Writing Interventions That Really Work

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The act of writing contains its own inner tensions. Writers must abide by a host of rules that govern the mechanics and conventions of writing yet are also expected—within the constraints of those rules—to formulate original, even creative, thoughts. It is no wonder that many students find writing to be a baffling exercise and have little sense of how to break larger writing assignments into predictable, achievable subtasks. But of course writing can be taught and writing can be mastered. The best writing instruction places the process of written expression on a timeline: Good writers first plan their writing. Then they write. Once a draft has been created, good writers review and revise their work. While the stages of the writing process are generally sequential, good writers also find themselves jumping frequently between these stages (for example, collecting additional notes and writing new sections of a paper as part of the revision process). Teachers reduce students' sense of intimidation when given writing assignments when their writing instruction makes the 3 stages of writing—planning, writing, and revision—clear and explicit. In particular, struggling student writers benefit from the following supports (Gersten, Baker, & Edwards, 1999):

- ‘Think sheets’ that outline strategies for tackling the different phases of a writing assignment (e.g., taking useful notes from research material; building an outline; proofreading a draft).
- Exposure to different kinds of expressive text, such as persuasive, narrative, and expository writing.
- Access to several examples of good prose models that the student can review when completing a writing assignment.
- Supportive and timely feedback about the student's writing assignments. When teachers or classmates offer writing feedback to the student, they should be honest but also maintain an encouraging tone.

Here are a few writing-related intervention ideas:

Cover-Copy-Compare (Murphy, Hern, Williams, & McLaughlin, 1990). Students increase their spelling knowledge by copying a spelling word from a correct model and then recopying the same word from memory. Give students a list of 10-20 spelling words, an index card, and a blank sheet of paper. For each word on the spelling list, the student (1) copies the spelling list item onto a sheet of paper, (2) covers the newly copied word with the index card, (3) writes the spelling word again on the sheet (spelling it from memory), and (4) uncovers the copied word and checks to ensure that the word copied from memory is spelled correctly. If that word is spelled incorrectly, the student repeats the sequence above until the word copied from memory is spelled correctly—then moves to the next word on the spelling list.

Self-Monitoring to Increase Writing Fluency (Rathvon, 1999). Students gain motivation to write through daily monitoring and charting of their own and classwide rates of writing fluency. At least several times per week, assign your students timed periods of ‘freewriting’ when they write in their personal journals. Freewriting periods all the same amount of time each day. After each freewriting period, direct each student to count up the number of words he or she has written in their daily journal entry (whether spelled correctly or not). Next, tell students to record their personal writing fluency score in their journal and also chart the score on their own time-series graph for visual feedback. Then collect the day’s writing fluency scores of all students in the class, sum those scores, and chart the results on a large time-series graph posted at the front of the room. At the start of each week, calculate the goal of increasing total class words written by taking last week’s score and increasing by five percent. At the end of each week, review the class score and praise students if they have shown good effort.

A Memory Device to Assist with Proofreading (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). When students regularly use a simple, portable, easily memorized plan for proofreading, the quality of their writing improves significantly. Create a poster to be put up in the classroom summarizing the SCOPE proofreading elements: (1) Spelling: Are my words spelled correctly; (2) Capitalization: Have I capitalized all appropriate words, including first words of sentences, proper nouns, and proper names; (3) Order of
words: Is my word order (syntax) correct?; (4) Punctuation: Did I use end punctuation and other punctuation marks appropriately? (5) Expression of complete thoughts: Do all of my sentences contain a noun and verb to convey a complete thought? Review the SCOPE proofreading steps by copying a first-draft writing sample onto an overhead and evaluating the sample with the class using each item from the SCOPE poster. Then direct students to pair off and together evaluate their own writing samples using SCOPE. When students appear to understand the use of the SCOPE plan, require that they use this plan to proofread all written assignments before turning them in.

Stimulate Writing Interest With an Autobiography Assignment (Bos & Vaughn, 2002). Assigning the class to write their own autobiographies can motivate hard-to-reach students who seem uninterested in most writing assignments. Have students read a series of autobiographies of people who interest them. Discuss these biographies with the class. Then assign students to write their own autobiographies. (With the class, create a short questionnaire that students can use to interview their parents and other family members to collect information about their past.) Allow students to read their autobiographies for the class.

Use Selective Proofreading With Highlighting of Errors. To prevent struggling writers from becoming overwhelmed by teacher proofreading corrections, select only 1 or 2 proofreading areas when correcting a writing assignment. Create a student ‘writing skills checklist’ that inventories key writing competencies (e.g., grammar/syntax, spelling, vocabulary, etc.). For each writing assignment, announce to students that you will grade the assignment for overall content but will make proofreading corrections on only 1-2 areas chosen from the writing skills checklist. (Select different proofreading targets for each assignment matched to common writing weaknesses in your classroom.) Also, to prevent cluttering the student’s paper with potentially discouraging teacher comments and editing marks, underline problems in the student’s text with a highlighter and number the highlighted errors sequentially at the left margin of the student paper. Then (if necessary) write teacher comments on a separate feedback sheet to explain the writing errors. (Identify each comment with the matching error-number from the left margin of the student’s worksheet.) With fewer proofreading comments, the student can better attend to the teacher feedback. Also, even a heavily edited student assignment looks neat and tidy when teachers use the highlighting/numbering technique—preventing students from becoming disheartened at the site of an assignment scribbled over with corrective comments.

References