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Build Writing Power

by Ms. Gretchen Bernabei

RECENT SCHOLARLY REPORTS highlight the importance of writing proficiency and provide an important research base for improving writing instruction for middle school students, especially striving readers and English learners (Graham and Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005). These reports make clear that if students are to improve in writing, they must spend significant classroom time writing, and they must learn about writing through explicit instruction, feedback, and reflection.

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Assignments that involve extensive writing can be spread out over several class periods. This allows time for teachers to present models for writing and for students to practice using the models as they generate ideas for writing topics, collect information about the topic, prepare and revise drafts, and solicit feedback from teachers and classmates.

Writing instruction is most successful when it encourages generative thinking — thinking that explores questions deeply, rather than simply producing an expected answer. Teachers prompt generative thinking by creating meaningful activities and helping students form questions that lead to deep understanding of a topic. Classrooms that foster generative thinking are more effective in increasing student learning (Strong, 2001).

Effective Elements of Writing Instruction

These and other aspects of writing are summarized in *Writing Next*, the important research summary by Graham and Perin. *Writing Next* highlights these effective elements of writing instruction:

1. **Study of writing models:** analysis of examples of good writing and the elements of the type of writing represented
2. **Specific goals for writing products:** identifying the target form of writing (such as persuasion) and its characteristics, and setting specific goals for how to develop or improve the end result
3. **Explicit writing strategy instruction:** systematically teaching the steps for planning, revising, and editing text
4. **Instruction in summarizing:** teaching students how to summarize texts
5. **Instruction in sentence-combining:** learning to combine two or more basic sentences to create more complex sentences
6. **Opportunities for collaborative writing:** students work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing
7. **Support for idea generation and prewriting:** activities to help students gather information, develop and organize ideas, and plan their writing

8. **Process writing approach:** extended writing opportunities for real purposes, involving planning, development, and revision, and lessons to address students' writing needs
9. **Writing for content learning:** using writing as a tool to enhance students' learning of content material

The Traits of Good Writing

In addition to the elements of effective teaching, writing power depends on an understanding of the traits of good writing:

- **Focus and Unity:** how well the parts of the writing go together and how clearly the writing presents a central idea
- **Organization:** how well the paper presents ideas in a structure that is appropriate to the writer's purpose and how smoothly the ideas flow together
- **Development of Ideas:** how well the ideas are explained and supported with details and examples and how thoughtful and interesting the writing is
- **Voice and Style:** how real the writing sounds and how it reflects the writer's unique style with powerful, engaging word choice and fluent, varied sentences
- **Written Conventions:** how understandable the paper is because it is free of errors in sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling

Students need ample opportunities to compare and evaluate papers that exhibit and do not exhibit these traits of good writing. They benefit from improving writing samples created by others and then applying these solutions in their own writing.

Applying the Research: *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content features explicit, intensive writing instruction that aligns with the findings of recent scientific research, including the points listed above. Throughout Levels A–E the program features opportunities to write in response to literature as part of the instructional plan, and at Levels C–E to write in response to the Guiding Question in each unit.

In Levels A and B, writing projects that teach and use the writing process offer extended writing assignments. In Levels C–E, this elaborated writing instruction occurs in the Writing Student Book with projects carefully coordinated to each week's instruction in the Reading & Language Student Book.

Across the levels, these projects address the writing forms required by state standards, including narrative, expository, and persuasive writing.

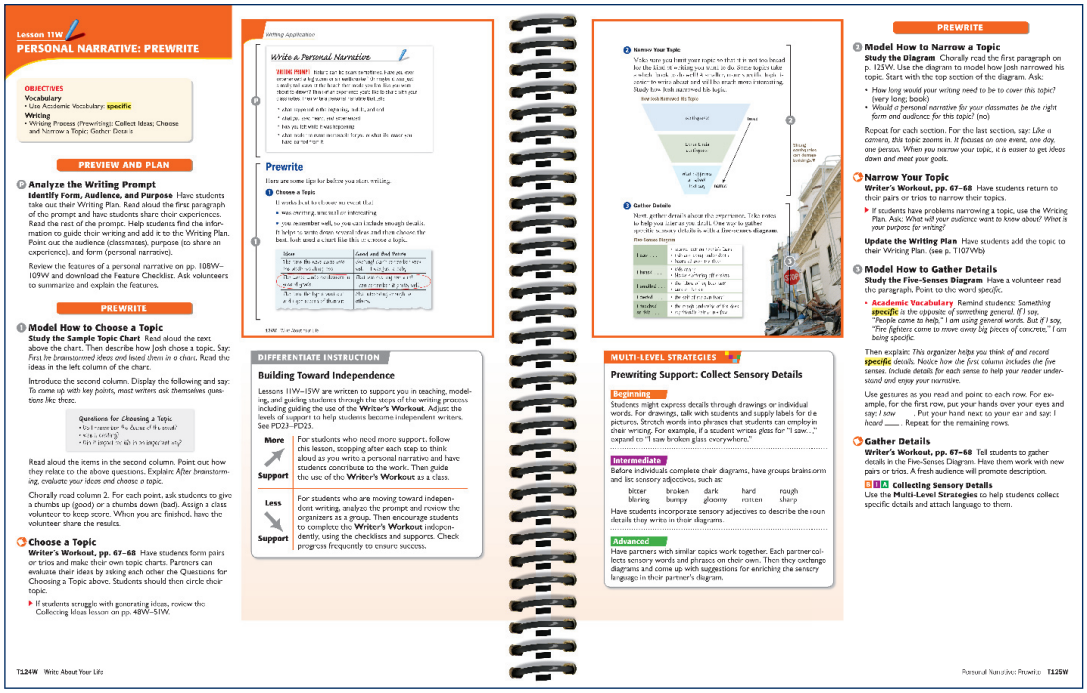
Elements of Effective Teaching Writing projects include research-based best practices. For example, the projects in the Levels C–E Student Books contain:

1. **Writing models** Each project begins with a student writing model which is analyzed for the elements of the writing represented. In addition, an extensive collection of professional writing models is provided for extension. Writing models extend beyond the introduction. As students explore writing traits, strategies, and use the writing process, models provide concrete samples that make abstract concepts clear and provide a source for evaluation and inspiration.
2. **Specific goals** Characteristics of the target writing form are explicitly examined and goals established for students to incorporate these characteristics in their work. Students learn and consistently utilize planning resources that focus attention on the form, topic, audience, purpose, and writing process. Through the use of this clear and consistent organizer, striving writers learn how to focus and structure their work and stay on track as they compose.
3. **Strategy instruction** Each writing project includes explicit, intensive instruction in strategies for improving student writing, such as using transitions, establishing a central idea, choosing and using precise words and sentences, writing strong introductions and conclusions, and more. By engaging students in extensive strategy instruction with shorter writing assignments, ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** builds skills and confidence in the craft of writing and then provides an authentic opportunity to apply learning in engaging projects.
4. **Summarizing** Summarizing is a key strategy taught throughout the levels of ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content***. In addition to writing summaries as part of reading instruction, a writing project at each level focuses on writing a summary. As noted above, clear and explicit instruction in strategies and extensive use of student models support instruction in this critical element of literacy.
5. **Collaborative writing** Partner and group writing activities are incorporated in teaching routines that

clarify their purposes and show students how to build their collaboration skills. A range of cooperative learning structures provide support for collaboration and clear management and grouping strategies. There's a craft to weaving in this collaboration during the writing process. One way not to do it is to say, "Get a partner and give each other feedback," without teaching students how. The importance of explicit instruction mentioned above is not just about the writing part of the process, but for all of the steps throughout. There are partner and group writing activities and peer response activities throughout the Writing Student Books, broken down into short, concrete tasks so that students can build their collaboration skills.

6. **Sentence combining** As students extend their writing from simple sentences to more complex linguistic structures, sentence combining is used as a vehicle for building and revising phrases and paragraphs.
7. **Idea generation and prewriting** Early in the program, students receive extensive instruction in the techniques and benefits of prewriting. These concepts are reinforced and extended through every project that follows. ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** includes a rich array of graphic organizers and student models of idea generation and prewriting to bring these concepts to life.
8. **Process writing** The writing process is taught in explicit detail at the beginning of each level. The stages of the writing process are reinforced and extended through all writing projects in the program. As they learn and apply the writing process, students study models that show works in progress and are provided with clear and extensive opportunities to follow the steps in the ***Writer's Workout*** activities. At the end of each step in the writing process, students are prompted to reflect on their work, focusing on the goals of the project and the particular stage of the writing process. This ongoing self-analysis builds habits of reflective writing and promotes metacognition. In addition, regular Check Progress features help teachers monitor student progress so students are well prepared before moving to a new stage of the writing process.
9. **Writing for content learning** ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** includes many opportunities for students to write about content topics they are exploring in the unit literature. In addition, the program provides explicit instruction in the research process and how to use a variety of information resources.

Writing Traits Beginning at Level C, writing projects in ***Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*** include robust instruction in writing traits. Each project targets one trait, such as Organization, which is taught using the direct instruction model. Students use the writing trait rubric to discuss and analyze the treatment of the trait in writing samples. They then critique the application of



Lessons allow teachers to adjust levels of support to meet their students' varied writing abilities.

the trait in four differentiated student essays on the same topic, analyzing how to raise the score of each essay from a 1 to a 2, or a 2 to a 3, etc.

Differentiated Instruction Lessons are designed to help teachers deal with the diversity of language levels and writing proficiency that may exist in the classroom.

For example, each writing application follows a gradual release model in which more and more responsibility is turned over to students. For each stage of the writing process, teachers model the step, and students then carry out the step in the ***Writer's Workout*** while the teacher provides guidance and support.

Each application also advises teachers on how to differentiate instruction further (see the box titled "Differentiate Instruction" in the pictured TE lesson). For example:

- If students need more support, the lesson directs teachers to move from the modeling to carrying out the writing step as he or she thinks aloud to create the work, inviting participation from students. This structured practice provides the bridge to the guided practice that students do next in the ***Writer's Workout***.
- If students need less support, they can work more independently in the ***Writer's Workout*** using the checklist and rubric that tie to the writing project.

These approaches help students build toward independence, moving from an "almost" stage to an "I got it" stage.

For further differentiation, lessons include:

- Strategies to help students build banks of personal topics
- Multi-Level Strategies to help teachers adjust the writing lesson so that students at all language levels can participate
- Academic Language Frames that support students in learning academic language and expressing their ideas about writing concepts
- Specific guidance to the teacher in providing immediate corrective feedback

Conclusion

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content approaches writing with all the elements of effective teaching. It involves students in studying and trying out the traits of good writing, learning writing strategies, and engaging in writing applications that will grow their writing proficiency. Lessons are set up for collaboration and differentiation so that teachers can meet the needs of their students regardless of their language levels and writing proficiencies.

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