

Cutting to the Common Core: My Students Can't Read So How Will They Write?

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***Hillary Wolfe* recommends building strategic scaffolds to assist adolescent writing**

One of the biggest instructional shifts resulting from the Common Core State Standards is the increased emphasis on writing. Students will be expected to write in all content areas, for various purposes, and over varying lengths of time (Writing Anchor Standard 10). Argument writing has been elevated to a high priority (indicated by its placement as Writing Anchor Standard 1). And writing must include textual evidence, in-depth analysis, and structures appropriate to task, purpose, and audience (Writing Anchor Standard 4) (CCSS, 2010). For a seventh-grade student who is reading at a fourth-grade level, how will this happen?

For too long, writing instruction has been difficult, especially for teachers of adolescents. Writing may be taught as separate subject, as a series of discrete skills (write a thesis statement, write a topic sentence and concluding statement), or taught through a series of prompts, which inspire interesting ideas but don't promote much skill building. Worse yet, writing interventions — scaffolds designed to help struggling readers — have been few and far between. The best research supports using mnemonics to help students remember the steps of the writing process (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Writing programs provide tools for brainstorming and graphic organizers to show students how a paragraph has a main idea that is supported by details (and commentary), but beyond that, students' understanding of writing has been largely inferential. We can assume that students who are well read tend to be better writers because they have been

exposed to many different types and styles of writing and therefore can mimic those constructs in their own writing. But what about the student who isn't very well read? Or the student who reads what is assigned but doesn't understand how that writing happened? Can teachers sufficiently define and describe an effective supporting detail and commentary for these struggling readers?

As a literacy teacher, literacy coach, and intervention coordinator, I have seen students look bewildered at their teachers' requests for "more details," "stronger support," "more analysis." These are terms that are foreign to the low-level reader. My students would say to me, "What do they mean, more details? I wrote seven sentences!" I realized early on that these students perceived the ability to write as a magical gift that was either bestowed upon you at birth or not. Literacy students saw themselves clearly in the latter group.

Sure, there are gifted and talented writers whose artistry goes above and beyond the scope of most of ours — just as there are some basketball players who are exceptionally gifted. But almost anyone can learn to play basketball and, with practice, learn to be proficient. Why should writing be any different? Here are some ways to help your struggling readers and underachievers get off the bench and into the writing game, all while supporting the rigorous expectations of the Common Core State Standards.

Method

Hopefully writing is going on all the time in class, as quick writes, journal entries, summary responses, and note taking. But to get students to synthesize all the components of writing instruction, they must be learning one skill at a time at a very simplistic level, then understanding how that skill fits into a bigger picture as a piece of a puzzle. They can do this by building a culminating project. As John Hattie explains in *Visible Learning*, "You need surface to have deep; and you need to have surface and deep knowledge and understanding in a context or set of domain knowledge" (2009, p.29). Each individual project should represent one text type, so students are consistently writing and revising and practicing with one type at a time. An easy way to do this is to build three writing units: argument, explanatory/informational, and narrative. Then, teach the skills and processes that go into creating each text type (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 5). There are three basic steps to writing instruction that will show students that writing can be accomplished incrementally but with great success.

1. Introduce a skill as a manageable three- to four-step process.
2. Use a mentor text that demonstrates how the outcome looks in a finished product.
3. Give the student opportunities to practice the skill in a piece of writing that is a work in progress, culminating in a final product.

While skill instruction happens piecemeal, I suggest having students keep all their "pieces" in a portfolio and referring to the processes through the drafting and revision stages. (By the way, these units can serve to reinforce reading instruction, too, by highlighting text structures, practicing close reading, and integrating ideas across and between multiple texts. The Carnegie Report *Writing to Read* indicates that writing instruction can strengthen reading skills. Graham & Hebert, 2010.) Here's how to get started.

Anchor Standards 1-3: Foundations

Start with the foundations. Everything must be defined to its simplest forms. Start with standards 1-3, Text Types and Purposes (CCSS, 2010). The language of these standards must be made explicit for students. Give every student a writing portfolio. On the first page, have them each make a four-column chart. Label the first column “Text Type” and list the three types (see Figure 1 below). Students need to have a visual way to compare these types of writing side by side. Label the next column “Structures.” This is where you will list the text structures that are most appropriate for each text type. For example, in argument text, the structures include a problem-solution setup, where an issue is introduced or a claim is made, and the rest of the writing either proves, rebuts, refutes, or pokes fun at a solution. The purpose of informational or explanatory text is to explain how, why, or which one (a relationship). The most appropriate structures include a sequence (chronological, spatial, or procedural), a cause-and-effect to show why something happened or the result of a set of circumstances, or a comparison to highlight the similarities and/or differences between two ideas. A narrative is a way to share a learned life lesson or to generalize a thematic struggle and achievement. Structurally, it is a sequence of events that progress logically. The tricky part of a narrative is that the structure can be ambiguous, including flashbacks or multiple perspectives. Use timelines and sequence maps to trace the actual order of events, but recognize that the writing should demonstrate a story arc, with a context and point of view established and significant events ordered by importance, all leading to a climactic moment that represents the lesson learned or goal achieved. Each structure will need to be explicitly taught, using short mentor texts (preferably written at the students’ reading level) where the structure is easy to identify. It doesn’t hurt to highlight the clues they should look for, such as transition words.

Writing Process

For my struggling readers, I found that it was too daunting to start at the beginning. How many hours have been wasted while a student stewes over how to begin? Besides, if they don’t know what they are planning to say, how can they “introduce” it? That would be like being asked to introduce a stranger to friends at a party. You have to get to know people first — their name, their hobbies or favorite movies — before presuming to introduce them to someone else. Start from the inside out, by planning the body of the writing. Once the ideas have been formulated and decided upon, it will be easier to write an introduction. This is where prewriting should begin — with the middle.

Prewriting, when attempted through broad brainstorming sessions, does not offer struggling students enough explicit information and step-by-step instruction. When a student lacks a treasure chest of background knowledge and their vocabulary bank is hovering at 20,000 words, brainstorming will not yield many results. These students must be given clear and unambiguous information about what kinds of thoughts they need to be generating. They need explicit definitions for terms like main ideas, details, and relevant evidence. Fortunately, the standards give us great clues about how to scaffold this information. Standard 1, eighth grade, defines argument as “logical reasoning” and “accurate, credible evidence” (CCSS, 2010). Therefore, start by defining logic and explaining why it is a convincing way to prove an argument. Think of data, statistics, authoritative sources, and deductive reasoning. These are all examples of evidence that students can identify in mentor texts and then practice inserting into their paragraphs. Once they recognize what logical evidence is, have them practice determining if it is

credible. Define credible, and give them lots of examples and non-examples. (As students' proficiency improves, you can introduce emotional techniques such as propaganda or connotative meanings.) In the four-column chart, label the third column "Types of Details." Ask the students to craft a working definition of logical evidence and post it conspicuously in the room. Write examples in the third column. Now when you ask students to state a claim and brainstorm evidence, ask specifically for pieces of data or statistics, logical causes and effects, and some emotional reasons as well. Their brainstorming will be more targeted and specific, and their paragraphs will be richer. If you are studying a topic such as ancient civilizations, their evidence (data, causes/effects, emotional support) should come from texts they're studying. Now they'll know exactly what kind of evidence to hunt for and will have grounds for explaining why it supports their claim. For explanatory writing, details might include descriptions or definitions, recognizable facts (versus opinions), comparisons, or quotations (Writing Standard 2b, eighth grade) (CCSS, 2010). For narrative writing, descriptive details include dialogue (internal or external) that reveals personality traits, elements of the setting that determine tone, or sensory language that evokes an emotional response. These represent techniques that authors use to reinforce the themes they hope to impart. Once students have had these details defined, they can find them in texts and mimic their use in their own work.

Vocabulary and Grammar

Almost every paper I received at the beginning of the year had one thing in common: each paragraph began with some version of, "The first thing I am going to talk about is..." Each paper was also rife with simple subject-verb sentences, usually along the lines of, "Snakes are reptiles. Snakes are slimy. Snakes are cold-blooded." I tried to explain to my students that a rich vocabulary was like a full refrigerator. If your icebox holds nothing but hotdogs and bread, your meals will all be pretty boring. But if you fill the refrigerator with all kinds of condiments, meats, and grains, you have endless possibilities. These students had been given years of grammar instruction and had sat through thousands of vocabulary tests. But none of this was showing up in their papers.

Focus on vocabulary and grammar through the revision process. Start with the draft your student created from the targeted brainstorm. It has some interesting details, but the writing is still simplistic. Give back the paragraph and make some stipulations. For instance, tell the student that the topic sentence of the paragraph must begin with a sound effect. Now the snake paragraph may say, "Sssss is the sound a snake makes." Stipulate that the next sentence must start with an adjective and can't use the word snakes. That sentence becomes, "Slithery and slimy, these reptiles have no legs." Stretch students to create sentences that are complex and interesting by imposing strict criteria. It may require a few mini-lessons on adjectives, semicolons, or pronouns, but this way the grammar will be relevant and purposeful, and the students will see how these techniques improve their own writing. Extra scaffolds such as sentence frames or cloze sentences might be appropriate at first, especially for language learners who need practice with specific sentence structures and functions of language.

Next, stipulate that vocabulary from the word wall is used. Forbid any word repetitions and force them to find synonymous choices. Have them circle any word they used more than twice and insist that all but two examples be changed.

Label the last column in the chart “Language.” Now that students recognize the value of vocabulary, categorize the types of language choices that are most appropriate for each text type. These include transition words, verb types (passive versus active versus imperative), and figurative (for narratives) versus precise (for explanatory) language. Again, define and explicitly teach each type, then have students find it in text and insert it into their work.

Results

This may seem a tedious process, but think of it as gradual release on the macro level. At first, you are being very prescriptive. The first sets of papers they turn in may all sound alike. Remember that for many of these students, it may be the first time they have ever written more than a few lines. Now that they have some grounding, they have some options. Gradually, remove the stipulations and tell students they can mix and match types of details or experiment with sentence structures.

Just like basketball, they learn how to shoot free throws by studying and practicing their foot placement, how to hold the ball, when to bend their knees, and when to release. With continued practice, they will learn to shoot and make a basket. And once they’ve sunk a few, they may be more willing to suit up and join the game.

References

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