

English Language Arts Strategies

Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively

Grades 6th–12th

RECOMMENDATION 1

Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Use assessments of student writing to inform instruction and feedback.

This document provides a summary of recommendations from the WWC Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively Practice Guide (Graham et al., 2016).

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Strong	6 th 7 th 8 th 9 th 10 th 11 th 12 th

RECOMMENDATION 1

Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle.

The most effective way to teach writing is through (1) explicit and direct instruction and (2) utilizing a Model-Practice-Reflect cycle. Explicit and direct instruction suggests teaching students specific components of the writing process in addition to learning how to select and execute the steps of the writing process strategies. Through the second method, students should be able to observe a strategy being used, practice the strategy on their own, and then evaluate their own writing and use of the strategy. These strategies applied in tandem support improvement in student writing.

Elements of the Writing Process



Strategies

1. Explicitly teach strategies for planning and goal setting, drafting, evaluating, revising, and editing.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Use resources like the National Writing Project to become familiar with best strategies for the writing process.
- Expose students to the different strategies used for the writing practice and begin to have students practice the different strategies.
- Explicitly teach students on each of the strategies for the writing process.

Introduce students to the writing process and the different strategies used within the components of the writing process. Practicing the writing process helps students better direct their thinking and better understand that there are multiple ways to approach each of the elements. Students need explicit instruction on each step of the process, including specific steps in each strategy and how to execute them effectively. Teachers can identify the best strategies through professional learning communities, such as the National Writing Project, or various publications. Process strategy examples can be found on pages 7–14 of the practice guide.

2. Instruct students on how to choose and apply strategies appropriate for the audience and purpose.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Provide a rubric or list of questions for students to use when selecting the best writing strategy. Ensure that students consider the audience and purpose for the writing.
- Have students write a reflection on which strategy they used, the reasoning for that strategy, and if it was beneficial for the identified audience and purpose for the writing.
- Encourage students to practice different writing strategies in different contexts.

Teachers should provide students with a rubric or list of questions for selecting the best writing strategy when considering the audience and purpose. Teachers should consider adding a writing assignment in which students need to describe a specific strategy they used for their assignment, what encouraged them to use that strategy, and how it was or was not beneficial for a specific purpose or audience.

Other options could be having students use writing strategies in different contexts, while also assessing how well the modified strategy worked. Sample questions for strategy selection, audience identification, and purpose identification can be found on pages 14–16 of the practice guide.

3. Model strategies for students.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Utilize a gradual release of responsibility strategy to model the writing process. Begin with “I do” and model the thinking process for selection and applying each writing strategy. Include examples with errors to demonstrate the solutions to writing issues. Then, model the “We do” portion together in whole group. Next, have students work in pairs or individually for the “You do” portion.

The “I do,” “We do,” “You do” instruction model provides students with opportunities to observe strong writers, attempt to emulate the high-quality elements of writing, and then evaluate their writing compared to those elements. This model illustrates to students the thought process behind the selection and application of each strategy and how it can help them write effectively. Teachers should include examples of modeling statements with errors and corrections to best demonstrate solutions to those issues. Sample modeling statements can be found on pages 20–21 of the practice guide.

4. Provide students with opportunities to apply and practice modeled strategies.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Provide regular, frequent opportunities for students to practice writing strategies in classroom activities, across multiple content areas.

Teachers should incorporate frequent opportunities for students to practice implementing writing strategies into all classroom activities. This should occur across all content areas, so students understand how strategies can be adopted for a variety of disciplines. Practice model samples for differing content areas can be found on pages 22–23 of the practice guide.

5. Engage students in evaluating and reflecting upon their own and peers’ writing and use of modeled strategies.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- As students practice a strategy, instruct students to reflect on the use of their strategy and discuss with other students how the strategy worked or did not work for them.

After students have had a chance to practice a particular strategy, they should reflect on their use of the strategy or discuss with other students how the strategy did or did not work for them—the goal is for students to understand how certain strategies can lead to effective writing. Writing reflection and evaluation tools can be found on pages 24–27 of the practice guide.

Instructional Adjustments for Increasing Use of Strategies

Identified Challenge	Instructional Adjustment
Students have not internalized strategies.	Reteach the steps of the strategies. Create visuals of strategy steps to post or distribute in the classroom.
Students lack confidence in applying strategies.	Provide opportunities for students to evaluate, select, and explain why they chose to use different strategies.
Students occasionally apply strategies.	Provide positive written or verbal feedback when students use strategies to improve their writing.
Students do not appear to be applying strategies; however, their writing has improved.	Students may be implementing strategies automatically. Celebrate and continue to monitor student progress.

Potential Roadblocks



I teach my students specific writing strategies, but then they don't seem to use them while composing.

Suggested Approach. Explore the reasons why students are not implementing strategies and respond accordingly. See the table above for instructional adjustment ideas based on the challenges identified.



For some of my students, strategy instruction doesn't seem to improve their writing achievement.

Suggested Approach. Teachers should assess why certain students' writing is not improving and then tailor their instruction based on each student's skill level. This can occur by simplifying and streamlining the steps for strategies.



I struggle to be a strong writer—how can I teach my students to be effective writers?

Suggested Approach. Teachers can strengthen their writing by doing assignments they ask students to complete, by understanding that writing is not always complex or long, by viewing writing as a progression of steps, or by joining a support group with other teachers. Use this opportunity to reflect, discuss, and model personal growth with your students.



I model the use of rubrics for my students, but my students' self-assessments aren't accurate.

Suggested Approach. Teachers can model the use of rubrics by first using the rubric to annotate and compare two pieces of student work. Then the students, in pairs, can annotate each other's writing by discussing how the rubric criteria can change or by assessing the degree to which students have confidence in their writing. Finally, require students to submit a completed rubric with their writing.



How can I help my students to feel comfortable reflecting on their own work?

Suggested Approach. Teachers should demonstrate the reflection process multiple times, while modeling how self-criticism is helpful to improving one's writing skills.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Minimal	6 th 7 th 8 th 9 th 10 th 11 th 12 th

RECOMMENDATION 2

Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features.

Combining both writing and reading into classroom instruction and assignments supports students in learning essential features of effective texts. By reviewing and reflecting on exemplar texts, students can strengthen their writing.

Strategies

1. Teach students to understand that both writers and readers use similar strategies, knowledge, and skills to create meaning.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Help students understand the connection between reading and writing by connecting what they just read to how they can use similar word structure to strengthen their own writing.
- Instruct students to imagine the author's senses or annotate a text to highlight how the author engages the readers.
- Use cognitive-strategy activities to guide student reflection.

To best identify the connection between reading and writing for students, teachers should directly state the connection between a concept students just read and how they can apply a similar word structure to strengthen their writing. Teachers can also have students imagine the senses an author used or provide annotations in texts to highlight how writers attempt to engage the readers through the use of context. Finally, students can utilize cognitive-strategy activities to guide student reflection.

Example Activities

Type of Feedback	Purpose	Outcome
Teacher Feedback	To highlight the strengths, successes, and challenges of student writing	Scaffolds instruction and customizes supports for the student's text and writing process
Peer Feedback	To highlight the strengths, successes, and challenges of student writing	Supports student in developing a deeper understanding of effective writing and constructive feedback
Self-Assessments	To review one's own writing as a reader	Identifies areas of text that require clarification and helps raise awareness of where the student has grown and in which areas they still need support

2. Use a variety of written exemplars to highlight the key features of texts.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Utilize exemplar texts that highlight specific features of effective writing. Use these exemplars when teaching specific learning objectives.

Exemplar texts should be used to illustrate specific features of effective writing, such as organization and structure, ideation, grammar, punctuation, voice, style, and word choice. These texts can exemplify specific learning objectives being taught or diverse writing qualities. For a detailed list of key features for different text types, review pages 36–39 in the practice guide.

Potential Roadblocks



Teaching writing and reading aren't central to my discipline. I have too much content to teach already, and I don't have time to develop students' writing skills as well.

Suggested Approach. Reading and writing activities support student learning, retention, and critical thinking in all content areas. For example, in math, students will need to write to verify and support their logical reasoning. Broadening the definition of reading and writing will help teachers realize that all content areas require reading and writing. Collaborating with subject-matter and grade-level colleagues can support reading and writing instruction across all content areas.



My school teaches reading (or literature) and writing separately. How can I integrate reading and writing?

Suggested Approach. In classes that focus on teaching writing, students can read and analyze exemplary texts as models to emulate in their writing. In classes that focus on teaching reading, teachers can offer opportunities for students to prepare short analytical writing products such as short journal entries after each chapter in a book to better identify themes and key points.



My students have trouble understanding the content of their reading, let alone writing about it.

Suggested Approach. Writing is a tool that helps students develop a deeper understanding of what they are reading. Teachers can consider differentiating starting texts for students and gradually increasing the goals for each student.

Content Area	Level of Evidence	Grades
English Language Arts	 Minimal	6 th 7 th 8 th 9 th 10 th 11 th 12 th

RECOMMENDATION 3

Use assessments of student writing to inform instruction and feedback.

The formative assessment cycle is a process where teachers regularly assess student skill levels, adapt instruction based on the assessment data, and then reassess skill levels. When teachers monitor student progress throughout the entire writing process, it provides helpful information for lesson planning and provides additional feedback to students. Assessment should occur on a regular basis, not just through final written products. This helps teachers better understand student progress so they can provide students with targeted instruction.

Strategies

1. Assess students' strengths and areas for improvement before teaching a new strategy or skill.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Utilize frequent assessments to identify student strengths and challenges.
- Use carefully defined on-demand writing prompts to assess student skills.
- Organize student data to identify groups with similar needs.

Utilize frequent assessment to identify strengths and challenges for individual students and groups of students. Assessment can occur through class work, complex essay writing, or on-demand writing prompts. On-demand writing prompts are short writing assignments that are carefully designed to assess student skills. Effective on-demand writing prompts identify a purpose and audience, offer some form of student choice, are age-appropriate, and should reflect authentic topics. For on-demand writing samples and design guidelines, reference page 46 in the practice guide. Teacher teams can collaborate to design common prompts and analyze common data. The use of a graphic organizer helps identify common student strengths and areas of need across student groups. A sample organizer is located on page 47 of the practice guide.

2. Analyze student writing to tailor instruction and target feedback.

Instructional strategies from the examples:

- Use formative assessment data to create lessons that challenge students.
- Use the data to provide constructive feedback that supports student growth.
- Modify lessons and assignments for different instructional groupings.

Choose learning objectives and create lessons that challenge students based on formative assessment data. Customize lessons and assignments for different instructional groupings, including individual students, small groups, classes, and grade levels. Support student growth through specific feedback targeted to the student's identified needs. Provide constructive feedback using protocols such as "Glow and Grow" and "Praise-Question-Polish." Student teams can aggregate and review school and grade-level data for trends in overall strengths and areas of need.

Locate and Recall

Type of Feedback	Purpose	Outcome
Teacher Feedback	To highlight the strengths, successes, and challenges of student writing	Scaffolds instruction and customizes supports for the student's text and writing process
Peer Feedback	To highlight the strengths, successes, and challenges of student writing	Supports student in developing a deeper understanding of effective writing and constructive feedback
Self-Assessments	To review one's own writing as a reader	Identifies areas of text that require clarification and helps raise awareness of where the student has grown and in which areas they still need support

3. Regularly monitor students' progress while teaching writing strategies and skills.

Instructional strategy from the examples:

- Monitor students' progress frequently and regularly based on students' progress and learning goals. Utilize tracking tools or visual representations to inform student groupings and instruction and to monitor student growth and areas for improvement.

Monitor student progress at regular intervals. The frequency of monitoring students depends on their progress and learning goals. Through the use of tracking tools or visual representations, student growth and areas in need of improvement can be monitored and used to inform student groupings and instruction. Refer to page 54 of the practice guide for a sample data-tracking sheet.

Potential Roadblocks



Writing is a nuanced discipline and each of my students needs support with a unique collection of skills. I do not have the resources to provide that level of differentiation.

Suggested Approach. Finding time to personalize instruction for students is difficult but beneficial because it is targeted support and students feel cared for when someone takes the time to customize instruction for them. Teachers should allot a small amount of class time, 5 to 10 minutes weekly, to work with students who need help in similar areas. Small-group instruction can occur while other students are completing independent work assignments. Collaborate with colleagues from other content areas about strategies for efficiently supporting student writing in the classroom.



I don't have time to regularly conduct formative assessments for all of my students.

Suggested Approach. Use existing assignments and assessments as a formative assessment. Provide students with opportunities to participate in formative assessments through peer and self-assessments.



I am not allowed to modify my school's curriculum or standards. How can I still use formative assessment?

Suggested Approach. Data-informed instruction can occur with existing curriculum and standards; the goal is to identify what areas of the curriculum students have not mastered and to support them in those areas.

References

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