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Balancing Best Practice and Testing Requirements in Writing

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Learning to write is a lesson that lasts a lifetime. But what brings out the best in young writers? Good writing means you can tell a story, provide information, and persuade people with your words. According to the *Nation's Report Card on Writing* issued by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007), America's students are getting better at writing. However, only a small group of students have advanced to the "proficient" level of achievement.

Although good writing instruction cannot be reduced to a formula, certain practices are found in classrooms where students are honing their craft and becoming confident writers. A resource from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory states that young writers improve their skills when they learn that writing is a process that involves review and revision. Many students work harder at writing when they see that their work reaches an audience and serves a real purpose - something more authentic than meeting a due date.



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Classrooms that generate good writing tend to be a place where students are actively engaged in the writing process. Careful classroom routines are established that include the following:

- Concise minilessons that focus on a specific skill, strategy, or procedure.
- Time for writing and conferring when students write at various stages of the writing process and engage in conferences with peers and teachers.
- Group sharing at the end of the writing routine when the whole class reacts to an individual's writing.

Creating this atmosphere of a writers' workshop requires skill and flexibility on the teacher's part. It's a new role for many teachers: being a writing coach rather than the resident expert. Choice, time, and response or feedback are important elements in teaching children to write effectively. As writing routines are established in classrooms, students have an opportunity of "doing" rather than simply "talking" about becoming a proficient writer. Students are then able to build on writing strengths with specific feedback from teachers and peers. Writing teachers also include strong models during instruction to allow students to "get a feel" for good writing. Reading experiences also enhance writing skills.

The Nevada Department of Education observed certain trends during the 2007 writing assessment. These trends provide suggestions for instruction and are best addressed during minilessons within the classroom writing routine. Based on the assessed needs of students in your classroom, the following writing skills and strategies might be taught:



Observed Writing Trends by Trait	Instructional Focus
Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use details to "show" rather than simply "tell." • Avoid repeating details such as, "I had a good time," "It was fun," or "We all enjoyed ourselves." • Avoid unrelated or overuse of dialogue that does not relate to or explain the topic or does not move the story along. • Stay focused on the topic. Use the words from
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a clear topic sentence. • Strengthen both the introduction and conclusion. The conclusion should support and reinforce the introduction. • Strengthen transitions between paragraphs to help guide the reader through the writing. • Avoid using transition words to start each sen-
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice is developed by confident writers. Do not overuse adjectives, similes, or dialogue to show
Word Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use ACTIVE verbs rather than passive verbs. • Avoid the use of common words such as "good."
Sentence Fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid run-on sentences and fragments.
Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the proper use of capital letters. • Match pronouns and antecedents. • Be consistent with verb tense throughout the writing. • Identify the proper use of commas. Use commas <u>before</u> "and" or "but." • Identify when to double the final consonant when adding suffixes. • Focus on the correct use of apostrophes to show plural and/or possession. Avoid adding apostrophes to random words, e.g., "wan't" or "wen't."

High-quality, evidence-based instruction need not be sacrificed in preparing students to succeed on standardized writing assessments. When schools are focused on best practices in all grades, the academic language of writing is developed, a student-centered focus is recognized, and developmentally appropriate practices are used. Writing workshop becomes a flexible place where students learn how to use the writing process in order to become fluent, independent writers. Incorporating 6 + 1 Traits and modes of writing with the writing process and writing workshop is the best way to teach students to think and learn while practicing and perfecting the process of writing. These elements will prepare students to take standardized writing tests, but test preparation is not the ultimate goal. The goal of good writing instruction is to produce good writers.