



Introduction

Research

The Common Core State Standards

During the decade before the creation of the Common Core State Standards, attention focused on effective strategies for teaching reading. Not as much attention was given to how to teach writing. Consequently, the curricula for middle-school students have been scattershot. A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York entitled “Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools” found that improving writing instruction for adolescents was “a topic that has previously not received enough attention from researchers or educators” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 3). However, the expectations put forth by the Common Core State Standards, in addition to the proliferation of new technology, intensified the need for instructional direction. “Writing, for adolescents who live in an age of digital communication, has taken on new importance and plays a prominent role in the way they socialize, share information, and structure their communication” (Sweeny, 2010, p. 121).

The finding was that there was still a lot of investigation that needed to be done to determine the best way to teach writing. The rich nature of the practice of writing and its relative neglect in instructional research make it inevitable that a whole compendium of possible approaches has not yet been studied. Research is clearly needed, not only to identify additional effective practices that already exist but to develop new ones (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 26).

What was evident was that “to be successful learners, adolescent readers must master complex texts, understand the diverse literacy demands of the different content areas, and navigate digital reading” (Biancarosa, 2012, p. 22). Therefore, writing instruction, especially for adolescents, needs to be multi-purpose. “Writing instruction for adolescents may involve process writing, along with instruction in different writing forms or genres, writing conventions and grammar, evaluation and criticism, and on-demand writing with prompts or for test purposes” (Sweeny, 2010, p. 125).

Furthermore, writing is multifaceted, and as advanced technology has become more prevalent, writing has evolved to include a variety of modes of communication. “Writing is an integral part of students’ lives today due to their use of texting and social networking sites, but most students do not recognize this type of communication as writing” (Sweeny, 2010, p. 124).

Balanced Literacy and Connecting Reading and Writing

The Common Core State Standards stress “the importance of the reading-writing connection by requiring students to draw upon and write about evidence from literary and informational text” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011, Standards for English Language Arts, p. 8).

Allington & Gabriel (2012) also describe writing as connected to reading: “Writing provides a different modality within which to practice the skills and strategies of reading for an authentic purpose” (p. 13).

The most relevant research that has shown promise for both reading and writing instruction came from the balanced literacy model. Bitter, O’Day, et al. (2009) define balanced literacy as an approach “designed to foster the gradual release of responsibility from teachers to students, moving from structured modeling (e.g., through read-alouds and shared reading) to scaffolded support (e.g., through guided reading) to independence of individual work” (p. 27). Balanced literacy models typically combine reading and writing instruction by integrating both instruction and practice in authentic settings and for relevant purposes. This integration enriches comprehension. “Students need to learn strategies to support their comprehension, not to demonstrate the acquisition of a new skill” (Guccione, 2011, p. 575). Furthermore, research has shown that an integrated approach is preferable to a single “silver bullet” solution to literacy instruction for adolescent readers: “There is no magic bullet or one-size-fits all approach to improving adolescent literacy learning.... Current policy texts may not propose a single solution, but they do advocate a number of interventions or programs as needed reforms” (Franzak, 2006, p. 236). There are many approaches to literacy available to teachers. “Although there are many best practices for teaching students to read, the challenge is in knowing which instructional strategy to choose” (Miller & Veatch, 2010, p. 154).

Why I Wrote This Book and How to Use It

An examination of different implementation models of balanced literacy led to the creation of this curriculum. Three chapters address a text type (or genre) as defined by the Common Core State Standards for Writing—“Explanatory/Informational,” “Argument,” and “Narrative”—with another chapter, “Response to Literature,” included because many standardized tests still contain on-demand writing that requires students to quickly respond to a poem or short narrative. “Response to Literature” is an umbrella category, in that it can encompass any of the text types. But the Common Core State Standards demand that students become accustomed to citing evidence from a piece of text and engaging in the close reading and analysis of text as part of the writing process. Chapters on the reading/writing connection and test prep round out this resource.

Within each of the three genre units, blocks of core instruction are combined to be delivered over a four- to six-week period and sample lessons were created as models for instruction. Two Mini-Lessons are included for each of three strategies per genre. The chapters on the reading/writing connection, response to literature, and test prep also contain additional strategies and Mini-Lessons. Mini-Lessons provide applicable Common Core Standards, materials lists, overviews, planning tips, procedures (including modeling, guided practice, and independent practice opportunities), reading connections, formative assessments, and reproducible graphic organizers and rubrics (both analytic for formative assessments and holistic for summative assessments).

The classroom setting for a balanced literacy model of instruction reflects constructivist principles, in which the students take more ownership of learning the strategies and skills they will need to apply across multiple content areas. “Constructivism recognizes that learning occurs most often in a social setting; thus, the formation of a classroom...is vital to student success” (Saulnier, 2008, p. 6). A classroom built to accommodate balanced literacy looks different from a traditional classroom with desks in rows. It also operates differently, as students must transition more frequently between whole-group, small-group, paired-work, and independent-work areas. Therefore, setting up the classroom and instructional plan requires a new approach. “Our teaching behaviors, our expectations we set for our students, and our students’ learning behaviors must evolve to fit our students’ futures” (Saulnier, 2008, p. 7).

Integrating all the components of a balanced literacy framework also requires some backward planning. The teacher must choose an overall objective and then smaller benchmark objectives that serve as prerequisites to reach the overarching goal. There also must be time for assessment (both formative and summative) and re-teaching when necessary. According to Wiggins & McTighe, learning for understanding develops in an iterative fashion across the three categories of transfer, meaning, and acquisition. The acquisition of new vocabulary [is] introduced in response to real problems...and as preparation for the final performance task...the unit culminates in a thought-provoking (and personally relevant) transfer task and a reflection on the unit’s essential questions (2008, p. 38).

Structuring the Class for Balanced Literacy

According to Bitter, O’Day, et al. (2009), a balanced literacy model fosters comprehension by integrating reading and writing in both instruction and practice, in authentic settings and for relevant purposes. This approach allows for the gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student. They describe a classroom setting that offers structured modeling, scaffolded support through small-group guided practice, and opportunities for independent practice. Not only is this arrangement better suited for an integrated curriculum, it also helps promote students’ self-efficacy. Swafford & Durrington (2010) explain that “the instructional practices utilized by teachers have an impact on both [self-efficacy and achievement]” (p. 222). They cite research showing that when instructional practices included teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice, learners were more likely to perform a new task successfully and, more importantly, were more likely to tackle and accomplish a difficult task. These practices raised self-efficacy (as cited in Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 2003; Schunk & Pajares, 2005; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Logistically, this structure presents a challenge for the middle-school classroom teacher. Average class size in California middle schools is approximately 29 students (City-Data, 2009). Students travel from class to class. Setting up and maintaining centers or workstations does not work the same way it would in an inclusive elementary classroom. Therefore, the teacher must strategize.

The following tips can help establish and streamline classroom management procedures.

Arranging the Room

Prepare your students for different group structures by teaching and practicing procedures for group arrangements.

Whole Class

Consider whether you want your students sitting in rows. Rows hinder the teacher from maintaining proximity with students, which is a key strategy for minimizing disruption. If your room allows it, consider having desks facing each other. This arrangement takes away the “back of the room” and gives the teacher quick and equal access to all students.

Consider placing desks in pods. Students in middle school respond to opportunities for social engagement, and this also gives students opportunities to practice oral language skills. “Students suggested that collaboration with a partner, small group, or the teacher would be helpful to develop oral reading confidence” (Swafford & Durrington, 2010, p. 231). Capitalize on this fact by setting up heterogeneous table groups. Each group can work as a team, and the teacher can create a reward system that encourages cooperation. Individual effort is still expected and can contribute to the success of the team. This strategy gives students ownership and responsibility for their work and can be more engaging and intrinsically motivating. Swafford & Durrington state, “To become self-efficacious readers,...students needed to experience reading in an instructional context in which they felt supported” (2010, p. 230).

Small Group

Encourage flexible grouping by instructing students how to quickly and efficiently move their desks to work in pairs, in triads, or in groups of four or five. Use symbols to represent various configurations; for example, two circles represent partner work, a triangle means they work in groups of three, a square means work in groups of four, and a five-pointed star means work in groups of five. Have students practice picking up and moving their desks to get into the appropriate formations. Be prepared to practice these configurations multiple times at first and to revisit the practice periodically through the year. Students should be expected to move their desks quickly and quietly. Once students have the procedure down pat, the teacher can simply write the appropriate symbol on the board and students will know without questioning how they are to arrange themselves for the day.

Move the station, not the students. Keep practice assignments for small-group work in laminated pocket folders or sturdy boxes or bags. Give students 10 to 15 minutes to work on one task, then move the folders or boxes to the next table. Continue working this way until all students have had a chance to complete each station’s assignment. One station should be set aside for time with the teacher to address intervention or guided practice.

Independent Practice

If possible, provide some comfortable areas for students to work on their own. Beanbags, a futon in the corner, or even individual computer stations with inviting lighting will set the stage for a relaxing environment. If you must have desks in rows, tape a number to each desk and assign that number to each student. Arrange students not alphabetically, but by ability. Keep the struggling learners in front, closest to you. This will help you stay focused on those students who need more guidance and direct instruction. Be sure to rearrange students at the start of each unit so everyone has a chance to benefit from more attention from the teacher.

Using Reading and Writing Portfolios

According to Swafford & Durrington (2010), adolescents need to take ownership of their work. “There is an increasing demand on students as 21st century learners to take responsibility to continue learning outside of school, so it is extremely

important for teachers to help them become self-efficacious readers” (p. 232). Using a reading and writing portfolio allows students to create their own set of reference tools, keep track of notes, and stay accountable for assignments. Here are some tips for creating and using reading and writing portfolios in class.

Be Practical

A portfolio can be as simple as six sheets of notebook paper folded in half and stapled together. Use sturdy paper to add pockets, and have students keep glue sticks in their supplies to attach handouts. A portfolio only needs to last for four weeks or as long as one unit of instruction. Have students turn in their portfolios as a form of assessment. This work product will provide more information than a report card to parents about how the student progressed through the unit.

Make a Cover Page

Let students decorate and label their portfolios as they want (within reason). Leave the first page blank so students can create a table of contents either as they go or at the end of the unit. Creating a table of contents can be a form of summarizing what they learned and can serve as a study tool. It also reinforces an understanding of features of text students need to know to read nonfiction and textbooks.

Keep the Portfolios in Class

Since these tools will be used daily, students need guaranteed access to them. Find a magazine holder or a basket and color code each one to correspond with each class period. At the beginning of class, students retrieve their portfolios, and at the end, they return them to the basket. Organize the portfolios so that all reading information is on the right side (R=right=reading) and all the writing information is on the left side. That will help students when they are trying to find information quickly.

Working Backward and Creating a Strategies Notebook

Wiggins and McTighe (2011) described a method of instructional planning that worked backward: “1) focus on teaching and assessing for understanding and learning transfer; and 2) design curriculum ‘backward’ from those ends” (p. 1). That is, teachers think of what they want their students to have achieved at the end of the unit and then fill in the necessary assignments and checkpoints needed to reach that goal. Each unit of instruction in this strategies notebook follows a balanced literacy framework and includes the following:

- Modeled reading instruction
- Guided reading practice
- Independent reading
- Modeled writing instruction
- Guided writing practice
- Independent writing
- Vocabulary (direct instruction of word analysis and decoding strategies)
- Content-area vocabulary (embedded in reading and writing practice)

Creating a Planning Calendar

Use the following steps to create a four-week planning calendar for teaching the strategies in this book.

Start with a Culminating Assignment

The culminating assignment for each unit reflects that specific form of writing. For example, a culminating assignment for the explanatory/informational unit could be a class newspaper, a student-authored textbook, or an essay. A culminating assignment for the argument unit could be a commercial, an editorial, or a political campaign. For the narrative unit, students could write a story, create a short video, or put on a play as a culminating experience.

The culminating assignment can also integrate content-area themes. For example, by combining mathematics and argument, students can identify a high-performing stock or bond, track its progress over a period of time, then write a letter to shareholders convincing them to buy or sell the stock. In science, students can write a narrative from the perspective of a morsel of food and describe its journey as it travels through the digestive tract. In social studies, students can write collaboratively with a partner, explaining a historical event from various perspectives.

Once the culminating assignment has been decided, write it in your planning calendar at the end of the third week. The fourth week of the unit should be saved for revisions, test preparation, and re-teaching. The summative assessment should take place in the middle of the week, so there is still time to make up work, allow students to make presentations, or revisit a skill and get ready for the next unit.

Planning Calendar 1

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1					
Week 2					
Week 3					
Week 4	Culminating Assignment Due	Presentations and Reteaching	Summative Assessment	Make Up Presentations	Make Up Presentations

Fill in Reading Instruction/Reading Practice

The purpose of a culminating assignment is to allow students to synthesize and integrate all the specific characteristics of that genre. Consider all the skills students will need to successfully master the text type. Narrow the focus to only include the most important five or six. Start the unit with an overview of the genre, and then fill in the reading instruction so that one strategy is covered every three to five days.

For example, informational text “organizes the explanation in successive steps, using imperative verbs” (Duke, Caughlan, et al., 2012, pp. 37-38). Therefore, in the explanatory unit, students will practice the following:

- Visualize while reading
- Monitor understanding by predicting
- Determine a main idea
- Distinguish a significant detail from an insignificant detail
- Summarize information

Each of these strategies will be addressed individually, as shown on the following planning calendar. Allow one or two days after the instruction for guided practice.

Fill in Writing Instruction/Writing Practice

Integrate writing into the equation and reinforce the reading and writing connection by weaving writing strategies into the calendar. This will give students opportunities to write for various purposes and time frames, as specified by the Common Core State Standards for grades six through eight: “Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences” (Common Core State Standards, p. 44).

For example, in the explanatory unit, if students are practicing the reading strategy of visualizing while reading, follow that lesson with a writing exercise focused on using descriptive sensory words. Give students a day after modeling to work in small groups or individually to write a descriptive piece. (See the planning calendar below.)

Planning Calendar 2

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Week 1	RI: Visualize	RP: Guided practice	WI: Descriptive writing	WI: Descriptive writing	RI: Predict
Week 2	RP: Guided practice	WI: Cause and effect	WP: Cause and effect	RI: Main idea and detail RP: Guided practice	WI: Main idea and detail
Week 3	WP: Main idea and detail	RI: Summary	RP: Guided practice	WI: Summary Culminating assignment draft	WP: Summary Culminating assignment draft
Week 4	CA: Due	Presentations and Reteaching	Summative Assessment	Make Up Presentations	Make Up Presentations

Legend

- RI = Reading Instruction
- WI = Writing Instruction
- RP = Reading Practice
- WP = Writing Practice
- CA = Culminating Assignment
- ML = Mini-Lesson

Fill in Vocabulary and Grammar

Vocabulary can be addressed in a few steps. First, provide explicit and direct word analysis and decoding strategies as an opening activity two to five days each week, for 10 to 15 minutes at a time. Fill in this time on your planning calendar. Include vocabulary checks on each Friday.

Next, provide content-specific vocabulary instruction within the structure of reading and writing. This can be done as an explicit reading strategy (to look for transition words or active verbs, for example) or as a writing strategy (as part of revising and editing within the writing process). Limit vocabulary to three to five words at a time, and provide opportunities for practice through word-consciousness and word-awareness activities.

Allowing Time for Re-teaching

The final week of the unit can be saved for re-teaching, but also allow flexibility within the other weeks of the unit for a quick 20- to 30-minute review as needed. Use formative assessments regularly, and use the information gained from these tools to determine whether students are ready to move on or whether they need more scaffolded instruction. Ideas for formative assessments are included with each strategy.

Practicing Test Prep

Synthesize the unit for students and show them the relevance of the information by practicing test prep. Help students identify the key words in a prompt that will alert them as to what their response should contain. Have them practice with a few prompts at the end of the unit.

Next, show students how to use all the tools they learned throughout the unit to quickly organize a written response or to skim a reading passage for pertinent information.

Using the Mini-Lessons

The strategies in this book are organized to provide an overview of the genre or text type and then to suggest the prerequisite skills students will need before starting the unit, including the specific content vocabulary. Three strategies are introduced for segmenting the unit into three manageable pieces. These strategies correspond to the stages of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, and revising—and are meant to offer specific scaffolds as students are working through each of these stages on their way to completing a culminating assignment. Two Mini-Lessons per strategy provide specific instructional ideas for how to address those components. Finally, graphic organizers are provided as scaffolds, and rubrics for assessment are included, both analytic (for formative assessments) and holistic (for summative assessments).