as early as first grade. Teachers should describe the writing activity and its purpose and demonstrate how to use it. For many writing activities, such as summarization, students need additional guided practice.

Attention should also be devoted to helping students learn to use the same writing activity across subjects. For example, students typically apply the same structural elements (e.g., claims, grounds, warrants, supports, rebuttals, qualifications) when building an argument to support or reject an idea presented in an English, a science, or a social studies text. Even so, these elements of argumentation do not appear in the same form or to the same degree in each of these subject areas.

Teach Writing

“I now know how to do it. Someone taught me.”

Reading and writing are complex activities. Both involve multiple skills and processes. As this comment by a fourth grader illustrates, students benefit when they are taught how to read and write.⁴

Why does writing instruction lead to better reading (and vice versa)? Although writing and reading are not identical skills, they each draw on common sources of knowledge. Readers draw on their knowledge of words, syntax, usage, and the features of text to decode words and comprehend sentence and longer pieces of text. Writers use this same knowledge to spell words, craft sentences, and create compositions.

Readers apply what they know about the functions and purposes of written language to help them interpret an author’s message. Writers draw on this same knowledge to help them construct their own text for others to read. Readers use their knowledge of goal setting, accessing information, questioning, predicting, summarizing, visualizing, and analyzing to make

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sense of what is read. Writers take advantage of this same information as they orchestrate and construct their writing.⁵

In the elementary grades, at least 30 minutes a day should be devoted to teaching writing. In middle school and high school, the time devoted to writing varies depending on how frequently teachers in different subjects use writing as a tool for learning. The effects of writing instruction on reading depend on how well writing skills or processes are taught and whether they enhance one or more of the common sources of knowledge previously described: words, syntax, usage, and text features; functions and purposes of written language; and strategic processes for creating and interpreting text.

Help Students Master the Process of Writing

“Writing, working, worrying, wondering, who knows, and help.”

These were the processes a journalism student identified for writing a newspaper article when asked about the “five Ws and one H” of journalism. The correct answers to this test item are, however, *who, what, when, where, why, and how*. These processes provide students with a strategy to remind them that they need to cover all the basic elements when writing a newspaper story.

The process of writing typically involves planning, drafting, revising, and editing:

- *Planning* includes setting rhetorical goals as well as gathering and organizing information to meet these objectives. Plans guide writers as they draft their paper but are best viewed as temporary guides that may be abandoned, expanded, or reworked during writing.
- *Drafting* involves using the planned ideas, knowledge of syntax, orthography, and genre to construct sentences. When plans are clear and well designed, sentence construction is supported. Typing and writing fluency can affect productivity and quality of the written message.
- *Revising* focuses on evaluating and modifying plans, text, or both as needed.
- *Editing* targets the correction of mechanical, spelling, grammar, and other types of errors in text.

These processes are recursive and can occur at any point during writing. Writers often use strategies specific to a particular form of writing when carrying out writing processes, such as the “five Ws and one H” strategy described earlier in this section.

Learning how to navigate the writing process is not something that happens immediately. It requires a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to students. When learning how to plan, draft, revise, and edit their work, students need to see teachers model these processes. Modeling by thinking out loud makes these processes visible and audible to students. Then, as students practice how to apply these processes in whole group and small groups with guided support, students become equipped with the necessary knowledge to plan, draft, revise, and edit text effectively.

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When students are taught how to engage in the process of writing, their compositions become longer, full, and qualitatively better.⁶ Such instruction helps students develop proficiency in the basic thinking processes underlying writing, including the following:

- Setting goals
- Accessing, organizing, and summarizing information
- Predicting what readers need to know
- Questioning, analyzing, evaluating, and making decisions
- Modifying plans and ideas as needed

Teaching students specific strategies for composing a particular type of writing has the added benefit of providing them with information about the purposes and features of such text:

- Who are the main characters?
- What are their motivations?
- Where does the story take place?
- When does the story occur?
- What do the main characters want?
- What happens as they try to achieve their objectives?
- How does the story end?
- How do the main characters react to these events?

Strategies such as these are taught by explaining and discussing their purposes, modeling how to use them, providing guided practice in their application, and helping students learn to apply them in a thoughtful and flexible manner.

To make sense of what is read, students rely on many of the same mental operations applied when writing, including setting goals for reading, accessing information from memory, summarizing material in text, and analyzing, evaluating, and rethinking what is read.⁷

Make Sure Students Spell Correctly

“Then the Spanish gorillas came down from the hills and nipped at Napoleon’s flanks.”

Misspellings like the one in this brief description of Napoleon’s Spanish Wars can lead readers to question the accuracy of the message as well as the wisdom of the writer. The impact of spelling extends beyond a writer’s audience and involves the writer as well. Having to think about how to spell a word when writing can lead students to forget ideas held in memory and not yet committed to paper. It can also lead students to choose a different word that they already know how to spell, restricting word choice in students’ writing.

Teaching students how to spell not only makes them better spellers but also enhances multiple reading skills.⁸ Phonological awareness is improved when young students study how a word is spelled. The examination of how sounds and letters fit together in spelling words provides cues about the phonemic structure of words to be read.

Phonics skills are strengthened when students are taught that particular sounds stand for specific letters. This increases students’ knowledge about the alphabetic principles involved in reading words. Word reading becomes more accurate and fluent when students learn how to spell individual words. This additional practice with spelling words makes it easier to recognize them when reading. These gains in word reading and fluency lead to improved comprehension of text.

Contemporary spelling instruction includes two fundamental practices that positively impact students’ reading and spelling: (a) teaching students how to spell words or spelling patterns they frequently use when writing and encounter when reading and (b) extending students’ understanding of the spelling system through

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word study. Instructional procedures such as word sorting (analyzing spelling words to determine their spelling pattern; e.g., *map* and *make*) and word building (building as many words as possible from a specific spelling pattern such as *at*) strengthen students' knowledge of spelling and reading.

Show Students How to Turn Ideas Into Sentences

“Grammar is what the teachers learn us.”

Students spend much of their writing time converting ideas into sentences that should be grammatically correct, make sense, and use the right words to convey a their intended meanings. As with spelling, sentence mishaps like the one in this opening quote color readers' perceptions of the message and the acumen of the writer.

Constructing written sentences is a complex process involving decisions about word choice, syntax, textual connections, clarity, and rhythm. A limited knowledge about how to construct written sentences diminishes students' success in translating their thoughts into text and imposes a heavy mental load on students, as they are still developing voluntary control over written sentence production processes. Teaching students how to construct written sentences reduces grammatical miscues, increases sentence complexity, and results in qualitatively better text.

Teaching students how to write more complex sentences has an additional benefit: Students become more fluent readers. As students practice producing specific types of written sentences, they gain familiarity and facility with the syntactical structures underlying each of them. This increased recognition of sentence patterns allows students to process information in similar sentences they are reading more quickly.⁹

Written sentence construction can be effectively taught using sentence combining. With this approach, the teacher models how to combine two or more simple sentences into a single complex sentence. This can include providing students with cues about which words should be used to combine sentences (e.g., *although*) and can further involve highlighting the words in the sentences that must be retained when creating a new sentence from them. Students practice combining simple

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sentences into the more complex pattern until they can do this correctly and easily. They should be encouraged to use newly mastered sentence construction skills when writing and revising text.

Teach Reading and Writing Together

“I learned early in life that you can be a reader or writer. I decided to be a writer.”

This missive from Erskine Caldwell, an American novelist, is provocative but not correct. Students can become good writers as well as good readers. When reading and writing receive equal emphasis in literacy instruction, students become better readers and writers.¹⁰ They become more adept at decoding and understanding individual words and comprehending text. Further, they write qualitatively better text that is longer and contains fewer errors.

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Do Reading and Writing Always Need to Be Tied Together?

The answer to this question is *no*. Students need time just to read. They do not need to write about everything they read. In fact, this would take much of the joy out of reading, making it and writing a chore.

Students also need time just to write. Writing activities such as creating a story or personal narrative, expressing feelings, chronicling experiences, exploring the meaning of experiences and events, and using writing as a tool for learning do not need to be preceded by reading.

There are many effective practices for teaching writing that need to be part of a strong literacy program, but they do not need to be tied directly to the teaching of reading. This includes establishing specific goals for students' writing, encouraging students to work together when composing, providing feedback on students' papers, teaching handwriting and keyboarding skills, engaging students in prewriting activities, and using digital and multimodal tools for writing.

Likewise, not all reading practices need to be tied directly to the teaching of writing. For instance, effective practices for promoting reading fluency involve reading and not writing. Although writing can be used to promote students' thinking

about material they are reading, so can oral discussion and other modes of expression such as drawing, music, or physical movement.

Overall, writing and reading share many similarities but are not identical. Reading and reading instruction can improve writing and writing and writing instruction can improve reading. The goal is to provide time for their instruction, opportunities for integration, and authentic purposes for their application.

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NOTES

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