

***The Good Writer's Kit***  
**Research Base**

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## Introduction

Writing is a critical skill that all students need in order to succeed in school and in society. It is an essential life skill that allows for communication with others, expression of thoughts, ideas and opinions, and equips students with the skills needed to advance forward in the workplace. But, during this time of accountability, with reading and math scores driving the focus of instruction in our schools, writing instruction can easily be overlooked, despite its link to literacy.

The most recent reports *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School*, commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation and released by the Alliance for Excellent Education, and *Writing and School Reform* from the National Commission on Writing, have generated a commitment to address the quality of writing instruction in middle and high schools today. The National Commission on Writing notes that few students are able to write “precise, engaging, and coherent” prose. In fact, only 27% of White students, 8% of African-American students and 13% of Latino/a students scored at or above proficient on the 2002 NAEP writing assessment. Both reports state that something needs to change to prepare adolescent students with the tools they need to excel at writing and pass high-stakes writing

tests; fortunately, there is consensus on the nature of that change which is defined in both reports.

In order to achieve change, adolescent students need research-based curriculum designed to accelerate growth in writing. Also, teachers need tools that will equip them for effective instruction for these high standards and help close the gaps in writing. *The Good Writer’s Kit* provides students and teachers with the tools they need for academic success in the area of writing.

National Geographic School Publishing / Hampton-Brown used the most current scientifically-based research in the development of *The Good Writer’s Kit* designed for students in grades 6-12 to excel at writing and pass high-stakes writing tests. This document defines the research base of *The Good Writer’s Kit* and the alignment of the program to the eleven elements of effective adolescent writing instruction defined by *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School*.

## The Good Writer's Kit and Writing Next

<b>WRITING NEXT RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>THE GOOD WRITER'S KIT</b>
<p><b>Writing Strategies</b> Involves teaching students strategies to plan, revise, and edit their compositions</p>	<p>Instruction in <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> focuses on developing students' ability to effectively implement various writing strategies across multiple forms of writing. For example, Chapter 1 introduces students to the writing process by providing explicit instruction for each step following a Teach/Model, Guided Practice, and Practice/Apply lesson path. This explicit instruction includes various writing strategies for each step of the process. Examples of strategies covered throughout the process include: generating ideas before writing, using graphic organizers, improving word choice, using reference tools, and self-assessment.</p> <p>Chapter 3, is full of effective strategies for students who struggle with their writing. Whether they can't write enough or their writing is too wordy, this chapter is sure to have a strategy to help get students on the right track.</p>
<p><b>Summarization</b> Involves explicit and systematic instruction to teach students how to summarize texts</p>	<p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> provides explicit instruction, following a Teach/Model, Guided Practice, and Practice/Apply lesson path to summarize various text forms. Students use the Writer's Workout Practice Book for systematic practice and application for each new concept.</p>
<p><b>Collaborative Writing</b> Uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions</p>	<p>During each chapter introduction, students participate in a collaborative exercise that correlates to the focus of the chapter. <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> also provides students with multiple partner and group activities as well as peer-response activities. These are broken down into short, concrete tasks so that students can build their collaboration and response skills, work as they plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.</p> <p>In each chapter, as students work through the writing process, they use checklists, peer conference guidelines, and rubrics that are specific to each step of the process so they can monitor their progress to meet the objectives. The objectives for each lesson are specific and reachable with built-in supports for English learners.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>WRITING NEXT RECOMMENDATIONS</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>THE GOOD WRITER'S KIT</b></p>
<p><b>Specific Product Goals</b> Assigns students specific reachable goals for the writing they are to complete</p>	<p>The design of <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> includes projects and writing pieces that span several class periods so there is plenty of time for scrutiny of models, dreaming up topics, working on focused craft ideas and gathering thoughtful feedback from listeners.</p> <p>In each chapter, as students work through the writing process, they use checklists, peer conference guidelines, and rubrics that are specific to each step of the process so they can monitor their progress to meet the objectives. The objectives for each lesson are specific and reachable with built-in supports for English learners.</p>
<p><b>Word Processing</b> Uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments</p>	<p>The Visual Writing Prompts CD contains a gallery of over 100 images to engage students' thinking and prompt their writing. Students can write, revise, and edit their work on screen and then email it to classmates for peer feedback or to their teacher for comments or grading.</p> <p>Each chapter also includes opportunities for students to practice their word processing skills. A few examples include writing e-mails, drafting a resume, and creating a blog entry.</p>
<p><b>Sentence Combining</b> Involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences</p>	<p>Multiple interactive lessons are provided for students to improve their writing with effective sentences. These lessons focus on the concepts of joining equally important ideas as well as related ideas.</p> <p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> also provides instruction on other strategies for using effective sentences including varying sentences, combining sentences, and avoiding repetition.</p>
<p><b>Prewriting</b> Engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition</p>	<p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> offers students a multitude of strategies for use in the prewriting stage. These include, but are certainly not limited to: collecting ideas, brainstorming to generate ideas, choosing a point of view, an audience or form, and organizing ideas.</p> <p>Chapter 1 includes a Writer's File which contains details on graphic organizers for text structures. Students also have access to various other printable, blank graphic organizers for planning their papers through <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> website: <a href="http://hbgoodwriters.com">hbgoodwriters.com</a>.</p>

<b>WRITING NEXT RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>THE GOOD WRITER'S KIT</b>
<p><b>Inquiry Activities</b> Engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task</p>	<p>Chapter 5, in <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i>, focuses on the process of conducting research for writing purposes. Students discover how to gather information, organize and digest information, and present information in written form. The instructional supports in <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> involve students as they sharpen their inquiry skills to improve the quality of their writing.</p>
<p><b>Process Writing Approach</b> Interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing</p>	<p>In <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i>, students begin by learning the writing process. Throughout the program, students move back and forth between life experience and writing concepts, showing how the concepts are really part of the complex but familiar spectrum of human communication.</p> <p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> avoids assigning students closed-ended tasks, favoring instead strategies that real writers use, such as, uncovering their own topics, deciding on organizational patterns, and then trying out writing on listeners. Recurring practices of student choice, freedom to experiment, and evaluation of the results are all included in the instruction in <i>The Good Writer's Kit</i>.</p>
<p><b>Study of Models</b> Provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing</p>	<p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> contains a multitude of models in various forms of writing for students to read and analyze. In Chapter 4, students have the opportunity to interact and study a variety of models such as biographies, e-mails, letters, poetry, essays, and more.</p> <p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> also provides students with models of student writing. In Chapter 2, four student writing samples are provided for each of the five traits presented. Each of the samples are written four different ways to show students how it is possible to have the same information in a written piece, but achieve a different score. Students are asked to analyze these papers and determine why they each received a different score.</p>
<p><b>Writing for Content Learning</b> Uses writing as a tool for learning content material</p>	<p><i>The Good Writer's Kit</i> includes opportunities for students to study and practice various forms of writing which can be found across the curriculum. These forms include analysis of an issue, observation reports, summaries, and procedures among many others.</p>

## Nine Key Principles of My Teaching by Gretchen Bernabei, program author of *The Good Writer's Kit*

The lessons in *The Good Writer's Kit* incorporate the best of what I know about how students learn and what educational approaches work.

I first became interested in what the research had to say about teaching writing back in the early '80s. It has been an enduring passion, and I have remained a part of the ongoing professional discussion through reading in the educational journals, through a series of intensive and extensive seminars and workshops, and through my own classroom experience and creative cooperation with fellow teachers.

The following are 9 Key Principles borne out repeatedly by research and practice. These principles inform my teaching and are reflected in the lessons and teaching approaches throughout *The Good Writer's Kit*. Relying on proven principles such as these gives us, as teachers, a solid foundation and sound framework within which we can exercise our unique creativity and flexibility.

### Key Principle #1

**For a concept to truly “stick,” students must see a connection to their everyday lives.**

Lev Vygotsky, a very influential thinker whose works have shaped a lot of my thinking, says that life experiences (for example, writing directions to your house) are difficult for students to analyze but are, by definition, already part of their lives. Many

academic and scientific concepts, on the other hand, are relatively easy for students to analyze, but are very difficult for students to connect to their lives.

As teachers, perhaps our greatest and most crucial challenge is to find and demonstrate the relevancy of school lessons to our students' lives. Judith Langer's *Guidelines*, the *Writing Next* report, and many other sources articulate the critical need for these connections.

Throughout *The Good Writer's Kit* we make a deliberate effort to move back and forth between life experience and writing concepts, showing how the concepts are really part of the complex but familiar spectrum of human communication. In *The Good Writer's Guide*, each section opens with a “What's it like?” feature that draws a parallel between the academic concept in question and something familiar in the student's life.

### Key Principle #2

**Whatever students can do with a little help now, they will be able to do independently soon.**

If each student has some sets of skills that he or she cannot even begin to do (“I can't” stage); some that he or she can do with help (“almost” stage); and some that he or she can do well (“I got it” stage);

then the teacher’s role may be seen as helping the student move from one stage to the next.

According to Vygotsky, the most effective use of instructional time occurs when teachers challenge students to work just beyond their comfort levels—this is what Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development” or ZPD.

The interactive lesson presentations in *The Good Writer’s Kit* will allow the observant teacher to gauge fairly precisely how far each student’s comfort zone extends. That will help stretch students into their ZPD. And this can happen for all students both simultaneously and individually, allowing for differentiation among students of varying abilities and obstacles. There is also plenty of material to use as guided and independent practice to help push students to “I got it.”

### **Key Principle #3**

**Learning to ask questions can be more important than learning to answer them.**

The Judith Langer *Guidelines* mentioned earlier emphasize the value of what she calls “generative thinking”—the posing of questions or inquiries without a preconceived answer—over the kind of thinking that is most often tested in multiple-choice methods: learning the answer to question. Classrooms that foster generative thinking by students are more effective than classrooms in which teachers ask, students answer.

Whenever feasible, the teaching approach in *The Good Writer’s Kit* is to foster student inquiry and exploration of possibilities—not “This is how it is,” but “What would happen if . . . ?” and “How about . . . ?”

### **Key Principle #4**

**Students do their best work when they have some freedom and choice.**

I first came across the idea of self-selected topics in Nancie Atwell’s workshop description in *In the Middle*. I remember feeling awed by the stark contrast between the traditional teacher-centered classroom and Atwell’s student-centered one, where students moved freely between tasks, empowered and engaged. There’s a related, wonderful research-based discussion of the need for students to explore ideas and reflect, in Judith Langer’s *Guidelines*.

So how does a teacher incorporate this student-centeredness into a classroom? It’s difficult, scary, and unrealistic to change completely overnight. It may be more manageable to look at ways to incorporate freedom and choice within individual writing assignments.

*The Good Writer’s Kit* avoids assigning students closed-ended tasks, favoring instead strategies more like the ones real writers use: uncovering their own topics; deciding on organizational patterns; and then trying out the writing on listeners. There are recurring practices of student choice, freedom to experiment, and evaluation of the results.



## Key Principle #5

**Outer dialogues serve students as rehearsal for inner speech.**

Back to Vygotsky. This is one of the most useful lessons I get from his work. Intuitive teachers know that hearing something said out loud helps you remember it. Vygotsky helps us understand how this works. The upshot is that in order to foster a new thought process, we can teach it first as a two-voiced dialogue, a conversation between two people. Once this is repeated enough for students to internalize it, they begin “hearing it in their heads.” Their imaginary voice will have been activated; speech will have turned to thought.

This concept can be of great help in writing class. If students are having difficulty writing more than a sentence or two when it’s time to write an extended piece, it could be because they are seeing—or hearing—writing as a monologue: one extended and uninterrupted speech. In real life, conversations are much more frequent than monologues. People who write fluently often report carrying on a sort of conversation as they write. How could that be, you ask? They imagine someone asking a question and someone else answering. (They do?) Yep. (You’re joking.) Seriously.

*The Good Writer’s Guide* promotes this inner dialogue as often as possible. In Chapter 3, for example, there’s a lesson for students who have trouble writing enough. They are encouraged to “have an argument” with an imaginary rival. If you

physically act this out with a student, the student hears the dialogue. With repetition, this technique gets internalized and becomes part of the student’s thought process. Year after year, I’ve seen this seemingly silly technique help students turn sketchy writing into fully elaborated compositions.

## Key Principle #6

**In order for students’ writing to improve, students must spend time writing.**

This is one of the stated foundation beliefs of most writing projects and programs. Yet research is still showing that students are not spending enough time engaged in writing activities. More information is available on the National Writing Project’s website and in the *Writing Next* report. I had thought that, as a nation, we were improving in this area—and maybe we are at least more aware of the need for increased writing. But the research compiled in *Writing Next* indicates otherwise. Students need to be allowed time to write in class, in addition to time for learning the craft of writing, and for feedback or reflection about their writing. Managing class time to get the writing in is a real trick, though, and too often we hear ourselves say, “I’m going to have to cut our writing time short today . . . .” With that in mind, it’s helpful to design projects and writing pieces to span several class periods, so that there is plenty of time for scrutiny of models, for dreaming up topics, for working on focused craft ideas, and for gathering thoughtful feedback from listeners.

Throughout *The Good Writer's Kit* you will find activities that allow teachers to engage students every single day in some kind of writing. In each chapter, professional writers talk about their own writing processes, and each of these writers also discusses the need for practice.

### **Key Principle #7**

**Students don't learn grammar when it's taught in isolation. It's more effective to teach grammar within the context of writing.**

I learned this at the first serious staff development I ever attended, in the early '80s. I had always secretly suspected that teaching traditional grammar was more like teaching math than like teaching writing, but getting familiar with the research helped me understand why and what to do about it.

The *Writing Next* report contains the research findings, as does Constance Weaver's book *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Weaver retraces the entire grammar debate, incorporating the research and bolstering teachers' need for grammar instruction somewhere. How do we weave grammar instruction into writing instruction? Most broadly, by treating it as one of the many aspects of communication, which either serves or hinders it.

In *The Good Writer's Guide*, grammar activities typically center around manipulating grammatical constructions and sentence parts for effect, both in Chapter 2 within the traits of good writing and in

Chapter 3. A concise and down-to-earth handbook of grammar and style is included as an appendix.

### **Key Principle #8**

**Student writing improves when students receive explicit instruction, including strategies for strengthening their weaknesses.**

Not surprisingly, many studies document the fact that students—especially struggling students—improve when they receive explicit, targeted instruction. The *Writing Next* report can point you to specific studies and also to additional resources.

Chapter 3 of *The Good Writer's Guide* is filled with classroom-tested strategies for helping students solve their writing woes. These are part of a growing body of innovative strategies—mostly invented and shared by classroom teachers—that target a specific writing problem or deficiency. I've seen these strategies, used in response to students' particular strengths and weaknesses, absolutely change the performance—and attitude—of struggling writers accustomed to failure.

### **Key Principle #9**

**Student writing improves most when students work collaboratively with others.**

Real talk is to someone else. Writing is the same way. Writers need readers, or why bother? In the traditional classroom, the only reader is the teacher. Things work much better and much more

naturally when the teacher's role is more like that of an agent, helping to put writers in touch with their readers, putting life into the experience of talking on paper for others.

Every writer has experienced this "life," and its benefits are reflected in the research. Both Judith Langer's *Guidelines* and the *Writing Next* report document rigorous studies showing the effectiveness of collaboration. In his *Book of Learning and Forgetting*, Frank Smith details why students learn so much faster from other students than from teachers.

But there's a craft to weaving in this collaboration during the writing process. The importance of explicit instruction mentioned above extends to all of the steps of the process. Students must be explicitly taught how to give feedback, and Chapter 1 of *The Good Writer's Guide* presents the foundation principles and practices of this essential part of the writing process.

There are also many partner and group writing activities, as well as peer-response activities, throughout *The Good Writer's Kit*. These are typically broken down into short, concrete tasks so that students can build their collaboration and response skills.

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