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# Developing Young Writers *by Nancy Frey*

The ability to read and write to convey information, provoke thought, and inspire others has long been considered a hallmark of an educated person (Manguel, 1996). More importantly, reading and writing are tools for empowerment—they provide a voice and a forum for those who would otherwise be silent (Freire, 2000). The importance of being heard, both verbally and through writing, is especially vital.

## Writing instruction across dimensions

Writing instruction has lagged behind reading instruction in both its scope as well as its depth. While educators recognize that reading requires carefully crafted experiences to promote phonemic awareness, mapping sounds onto letters, building vocabulary knowledge, and fostering comprehension across longer pieces of text, writing lacks the same fine-grained approach. Writing instruction has been confabulated with causing writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010), with comparatively little attention dedicated to building skills, establishing a variety of purposes for writing, and building motivation for doing so. Even worse, writing occurs infrequently and for short durations, leaving students without the stamina they need to engage in sustained writing.

*Reach for Reading* seeks to alter the way writing occurs in the classroom by promoting instruction across dimensions. Dimensions include project-based writing and writing in response to authentic questions; writing to reinforce comprehension; developing writing fluency; and building writing skills.

First and foremost, the need to write begins on the first page of the unit when a true purpose is established. Students confront meaningful Big Questions such as “When do harmless things become harmful?” as they explore the world of insects and competition for habitats. Students also write daily in lessons that focus on specific skills. They learn about the grammar of the language through writing as well, and incorporate vocabulary and grammar in generative sentences. Importantly, they build their writing fluency through daily power writing. Weekly project writing allows students to answer these Big Questions across a variety of genres and forms as they apply their knowledge of conventions and build their capacity to engage in skilled production. Taken together, these instructional components consolidate to form systematic, scaffolded writing instruction that mirrors the purposeful teaching of reading. Let’s look further at the research base on programmatic implications of each of these principles.

## Motivating writers with Big Questions

As with all people, children are spurred to discovery by questions that require investigation. Ask a child “What is the difference between then and now?” and then give her the resources and experiences she will need to address the topic, and wonderful things can occur. She might learn about how communication technologies have changed, but the need to communicate has not. She can compare and contrast similarities and differences between past and present, view a video about invention, and develop visual literacy skills to examine photographs and illustrations of transportation across time. The question can even spur on investigation about space exploration and changes that have occurred as women have become astronauts and scientists. This is intriguing content for anyone. And, in *Reach for Reading*, the content is presented in a way that is accessible to young students. With information, ideas, and opinions swimming in her imagination, the student can use writing as a natural outlet for sharing with an audience.

Motivation in writing is essential in the development of this complex skill. Young writers are motivated to write when they have an audience and purpose (Wilson, 2008). As well, knowledge of content and writing forms has been found to have a significant positive impact on the writing performance (Olinghouse & Graham, 2009). It is also significant that even primary writers find self-expression to be a motivation for writing in school (Nolen, 2007).

The spirit of inquiry in *Reach for Reading* serves as a catalyst for spurring the act of writing. But the willingness to write can be muted by a lack of skill. Therefore, writing instruction needs to be scaffolded to build competence and confidence.

Unit 5

**Invaders!**

Share What You Know  
Think of a time when you really...

**BIG Question** When do harmless things become harmful?

## Scaffolded instruction builds writing skills

Scaffolded instruction is a principle of teaching dating back to the early 20th century. Vygotsky's (1938/1978) observations of the interactions of children who were learning together gave him insight into the possibilities of what could occur when a competent other (teacher or peer) was present to offer support. Over time, Vygotsky's insights about a learner's zone of proximal development were reinterpreted as the teacher practice of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Scaffolding in turn has been further explained in reading as a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). More recently, this model has been expanded for reading and writing instruction to include a collaborative learning phase where students engage in productive group work in the company of peers (Fisher & Frey, 2007, 2008).

Effective teachers deliver writing lessons designed to scaffold student learning using a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Scaffolded instruction in writing includes opportunities for students to witness the act of writing by their teacher while he or she uses a think aloud approach to explain the decision-making used by a writer (Davey, 1983). *Reach for Reading* provides examples of modeled writing to support teachers as they implement scaffolded writing instruction.

Think Aloud	Write
<i>I'm going to write about the Great Wall of China. When I <b>visualize</b> the wall, I think about its stone walls. They are bumpy and remind me of a tortoise's shell, so I'll make that a simile.</i>	The Great Wall has stone walls that are as bumpy as tortoise shells.
<i>The wall is long and twists like a snake. I'll make that a metaphor.</i>	The wall is a snake. It twists through the mountains.

At various times, students also benefit from writing together through the guided instruction offered by interactive writing. In addition, students regularly experience skill-building exercises such as generative sentences, daily writing skills, power writing, and close examination and replication of writing models (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Schleppegrell and Go (2007) examined the writing of fourth and fifth grade English learners who had generated lists of possible academic language and vocabulary prior to writing and found that the young writers utilized these lists to strengthen the structure and content of their writing. In addition, the children whose teachers used writing models were able to transfer these linguistic structures effectively.

## Daily writing builds fluency

Systematic building of writing skills within a supportive environment that includes scaffolded instruction is essential if students are to become accomplished writers. However, the issue of writing fluency is also critical to their development. As with reading instruction, where it is understood that a steady daily diet of texts nourishes young readers and contributes to fluency, so it is with writing. In addition to the scaffolded writing instruction noted above, additional daily writing instructional activities are provided in *Reach for Reading* including power writing, generative sentences, and daily writing skills.

Power writing (Fearn & Farnan, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2007) builds the writing stamina of young writers. These brief, timed writing events encourage children to put their ideas down on paper in order to build writing fluency. Students are encouraged to write for both volume, and with effort, for a minute at a time and then count words and circle errors. This can be repeated, and students can chart their best result to gauge their own progress over time. By engaging in these short timed writing exercises, students build stamina similar to results of daily training for a physical activity. In addition, students can track their own growth, set goals, and discuss their progress with their teacher. All of these practices are found to be essential for maintaining motivation (Bong, 2009).

**Power Writing**

Have students write as much as they can as well as they can in one minute about the word *power*.

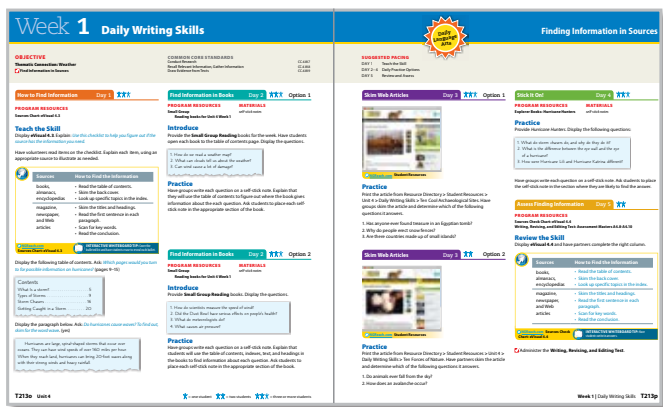
For **Writing Routine 1**, see page BP47.

The purpose of generative writing is to draw the student's attention to several key features of effective writing, including vocabulary, syntax, and semantic meaning (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Inspired by the work of Fearn and Farnan (2001) on given word writing, students are challenged to incorporate a vocabulary word or specific part of speech into a sentence. Unlike convention writing exercises, several conditions are provided to constrain their work. For instance, students might be instructed to use the word *weather* in the third position in a sentence that is at least seven words in length. Responses include the following:

- The cold *weather* caused me to go back to get a coat.
- I like *weather* that brings sunshine after a rainstorm.
- Meteorologists study *weather* so they can make predictions.

The attention to position and length causes the writer to simultaneously consider the grammatical and semantic elements required, giving them a time to consolidate this knowledge authentically. By integrating grammar instruction into a progression of more extended writing, students move from learning basic skills in isolation toward making decisions about grammar at its point of use.

Daily Writing Skills provide focused instruction, practice, application, and assessment resources that target specific skills such as using transitions or supporting ideas with sufficient and relevant details. These focused activities help develop the craft of writing to support students as they participate in extended writing projects.



## Conclusion

The act of writing is far too important to leave to chance. We know that merely “causing” writing through writing prompts is not enough. Young writers must be taught about the structures and conventions of the language, as well as the craft. Purposeful attention to building the fluency, content knowledge, and art of writing are woven together into a compelling program. Using a scaffolded approach to writing instruction, children learn not only what and how to write, but most importantly, why we write. In discovering the art of writing, they also discover themselves.

### Language Frames

<p><b>Retell</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The story takes place _____.</li> <li>• The main character's problem is _____. Then _____. Finally, _____.</li> <li>• The funniest part is when _____.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Make Suggestions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was hard to picture _____. You could add more details to _____.</li> <li>• Your story is _____ in some parts. _____ is one place where you can add _____.</li> </ul>
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## Writing projects extend writing opportunities

The view that recognizes that writing is a social act, not just a strictly cognitive one (e.g., Au, 1997; Dyson, 1989) is a central tenet of *Reach for Reading*. These social acts are fueled by the conversations that occur between writers. The weekly writing projects in the program capitalize on the interaction of oral language development and writing development. Students regularly experience research-based instructional routines that invite them to compose orally in the company of their peers (Lapp, Flood, & Tinajero, 1994). They meet to discuss their writing with peer responders who are supported with language frames to shape their collegial discussions.

Time is devoted at the end of each week to publish and share their writing with an audience, thereby further reinforcing the purpose of the writing as a way to answer a compelling question. These writing projects do double duty, as each spotlights a writing trait as well as a format or genre. These projects provide further opportunity to consolidate complex writing behaviors, develop self-awareness, and build community in the classroom. After all, isn't that what writing is for?

While writing is often viewed as an independent activity, the research on the importance of collaboration before and after writing is compelling. Writing is ultimately about audience, so conversation and response is integral to the process. As noted earlier, writers typically begin to compose orally before they put pencil to paper. Therefore, it is essential for young writers to convey their own ideas, listen to the ideas of others, and dialogue about both. Children also need opportunities to discuss what they have written with fellow writers in order to obtain peer responses. Students meet the authors of many of the readings in the *Reach for Reading* program and learn how these professionals approach their craft. These author conversations are intended to model the kind of thinking that writers of all ages engage in.

Writing Project *continued*

<p><b>Revise</b></p> <p>1. <b>Read, Retell, Respond</b> Read your draft, also partner listens and then retells the story. No improve your writing.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #0070c0; padding: 5px; margin: 5px 0;"> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #0070c0;">Language Frames</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 2px;"> <p><b>Retell</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The story takes place _____.</li> <li>• The main character's problem is _____. Then _____. Finally, _____.</li> <li>• The funniest part is when _____.</li> </ul> </td> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 2px;"> <p><b>Make Suggestions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was hard to picture _____. You could add more details to _____.</li> <li>• Your story is _____ in some parts. _____ is one place where you can add _____.</li> </ul> </td> </tr> </table> </div> <p>2. <b>Make Changes</b> Think about your draft and your partner's suggestions. Then use the Revising Marks on page 585 to mark your changes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is every event clearly described? If not, add details.</li> <li>• Make sure you what the character says sounds like that character. Replace words that don't.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Retell</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The story takes place _____.</li> <li>• The main character's problem is _____. Then _____. Finally, _____.</li> <li>• The funniest part is when _____.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Make Suggestions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was hard to picture _____. You could add more details to _____.</li> <li>• Your story is _____ in some parts. _____ is one place where you can add _____.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Edit and Proofread</b></p> <p>Work with a partner to edit and proofread your tall tale. Remember to use lots of action verbs. Use verb forms of have and be. Make sure that each verb agrees with its subject. Use the marks on page 585 to show your changes.</p> <p><b>Spelling Tip</b></p> <p>When you write a correction use an <b>underline</b> in place of the letters that are left out. I have 17 <u>u</u>.</p> <p><b>Publish</b></p> <p>1. <b>On Your Own</b> Add pictures. Read your story to your classmates. You may even want to use sound effects!</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #0070c0; padding: 5px; margin: 5px 0;"> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; color: #0070c0;">Presentation Tips</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; font-size: 0.7em;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 2px;"> <p><b>If you are the speaker...</b></p> <p>Read with expression. If your story is funny, make it sound funny.</p> <p>Use gestures to help your listeners imagine what the text describes.</p> </td> <td style="width: 50%; padding: 2px;"> <p><b>If you are the listener...</b></p> <p>Try to picture the story in your mind.</p> <p>Laugh or smile to show the speaker when you think something is funny.</p> </td> </tr> </table> </div> <p>2. <b>With a Group</b> Invite family and friends to a storytelling festival. Choose several of your tall tales to act out. Create scenery and assign parts. Practice and perform the stories for your audience.</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;"> </div>	<p><b>If you are the speaker...</b></p> <p>Read with expression. If your story is funny, make it sound funny.</p> <p>Use gestures to help your listeners imagine what the text describes.</p>	<p><b>If you are the listener...</b></p> <p>Try to picture the story in your mind.</p> <p>Laugh or smile to show the speaker when you think something is funny.</p>
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For research citations see page R27.

Author Monograph | Writing **BP9**