

Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools

Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

This report identifies 11 elements of current writing instruction found to be effective for helping students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. It is important to note that all of the elements are supported by rigorous research, but that even when used together, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum. However, when combined in flexible ways schools should expect to see very positive results in literacy development.

1. Writing Strategies, explicitly and systematically teaching steps necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing text (Strength of effect = 82%)

2. Summarization, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts (Strength of effect = 82%)

3. Collaborative Writing, which uses instructional arrangements in which students work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions (Strength of effect = 75%)
Student may assist peers with meaning, organization, spelling, punctuation, generating ideas, creating a draft, rereading essays, editing essays, choosing the best copy, and evaluating the final product.

4. Specific Product Goals, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete (Strength of effect = 70%)

This includes identifying the purpose of the assignment (e.g., to persuade) as well as characteristics of the final product, such as -

(a) adding more ideas to a paper when revising, or establishing a goal to write a specific kind of paper and

(b) assigning goals for specific structural elements in a composition.

5. Word Processing, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments (Strength of effect = 55%)

The use of word-processing equipment can be particularly helpful for low-achieving writers. In this type of instruction, students might work collaboratively on writing assignments using computers, or they might learn to word-process a composition under teacher guidance. Typing text on the computer with word-processing software produces a neat and legible script. It allows the writer to add, delete, and move text easily.

6. Sentence Combining, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences through exercises in which two or more basic sentences are combined into a single sentence (Strength of effect = 50%)

7. Prewriting, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition (Strength of effect = 32%)

Some common pre-writing activities include encouraging group and individual planning before writing, organizing pre-writing ideas, prompting students to plan after providing a brief demonstration of how to do so, or assigning reading material pertinent to a topic and then encouraging students to plan their work in advance.

8. Inquiry Activities, which engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task by analyzing immediate, concrete data (comparing and contrasting cases or collecting and evaluating evidence) (Strength of effect = 32%)

Effective inquiry activities in writing are characterized by a clearly specified goal (e.g., describe the actions of people), analysis of concrete and immediate data (observe one or more peers during specific activities), use of specific strategies to conduct the analysis (retrospectively ask the person being observed the reason for a particular action), and applying what was learned (assign the writing of a story incorporating insights from the inquiry process).

9. Process Writing Approach, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for real audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing which include planning, translating, and reviewing; stressing personal responsibility and ownership of writing projects; facilitating high levels of student interactions; developing supportive writing environments; encouraging self-reflection and evaluation; and offering personalized individual assistance (Strength of effect = 32%)

10. Study of Models (Exemplars), which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and copy models of good writing (Strength of effect = 25%)

Students should be provided with good models for each type of writing that is the focus of instruction. Students are encouraged to analyze these examples and to emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models in their own writing.

11. Writing for Content Learning (Writing to Learn), which uses writing as a tool for learning content material in all content areas (Strength of effect = 23%)

A Note About Grammar Instruction

Grammar instruction in the studies reviewed involved the explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences and found an effect for this type of instruction for students across the full range of ability, but surprisingly, this effect was negative. This negative effect was small, but it was statistically significant, indicating that traditional grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students' writing. These findings raise serious questions about some educators' enthusiasm for traditional grammar instruction as a focus of writing instruction. However, other instructional methods, such as sentence combining, provide an effective alternative to traditional grammar instruction, as this approach improves students' writing quality while at the same time enhancing syntactic skills. However, studies have shown that teaching students to focus on the function and practical application of grammar within the context of writing (versus teaching grammar as an independent activity) produced strong and positive effects on students' writing.

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Authors

Dr. Steve Graham is a Professor of Special Education and Literacy at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education. **Dr. Dolores Perin** is an Associate Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She directs the Reading Specialist MA Program, which prepares teachers to assess and teach children and adolescents with reading and writing