

Best Practices in Teaching Writing

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Following is a list of selected teaching practices that are well recognized in the profession as being effective in helping students develop as writers. The practices listed have been emphasized by teachers participating in Writing Project Summer Institutes, and a good discussion of best practices is available in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools* by Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde (Heinemann, 1998; ISBN: 0325000913). See also the IRA/NCTE Standards for English/Language Arts.

A statement identifies the particular best practice, and then some elaboration is offered. The elaboration often draws attention to more specific practices that are related to the more general practice identified. There is some overlap in the discussion of the practices, and, of course, other educators likely will add other practices to this list.

1. Establish a positive atmosphere for writing, reading, learning.

Admittedly, this “best practice” is very general, and, understandably, teachers face constraints in arranging their classrooms. Nevertheless, it is important in teaching writing for teachers to create a positive environment for writing, an atmosphere of mutual respect, positive regard, safety. Students should feel they are a part of a community of people supporting each other in developing as writers, readers, and thinkers. In this community, literacy is valued and celebrated, as are the efforts of individuals to develop as members of a literate community. Sometimes teachers and students ignore what is broadly described here, perhaps thinking it is “touchy-feely stuff” or perhaps taking it all for granted, but we should not do so. To help students develop as writers, teachers must take steps to establish and maintain a positive atmosphere, a sense of community.

➤ An inviting classroom

It is, of course, difficult to identify all that will contribute to creating a literate community. Thinking of the physical environment, for example, teachers often arrange furniture to facilitate discussion and collaboration, as well as easy use of resources. Some teachers bring in non-institutional furniture or try in some other way to make the room an inviting place to learn. Teachers often draw on our profession’s understanding that, especially with young adolescents, engaging students’ senses and emotions, for example, through a colorful room, artwork, and music, is a way to hold students’ attention and make them feel comfortable. Encouraging students to talk with each other and allowing them to move occasionally from their seats to participate in an appropriate task or project can help, especially with middle school students.

➤ Respect for and among students

Essential for a positive environment is respect for students, their ideas, emotions, cultural backgrounds, interests, concerns, etc. This respect is modeled by the teacher in a variety of ways and is expected in the interactions of students. People listen to each other; individuals have a voice; they are encouraged to offer their own ideas and responses; they collaborate. The teacher models and arranges for conversations that will promote learning. People respect cultural differences and diversity in opinions and ideas.

➤ **Teacher as writer**

Ideally, writing teachers are practicing writers. By sharing their writing—particularly when it's in draft form—teachers model respect for themselves, for their students, and for the act of writing itself. They communicate that they are part of the writing community in the classroom and in the world at large and that they feel safe sharing this part of themselves.

➤ **Routines and expectations**

As in any community, certain expectations, procedures, and routines are established; there is a sensible order but not one that is oppressive or unreasonably rigid. Many teachers use a writing workshop model and help students understand what is expected. They organize so that students are not confused and can cooperate well with each other.

2. Organize for writing.

Though teachers will be flexible to help their students and meet instructional goals, they also are thoughtful and systematic in organizing for writing. Organizing, of course, refers to planning the curriculum as well as the classroom activities and routines, practices established to help student develop as writers (and usually as readers and learners in a study area). Often teachers are required to address certain standards and assessment, and in organizing for writing, they keep these curriculum needs/goals in mind.

➤ **The writing workshop**

In terms of teaching practices, many teachers organize through a writing workshop structure, basically a studio approach in which student writers are engaged in developing their craft and are guided by a mature writer—the teacher. In the writing workshop, students are involved frequently in the writing process, though in some cases not all students necessarily are at the same place in that process. A writing workshop can have many components and kinds of activities, but here are some that are common:

- Directions from the teacher on the day's work or a brief review
- A block of time designated for planning, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing writing
- Time for reading and response to reading
- Mini-lessons, based on established curriculum, assessment, and, especially, students' needs as writers
- Time for students to receive responses to their writing—conferences with the teacher, classmates, and others
- Guidance in using appropriate resources for writing and learning
- Time for inquiry, as appropriate for the students' tasks
- Reflection and assessment

These are sample activities; not all of them necessarily occur daily. The teacher has a fundamental design, the workshop, but is flexible to meet the needs of students. During the workshop, the teacher organizes the work, provides lessons and resources, guides and responds to students, models and facilitates. The amount of time devoted to writing workshop differs from teacher to teacher. Some conduct the workshop daily, others weekly, others at the end of a unit of study, etc. The main requirement is that students engage regularly in developing as writers—which usually includes developing as readers and as learners in a study area. Teachers across the grade levels and study areas can organize for writing in different modifications of a writing workshop structure.

➤ **The writer's notebook**

Another useful tool in organizing for writing is a writer's notebook (sometimes a writer-reader's notebook). This tool is used during a writing workshop. The notebook, often a three-ring binder, may contain whatever the teacher and students think helpful. Some examples of contents are samples of the student's writing (works in progress, quick-write exercises, polished pieces, etc.); other samples that serve as examples of kinds of writing or of specific skills and strategies; conference records; planning forms and revision and editing checklists; instructional materials; resources on writing; items used in reflection and assessment; sentence combining exercises; etc. To model writing, the teacher may also keep a writer's notebook and share excerpts from it when appropriate.

➤ **A meaningful approach to writing**

A third important way of organizing is through selecting a meaningful approach to writing. Teachers draw on their experience, on their understanding of their students, and on professional literature to select an approach that will be effective. Teachers might, for example, decide to use a multigenre approach or an approach based on immersion in literature.

Here is a sampling of other approaches:

- Inquiry-based writing
- Writing based on study of popular media
- Writing relevant to a theme, issue, or problem or to an organizing question for a unit of study
- Writing to gain experience with selected genres (for example, personal narrative, poem, editorial)
- Writing relevant to a project (for example, a study of community or school needs)
- Writing based on thinking processes (for example, comparing, evaluating, predicting, analyzing, problem-solving)
- Student choice of topic

Working within the selected approach, students complete one or more pieces of writing. Whatever the approach taken—and there are other options—the teacher bases the selection of the approach on what might be meaningful to students, a key principle in organizing for writing.

3. Arrange for meaningful-to-students reasons to write.

This tenet for teaching writing is addressed also in the discussion of “organizing for writing,” but it is so important that it deserves a separate section. The assignment or the way students are led to write is a critical influence on their “will” to write and, thus, on their development as writers. As discussed above, teachers must think carefully about the approach they will use to arrange for students to write for meaningful purposes. True, it may not be easy to determine what will engage all students, and, true, some students are reluctant to write, but teachers should strive to “invite writing” to improve the odds that all students will be engaged and interested in writing.

➤ **Student choice and ownership**

For at least some (and maybe all) assignments, providing students with choice, promoting ownership, and helping students draw on their own experience, interests, inquiry, etc., can engage students as writers. It is important to recognize that not all

students have to write with exactly the same purpose or for the same audience. When students write about issues, needs, problems, or subjects they find important and relevant to their lives, we improve the odds for their engagement, as well as the likelihood that they will strive to write well. Under the teacher’s guidance, students often conduct inquiry into matters of interest to them, generating ideas and questions and analyzing problems and issues. The reason for writing is not merely to transcribe what others have said or recite what the teacher has taught. Inquiry may focus on personal experience, community issues, questions, themes, issues, problems, etc. From this inquiry, students develop writing to communicate their ideas for different purposes and audiences and in different forms.

➤ **Authentic writing and publishing**

When students recognize that they are writing for authentic purposes and readers—when their writing is not simply a school exercise, when their writing is like that done in the “real world,” when their writing will “go public” in some way—they likely will be more engaged as writers. Though teachers must prepare students for high-stakes assessment, students should perceive that the reason for doing the writing is more powerful than merely to prepare for the test or to receive a grade.

Whenever possible, teachers should provide opportunities for publishing—posting student work on the wall, sharing finished writing with the class, mailing letters to intended audiences, doing presentations for younger students or for parents and families, creating a class publication, posting writing on the Web, etc. One additional benefit of publication is that it gives students a meaningful reason for revising and for editing for correctness.

4. Arrange for students to read, respond to, and use a variety of materials written for a variety of purposes and audiences.

Though it may seem obvious, it is important to recognize that the experience of reading is a key way to help students gain familiarity with the ways writers work. Helping students “read like a writer” and respond to what they read also can make students aware of ways they, too, can write. The experience of reading is an important goal in itself and a focus on reading materials can help students develop as writers. However, teachers should not devote so much time to reading and analysis of texts that experience in writing is short-changed.

➤ **Giving reading a role in the writing classroom**

In organizing for writing, teachers will determine how reading will play an important role in helping students develop as writers. Typically, the reading materials are used as models of writing or examples of genres, as a means of discussing a writer’s strategies and techniques, as a means of stimulating students’ interest and thinking about an issue or topic, and as resources to help students complete a task.

➤ **Using reading materials to model writing**

Reading and talking about a variety of genres are important practices, and a variety of other practices can stem from this reading. Teachers can help students develop as writers by encouraging students to apply the techniques and characteristics of materials they read. Teachers can construct mini-lessons drawing on reading materials, and they can ask students to identify in the reading material important features they can apply in their own writing.

A very important practice is to lead students in reading and discussing samples of writing like those the students plan to write, including samples written by students. Many teachers maintain a file of such samples. Teachers often display samples or give students copies, and they lead the students in highlighting and annotating the samples as a preparation for their own writing. Sometimes checklists based on samples are formed to serve as a resource when students confer with each other or with the teacher; the checklist can be useful to students as they revise their work.

➤ **Providing diverse reading materials**

Standards for reading emphasize the importance of helping students read a variety of materials. Though literature figures prominently in the classroom—both as a subject of study and as a prompt for writing—students also read a variety of other materials (for example, practical/workplace, technical, and persuasive writing). It is important that the materials read are meaningful to the students, relevant to their lives, and useful in addressing their concerns and interests.

5. Write regularly across the curriculum and grade levels.

Teachers across the curriculum may include different kinds of writing to help their students, for example, writing-to-learn practices like learning logs, response journals, quick writes, etc.; writing to demonstrate learning to the teacher, such as essays, reports, and responses to prompts; and writing in realistic forms for authentic purposes and readers. Writing regularly for different purposes will help students develop as writers and can also help them learn in any study area. Teachers include writing not merely to help students develop communication skills but to promote learning and thinking.

Even students in the early grades can begin to write, using whatever they have learned about printed text along with their drawings to help them construct meaning. How much classroom time is devoted to writing and how frequently students write in their classrooms are matters the teacher will have to determine. It is especially important for young students to write frequently, perhaps each day. The point is that students need to engage in composing their thoughts, not merely complete skills exercises in preparation for some later day when they actually will write.

6. Arrange for students to have constructive response to their writing and to offer response to other writers (classmates, teacher, others).

Students need to have response to their writing, and this response can occur throughout a writing cycle, can focus on any number of relevant matters, and can be offered in different ways by different people. Though providing response to students' writing is very important, teachers realize that not every piece of writing needs to be revised. Response focuses on developing the writer, not on "fixing" the piece of writing.

➤ **Achieving teaching goals through response**

When teachers respond to student writing, they especially want to encourage students as writers, validating the writer and writing as important—perhaps the most important goal for response. They want to promote and preserve the student's ownership as a writer. Teachers also want to respond as a fellow writer and reader, modeling and conducting a conference as a conversation. They want to respond genuinely to the writer's ideas and experiences. They want to lead the student writer to talk, think, and

make decisions. They want to describe what they see in the student's work, ask questions about content and form, provide suggestions or options, explain strategies or techniques, identify resources the student could use, and refer to mini-lessons.

➤ **Meeting the needs of student writers through response**

What teachers decide to focus on in response will be based on curricular goals but mostly on the needs of their students as writers. The response might focus on such matters as strategies for revision, characteristics of different genres, criteria for good writing (e.g., organization, support), techniques for persuasive writing, and, of course, specific features of the student's work. Teachers learn their students' needs as writers in a variety of ways—for example, through observing and listening to students engaged in writing, asking them to discuss their writing, and reading samples of students' writing. Some teachers learn about their students as writers by asking for letters of reflection or by maintaining charts with notes about students' work.

➤ **Providing selective responses**

It is important that teachers do not focus on error alone when they respond to students' work. In fact, they realize that error can be a sign of risk-taking that is needed in progressing as a writer. Also, whether the response is from the teacher or from classmates, it should be selective. The teacher or students are not required to "cover everything."

➤ **Responding throughout the writing process**

In the not-too-distant past, teachers responded only after the writing was "done." They "marked" the papers, often focusing only on errors, provided a grade, and went on to the next assignment. It is true that students should be expected and helped to edit their writing, but response should focus on more than error, and the purpose in responding to a student's writing is not solely to identify all the errors or problems. More often today, teachers provide response during the writing process—at any time: planning, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, reflecting.

Response does not have to occur in a formal conference setting; it can occur casually as the teacher looks over a student's shoulder or in an informal conversation held just before the start of class. Responses do not have to be long, either. In fact, sometimes an extended conference with a student can overload the student's circuits such that the student does not understand what to do or how to progress.

➤ **Using a variety of techniques for response**

Teachers use a variety of techniques in arranging for response: teacher-student conferences, written notes to the student, peer conferences (pairs or small groups), response forms, whole-class response to a sample of writing (especially one done by a student from a former year), self-response notes in a writer's notebook, response provided by an older student or an adult, read-alouds, etc.

Students, of course, like to talk with each other, but merely asking students to get together and talk with each other about their writing usually is not enough. Students need guidance in responding to each other's writing. Teachers model good responses (and sometimes bad ones), they offer mini-lessons on response, and they lead students to define what truly helps them, so that response sessions are effective. Teachers also use forms and provide or ask students to create checklists that can serve as guides

during a conference on writing.

7. Provide opportunities for students to collaborate as writers, thinkers, learners.

This practice is referred to also in the sections devoted to organizing for writing and arranging for response to students' writing. Teachers of writing take steps for students to work together throughout the writing process. In the past, when students wrote, the teacher often admonished, "Do your own work." The act of writing was viewed as a test that students were to complete with no assistance from others. Today, too, students sometimes are expected to write under test conditions, and it is true that teachers today want students to have ownership as writers, but they recognize that they can help student writers gain ownership and independence by working with classmates.

➤ **Collaboration techniques**

Teachers use a variety of techniques to arrange for collaboration including:

- Arranging classroom furniture so students can work together
- Modeling and discussing effective methods of collaboration
- Helping students define and share with classmates what helps them as writers
- Providing checklists and forms to guide students
- Arranging for students to share and discuss drafts
- Organizing writing partnerships or small groups

Sometimes, teachers collaborate in designing a project for which students will write. They make connections between instruction and students' lives, as well as their literacy.

➤ **Collaboration guidelines**

Students like to talk with each other, and they need to talk, so providing them a constructive means of doing so in a writing workshop helps engage the students and create a sense of community. Of course, the idea is not just to provide students with an opportunity to talk with each other, so teachers usually work with the students to establish the rules or principles that will apply to their collaboration, and teachers circulate to listen to the conversations and to guide students. Collaborating writers do not always agree, and students are taught to offer their ideas in constructive ways, in a tone that is that of a conversation more than that of a debate or argument. Sometimes the work of one group is shared with the class, a demonstration of how writers are developing or solving problems.

Often, especially after a mini-lesson, teachers create specific tasks relevant to writing and lead students to work together on the task. Teachers also set forth certain specific objectives or ask questions that guide the collaboration, for instance, "Look at the examples we have discussed and help each other with the lead for your editorial. In ten minutes, let's meet in our celebration circle to discuss the before and after." Students are expected to think about content and form. Collaboration can have an important influence on students' growth as writers, and teachers will find many ways to promote collaboration, but it is essential that teachers and students affirm that individual writers should retain ownership of their work.

8. Conduct mini-lessons on writing.

Though arranging for students to write and to develop as writers from this experience in writing is important, teachers also provide specific instruction, often through brief “mini-lessons” conducted in a writing workshop structure.

➤ **Choosing subjects for mini-lessons**

In choosing what to address in mini-lessons, teachers refer to curriculum/assessment needs, their experience with their students, criteria for good writing, strategies used by writers, features of different genres, stylistic techniques, and, especially, their own students’ needs as writers. For instance, if the teacher sees that students are having trouble creating effective leads, a mini-lesson is offered. The methods used will reflect awareness of different learning styles and students’ backgrounds (educational, cultural, language). The mini-lesson is also an ideal vehicle for teaching usage and mechanics within the context of writing. The teacher can make sure that these lessons reflect the students’ needs and that the students have ample opportunity to apply the lessons in a meaningful way.

➤ **Structuring mini-lessons**

The anatomy of a mini-lesson will vary from time to time and teacher to teacher, but a typical structure is as follows: A separate skill, criterion, strategy, etc., is highlighted and explained, and sometimes students are given relevant resources or tools. Students are given a task in which they practice and talk about what has been taught. The teacher helps students understand approaches to the task, often by modeling or explaining procedures and strategies. Usually, students share what they have done in the task, discuss it, problem-solve, etc. Then, the skill or strategy is integrated into the student’s own writing.

It is important that the mini-lesson not be perceived simply as isolated drill; it should be applied in the students’ writing, writing for meaningful purposes. Teachers follow up to build on the lesson and also to see how well the students are able to integrate it into their own writing. When students are maintaining a writer’s notebook, they might include in the notebook the resources, examples, practice exercises, quick writes, etc., from the mini-lesson. If including all this seems burdensome, then, of course, the items can be omitted.

What is addressed in the mini-lesson logically should be considered when students and teachers respond to students’ writing, and it also logically should be considered in assessment practices. In preparing students for state and national assessment, teachers develop lessons that integrate standards into the curriculum. It is useful for teachers to talk together about their plans for mini-lessons, and some teachers keep a record to help them reflect on their practice and plan.