

Writing Concept Paper

The purpose of this paper is to define KIPP's point of view on effective writing instruction.

The Research that Matters

- **27%.** According to the most recent NAEP report card, just twenty-seven percent of high school students from public and private schools were proficient in writing.¹
- **3.1 billion dollars.** That's how much employers spend on average per year to provide writing training for employees. By the time students enter the workforce, their writing needs significant improvement.²
- **Non-fiction writing and overall student achievement.** Harvard University's School Board Journal found that non-fiction writing is the academic activity with the highest correlation for student achievement in reading comprehension, math, science, and history.³

What Effective Writers Do

Writers who meet the literacy demands of college and the professional world are able to write in authentic, academic, and professional settings. They have a deep understanding of the function and form of narrative, argumentative, and informational writing and can appropriately match or blend these three writing types for the tasks and audiences of these particular settings.

Argumentative Writing. Argumentative writing demonstrates "that a writer's belief, position, or conclusion is valid" through logical reasoning. Claims or interpretations are defended with relevant and sufficient evidence from reliable sources to convince the reader that something is true. The writers of the CCSS emphasize argumentative writing as having more importance in college and the professional world than all other writing types. They stress that college is "an argument culture" and "argument literacy is fundamental to being educated." Literary critique, persuasive letters, editorials, and scientific proofs are all examples of argumentative writing formats.⁴

Informational Writing. Unlike argumentative writing, informational writing is not intended to persuade someone to change his or her position or beliefs. It is meant to bring clarity by defining concepts, describing how things work, or explaining why things happen. Informational writing formats include reports, how-to summaries, descriptions, and biographies.⁵

Narrative Writing. Through narratives, writers convey experiences. This type of writing uses the description of events, character actions, and dialogue to tell a story. Typically, personal journals and works of fiction fall under the category of narrative writing.⁶

¹ NAEP Report Card 2011.

² "Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out." The National Commission on Writing. College Board: September, 2004.

³ Reeves, Doug. "High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond." Harvard University School Board Journal, 2003.

⁴ CCSS Standards, Appendix A.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

The Structures Effective Writers Use

Skilled writers focus on the following elements as they craft their argumentative, informational, and narrative works.⁷

Element	Argumentative	Informational	Narrative
Focus on Purpose and Text	Writer makes a worthy claim given the task and audience; shows accurate comprehension of texts that are being leveraged	Writer makes purpose explicit; shows accurate comprehension of texts that are being leveraged	Purpose implicitly communicated through character actions and events
Organization	Includes an introduction, supporting explanations, and a conclusion	Includes an introduction, supporting explanations, and a conclusion	Includes an introduction, a logical sequence of events, and a conclusion
Development and Support	Writing has a logical flow and includes compelling evidence; addresses counterarguments where appropriate	Writing has a logical flow, and includes the most significant supporting details	Uses a variety of techniques (dialogue, description of actions, character development) to convey a point of view
Language	The style and tone is appropriate to the task and audience	The style and tone is appropriate to the task and audience	The style and tone is appropriate to the task and audience
Conventions	The writer shows proficient command of grammar and mechanics	The writer shows proficient command of grammar and mechanics	The writer shows proficient command of grammar and mechanics

What is Effective Writing Instruction?

To teach writing well, teachers need to know the philosophical underpinnings of effective writing instruction, what content to teach, how to plan effective lessons, and how to analyze and act on assessment data. .

Research-Based Foundations

Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing.⁸ Strong readers tend to be strong writers because the ability to analyze literary devices and structural elements of a complex text enables them to embed these same devices and structures in their own writing. For example, when students can identify and analyze symbolism in text, they are better able to create symbolism in their own written pieces. Similarly, when students can craft meaningful complex sentences, they are more apt to understand their function in the text they are reading. Because reading and writing are interdependent, the instruction of these practices should be tightly integrated. Academic writing prompts should be text-based, requiring students to analyze written texts to inform their own writing. To achieve this synergy, schools should offer a reading and writing “ELA block” instead of separating reading and writing into their own distinct courses.⁹

⁷ These writing elements were generated from the following sources: Achievement First’s PRB rubric, the CCSS standards, Keli Swearingen.

⁹ Coker, David L. *Teaching Beginning Writer*. New York: Gilford Press, 2015

Writing instruction is driven by a focus genre. It’s essential that students have a firm understanding of the purpose and possible structures of argumentative, informational, and narrative writing. In grades K-8, teachers should focus on developing students’ command of these three writing types by targeting each one as a separate entity for an extended period. In grades 9-12, students learn to integrate these writing types with a focus on how narrative writing enhances argumentative and informational works.¹⁰ For all genres, a variety of formats should be explored to develop students’ fluency and repertoire as writers.

Students are provided with sufficient time for sustained writing across a school day. To fully apply what they have learned during writing instruction, students need time for sustained independent practice. In K-4, students should be writing for 45 minutes across multiple subjects in a school day; for grades 3-5 the recommendation is 60 minutes, in 6-8, the recommendation is 75 minutes, and at the high school level, students should be writing for at least 90 minutes during the entire school day.

Writing instruction includes a balance of process-based and on-demand writing opportunities. Writing is a process. Teachers need to emphasize that effective writing occurs in multiple phases—from pre-writing (research, idea generation, and planting) and drafting, to revising, editing, and publishing. By understanding each step of the process, students are more readily able to synthesize these steps in both process-based and in high-stakes, on-demand writing opportunities.

Process-based writing instruction involves teaching the discrete skills of building a written product, one at a time. It is considered a series of formative assessments. The teacher provides students with detailed feedback on each of these discrete parts. The feedback is designed to equip students with the tools, tips, and instruction to independently revise their products and support their thinking. Effective process-based instruction involves this series of steps for each writing type.

Argumentative ¹¹	Informational	Narrative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruct model of format and genre • Analyze prompt • Gather evidence that relates to prompt • Create overall thesis based on evidence • Outline topic sentences with supporting evidence for each body paragraph • Write each body paragraph: including topic sentence, cited evidence, explanations that defend evidence in relation to topic sentence • Identify and address the counterargument • Write introduction • Write conclusion • Revise for structure, content, and language • Edit for conventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruct model of format and genre • Analyze prompt • Gather information that relates to prompt • Create overall thesis based on evidence • Outline topic sentences with supporting details for each paragraph • Write each body paragraph: including topic sentence, cited information, and supporting explanations • Write introduction • Write conclusion • Revise for structure, content, and language • Edit for conventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstruct model of format genre • Gather information that relates to the prompt • Develop story’s characters, setting, conflict, and theme • Outline narrative by creating a plot diagram • Draft full narrative • Incorporate character dialogue • Incorporate sensory language • Revise for structure, content, and language • Edit for conventions

¹⁰ Gallagher, Kelly. “The Common Core Writing Standards: Good News/Bad News.” International Reading Association Conference. New Orleans Convention Center, New Orleans. May, 2013. Lecture.

¹¹ Depending on the grade level, not all of these steps will apply. Reference the CCSS Writing Standards for specific guidance.

On-demand writing refers to writing that happens in one sitting, involving students completing a piece of work from start to finish. In this setting, students are applying all the steps they learned in process-based writing as a summative assessment. On-demand writing opportunities should occur approximately every three weeks of instruction.¹²

Writing tasks are both academic and authentic. High-stakes exams and college courses demand that students are strong academic writers, proficient with literary analysis and research. Writing instruction should include tasks that are strictly academic in scope to prepare students for these settings. It is also essential that students are provided opportunities to write for authentic audiences and purposes. Writing a letter to a senator or composing a speech to the school community, as examples, are tasks that require students to apply the elements of academic writing to more authentic formats. They also help to empower students to utilize writing for broader causes.

Grammar and conventions are taught in context of a writing task. The traditional systematic teaching of grammar—identifying the parts of speech of words and structure of sentences in isolation—has been found to be insufficient for students. Effective grammar instruction involves both sentence deconstruction and its practical application in the context of a written task. For every writing task, teachers should target a small number (two to three) of high-leverage grammatical skills to teach during the drafting phase of the writing process. Focusing on sentence composition and sentence combining yields the most impact for students.¹³

Handwriting and typing are foundational writing skills. In early elementary grades, students need extensive practice in handwriting and typing. These skills should be taught explicitly with ample opportunities to practice in authentic contexts.

Lesson Structure

Instruction employs a gradual release learning structure. Writing lessons are most successful in promoting student mastery when they follow a gradual release structure. The core lesson elements of this structure are outlined below, recognizing that once students are more proficient with a particular skill, modeling is less of a need.¹⁴

Core Lesson Element	Description
Access Prior Knowledge Model	A short exercise designed to gauge students' current knowledge related to lesson objective
Guided Practice	Teacher explicitly models each step of the process involved in performing skill
Independent Practice	A practice opportunity that is distinctly different from model and heavily guided; the teacher checks for understanding after each step of the process is completed
Address Student Misconceptions	An additional practice opportunity in which students perform the skill completely independent of the teacher; teacher is circulating and diagnosing trends in student performance.
Exit Ticket	A gauge of student progress against mastery of objective; teacher addresses common student misconceptions through re-teaching
	A final practice opportunity for students to show mastery of skill

¹² KIPP Wheatley assessments occur approximately every 10-15 days of instruction. These assessments include at least one on-demand writing opportunity.

¹³ Fearn, Leif and Nancy Farnan. "When is a Verb? Using Functional Grammar to Teach Writing." University of San Diego, 2005

¹⁴ Madeline Hunter Mastery of Learning Model. Ohio Network for Education Transformation.

Analyzing text exemplars is a routine practice. The act of deconstructing high-quality texts is highly beneficial in helping students understand how texts are constructed and how they function. It's recommended that teachers facilitate the analysis of text exemplars on a regular basis, particularly when the genre that students are studying is new.¹⁵

Assessment and Feedback

Writing assessment comes in three forms: on-demand, process-based, and exit tickets. On-demand writing opportunities (ideally occurring every three weeks) are summative assessments, demanding the independent synthesis of many writing skills learned over time. Process-based writing opportunities are ongoing formative assessments, measuring students' ability to perform the writing process in stages with guidance from the teacher. Exit tickets are daily formative assessments, and they gauge students' ability to apply discrete skills. Each of these assessments provides integral data for a holistic evaluation of each student's writing development.

Teacher to student feedback is rooted in a specific set of criteria that has been communicated clearly to students. Writing should be evaluated with a rubric that includes a specific set of criteria. Learning growth accelerates when students understand and have internalized these criteria.¹⁶

Teacher to student feedback targets one or two specific criteria at a time. Students are more able to internalize and act on feedback that narrow in scope and directly addresses their primary areas of need.¹⁷

Teacher feedback is specific, actionable, and student friendly. A teacher's feedback can only be acted upon when it's clearly understood by the student. Written and oral feedback to students needs to be communicated in student-friendly language, explicitly addressing areas of need and providing concrete action steps for improvement.

Feedback is most actionable when it is received within 48 hours of completing a task. It's recommended that teachers prioritize giving written feedback to students after specific intervals during the writing process and within two days of a task being completed. This rapid turnaround more readily equips students to respond to the feedback effectively. Also, the teacher can more efficiently evaluate students' writing since he or she will have collected significant data from each student by the end of the writing process.

Students self-assess and track progress against the rubric criteria. When students closely monitor their own growth by cataloguing the feedback they have received, it reinforces their understanding of the rubric criteria and increases motivation to improve. Self-assessment and goal setting should occur after every major writing assessments.¹⁸

¹⁵ Gallagher, Kelly. "Students Need Models Across the Writing Process." April 14th, 2015.

¹⁶ Stiggins, Rick. "Assessment for Learning, the Achievement Gap, and Truly Effective Schools." ETS Training Institute, Portland. September, 2008. Lecture.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Stiggins, Rick.

Enabling Systems

School schedules and professional development calendars must promote successful student writing.

School schedules need to include sufficient time for writing instruction. In addition to the other elements of balanced literacy, this will require approximately four hours of literacy instruction per day. In elementary, middle, and high school, students should be receiving at least 45 minutes of explicit writing instruction across the school day. *Refer to the [K-8 Literacy Blueprint](#) for other recommendations about other core literacy practices involved in these four hours of instruction.*

Teachers need to be excellent writers themselves. Having a deep and thorough knowledge about the craft and art of writing is essential for planning and executing successful writing lessons. Teachers need ongoing development to help them develop their content knowledge in writing instruction.

Writing instruction is a cross-curricular effort. Every teacher is a writing teacher. While the explicit teaching of writing most appropriately lives in the ELA block, the skills students are learning in ELA should be reinforced in all other content areas. A collective effort to implement common school-wide rubrics is integral to successful cross-curricular writing programs.

Teachers meet with colleagues at least one time weekly to plan collaboratively and to look at student work (LASW) in content teams. Writing instruction and student achievement are most likely to show continuous improvement if teachers have the opportunity to collaborate regularly, engaging in a consistent cycle of lesson planning and group analysis of student work.

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