



The LeafLIT

A Literacy Publication

Writing Instruction

by
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After more than thirty years of teaching, I have finally found my niche; writing instruction. I have always loved to write and have encouraged my students to develop their writing skills using a variety of methods along the way. There have been significant successes but unfortunately some failures throughout the years. However, in recent years, things have been changing in my writing classes in a positive way.

So what has changed? Several years ago I was trained to score the writing proficiency test for the State Department of Nevada, both analytically and holistically. What insight this gave me! I finally understood what made a paper proficient or not. I realized with this tool, I could offer more constructive instruction to the students in my classroom.

Being involved with the Writing Department has been a challenging and a wonderful experience. Many educators are unaware of the exhausting process that the Department goes through to ensure that our students receive a thorough evaluation of their writing. The process begins with Head Readers, from all over the state, developing prompts. Then the prompts must go in front of a bias committee for approval. After the prompt is selected, the test administered and completed, the grinding work begins. Head Readers review tons of papers in an effort to select examples that demonstrate each level for every trait. When these are gathered, meetings simultaneously take place in Reno and Las Vegas with our Table Leaders, twenty-four in all, and four Head Readers. These meetings finalize

our sample selections that we call our pure set. On the day of the actual scoring, Head Readers lead an intense warm-up, using the pure set to ensure consistency



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among all of the scorers. Each paper is scored by two trained teachers throughout the day. If there is a discrepancy, a Head Reader steps in to score the paper for a third time. I am proud to say that the system works!

As a Head Reader I have been privileged to work and learn from some of the best writing teachers in the state of Nevada. There is constant brainstorming going on as to how to help our writing students. Our tips are simple; write, write, and write. Use the traits to drive your instruction and teach the rubrics. Our students must be aware of what we are looking for in their writing. Have your students trained to score their own work. This will encourage them to revise and edit which is always a daunting task. Don't let yourself be limited to a program, go beyond it. Although a program will offer structure and a direction for the hesitant writer, the exceeding student will need the freedom to explore a less rigid method. Take the best of several programs and make them your own. Use what the individual child needs to push his or her writing to the next level.

SIMPLE TIPS

- 1 Write, Write, and Write!
- 2 Use the traits to drive your instruction.
- 3 Teach the rubrics.
- 4 Don't let yourself be limited to a program, go beyond it.
- 5 Use what the individual child needs to push his or her writing to the next level.

For the past three years, our school has incorporated the Units of Study for Teaching Writing by Lucy Calkins. Lucy has given my students an awareness of how to develop their ideas into stories and essays. She has opened our eyes to uncovering a "seed" and working with it until it becomes a focused work. The most valuable thing that Lucy has given our students is the gift of "voice". Their writing has become individual and honest with a strong use of vocabulary that enhances their work. I must confess that I love Lucy!

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But even with this love affair, Lucy is not enough. I combine many other sources that will help to secure proficiency. I constantly refer to the traits and state rubrics. An extremely important component to any writing program must include a reflection time. Conferencing with your students is a necessity. You must visit with each student every week to celebrate their accomplishments but also to discuss their areas of need. Putting a grade or number on a piece of writing will not help him or her to reflect on ways to push their skills in the right direction. Keep a conference journal or log. This will keep you on track with your students and it will also provide a place for your student to go when there is a question.

Last year I was very fortunate to be involved with departmentalizing of subject areas. I was assigned to be the writing teacher for the 5th grade. What we found was a success. Our writing scores soared! Having a consistent class that was taught five days a week worked well. I divided my writing blocks into four sections.

1. The mini-lesson-addressing a technique or skill that we would focus on for the day.
2. Independent, directed writing time with individual conferencing.
3. Pair shares-partners are trained to guide each other and ask conferencing questions.
4. Whole group share-sharing our successes for the day.

Although we no longer departmentalize subject areas in my school, I still use this four part lesson structure with my own class.

Celebrations of a published piece are a time that we give each student the insight that what they have accomplished is valued and important to all of us, both classmates and teacher. When the student has the opportunity to take center stage and share his or her masterpiece, there is no stopping the positive effects that this will have on their future writings.

I encourage all teachers to be trained to score, even if you only use this tool with your own students. Be creative in your approach of writing instruction. **Always write your own pieces while your students are writing.** Modeling is such a valuable tool, and they love to hear your examples. **Show your class that writing is an awesome experience and a life-long skill!**