

Writing Instruction

Sharon Hill

Effective Writing Instruction: The Missing Piece

Effective writing instruction can be an elusive task to many dedicated, quality educators. The task of writing in general is a mystery to many of us. Many reading/language arts programs give little attention to this critical component of literacy instruction, leaving teachers to construct their own curriculum in this arena. However, when writing instruction is given the same focus, attention, forethought, and planning as reading instruction, when the components of good writing are made explicit, when the qualities of good writing are clear, when the writing process is modeled, scaffolded, and practiced, then the mystery is revealed, and readers become writers.

Literature as Mentor

Finding mentors and having opportunities for practice are critical to developing expertise in any area. The same is true in learning to write. Young writers must be provided with models of quality writing and time to practice what they have learned. Good literature is the perfect mentor for learning to write. The careful selection of mentor texts for students is crucial. In selecting literature, it is important to think about the following:

- Is the text enjoyable? Will learners find the subject matter interesting? Can they relate and make connections to the subject?
- Is the piece well written so that it provokes deeper thinking and not just surface thoughts?
- Does it offer explicit examples of structure, organization, craft, conventions, and other qualities of good writing?
- Are the characteristics and purpose of the genre explicit enough to support learners?

Genre

Exposure to a variety of genre is key for young writers. Both fiction and nonfiction genres are essential components of writing curriculum. Students must learn to control nonfiction forms including procedural (directions), expository, persuasive, descriptive, and others. These are the writing forms of daily living and the forms most often represented in the texts that govern the majority of schooling.



Explicit instruction in the specific forms and organizational patterns that provide the structure of various writing genres provides students with the tools they need to develop different forms of writing for different purposes. Writers learn to select the genre that best fits the purpose they have in mind for their writing. They learn how to bring their writing alive through the special nuances of form, structure, voice, and use of language particular to the genres they study. Again, the use of mentor texts is a critical support for success. By analyzing mentor texts, students identify the characteristics unique to a certain genre. Visual representations, such as graphic organizers, of the various forms and organizational patterns can be powerful tools in helping students learn to organize their writing when working in a specific genre. Opportunities for guided practice, using scaffolds where necessary, are key to ensuring that students learn to write in a variety of forms with success and confidence.

The Writing Process

In order for students to become successful and passionate writers, they must learn to engage and make use of the writing process. Learners must understand writing as a process that starts with an idea that is developed through the stages of drafting, revising, editing, and final publication. The first stage of the writing process is finding ideas or topics to write about. Students need to be encouraged to see their passions, hobbies, experiences, and what they wonder about as possible topics for writing. They need to be inspired by what others write about and realize that those inspirations are perfect beginnings for exploring their own ideas about the subject. They need to be supported in developing the ability to look at the world in ways that allow them to give life to what they see. A Writer's Notebook can be the perfect place for recording all these sources of inspiration and for reflecting and expanding on ideas as they develop.

Writing Traits and Craft

It is also important to be able to identify the qualities, or traits, of good writing and to develop specific lessons that match teaching goals to the specific needs of learners. Explicit instruction in the traits and craft of writing optimize the opportunity for learners to master specific strategies and techniques. Crafting text is the author's

Writing

deliberate use of language to convey intended meaning, an important practice when composing any text. When authors are successful with their craft, their writing displays evidence of the traits—ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Learners must be allowed to study the craft used by a variety of authors, develop expertise in using those techniques effectively, and be able to apply the appropriate crafting technique to carry out their intentions. When writers can thoughtfully apply understanding of traits and craft in their writing, they are well on their way to becoming effective writers.

Writing Conventions

In the past, writing instruction focused on punctuation and grammar with drills on rules of common practice. Good writers, however, not only think about the rules, but about purpose. They recognize that there are certain expectations for written text that must be honored because they help make the text predictable in some ways and easily read. They must learn also how to use punctuation marks and language to give writing voice, and to make it alive, engaging, and powerful for readers. Above all, the message is that learners must understand the importance of conventions and develop their expertise in using them effectively.

Summary

To be most effective, writing instruction must attend to all facets of writing: genre, process, traits, craft, and conventions. Explicit instruction and daily practice in these aspects of writing are critical components of any comprehensive literacy program. Through the use of quality mentor texts as models of good writing, the use of graphic organizers to help plan and develop organization and structure, and plenty of guided practice, teachers can equip students with the tools they need to become powerful writers.

References

Davis, J. and Hill, S. (2003). *The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing: Strategies, Structures, Solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

“...writing instruction must attend to all facets of writing: genre, process, traits, craft, and conventions. Explicit instruction and daily practice in these aspects of writing are critical components of any comprehensive literacy program.”

Sharon Hill