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Getting it "Write": Evidence-Based Practices for Teaching Writing

Better: Evidence-based Education Magazine, published by the Johns Hopkins University School of Education's Center for Research and Reform in Education, takes an evidenced-based approach to figuring out what works in teaching. In its Winter 2011 article, *Evidence-based practices for writing*, authors Amy Gillespie and Steven Graham provide teachers proven techniques that work for teaching writing. Below are several excerpts from that article.

What the Research Shows

The list of recommendations presented below is based on scientific studies of students in grades 4-12. The strategies for teaching writing are listed according to the magnitude of their effects. Practices with the strongest effects are listed first.

Evidence of the effectiveness of each strategy or technique was compiled from research studies that met several criteria. First, a recommendation was not made unless there was a minimum of four studies that showed the effectiveness of a writing intervention. Second, in each study reviewed, the performance of one group of students was compared to the performance of another group of students receiving a different writing intervention or no intervention at all. This permitted conclusions that each intervention listed below resulted in better writing performance than other writing strategies or typical writing teaching in the classroom. Third, each study was reviewed to ensure it met standards for research quality and that study results were reliable (reducing the chance that error in assessment contributed to the results). Fourth, studies were only included if students' overall writing quality was assessed post-intervention. This criterion was used to identify strategies that had a broad impact on writing performance, as opposed to those with a more limited impact on a specific aspect of writing such as spelling or vocabulary.

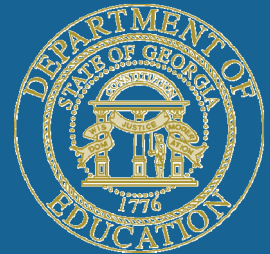
Effective writing practices

Writing strategies: Explicitly teach students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their written products. This may involve teaching general processes (e.g., brainstorming or editing) or more specific elements, such as steps for writing a persuasive essay. In either case, we recommend that teachers model the strategy, provide assistance as students practice using the strategy on their own, and allow for independent practice with the strategy once they have learned it.

Summarizing text: Explicitly teach students procedures for summarizing what they read. Summarization allows students to practice concise, clear writing to convey an accurate message of the main ideas in a text. Teaching summary writing can involve explicit strategies for producing effective summaries or gradual fading of models of a good summary as students become more proficient with the skill.

Collaborative writing: Allow students to work together to plan, write, edit, and revise their writing. We recommend that teachers provide a structure for cooperative writing and explicit expectations for individual performance within their cooperative groups or partnerships. For example, if the class is working on using descriptive adjectives in their compositions, one student could be assigned to review another's writing. He or she could provide positive feedback, noting several instances of using descriptive vocabulary, and provide constructive feedback, identifying several sentences that could be enhanced with additional adjectives. After this, the students could switch roles and repeat the process.

Georgia
Department
of Education



Dr. John D. Barge,
State School
Superintendent

*"Making Education
Work for All Georgians"*

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Goals: Set specific goals for the writing assignments that students are to complete. The goals can be established by the teacher or created by the class themselves, with review from the teacher to ensure they are appropriate and attainable. Goals can include (but are not limited to) adding more ideas to a paper or including specific elements of a writing genre (e.g., in an opinion essay include at least three reasons supporting your belief). Setting specific product goals can foster motivation, and teachers can continue to motivate students by providing reinforcement when they reach their goals.

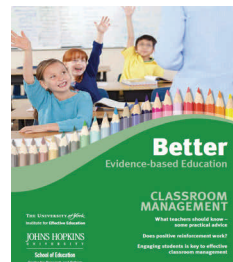
Word processing: Allow students to use a computer for completing written tasks. With a computer, text can be added, deleted, and moved easily. Furthermore, students can access tools, such as spell check, to enhance their written compositions. As with any technology, teachers should provide guidance on proper use of the computer and any relevant software before students use the computer to compose independently.

Sentence combining: Explicitly teach students to write more complex and sophisticated sentences. Sentence combining involves teacher modeling of how to combine two or more related sentences to create a more complex one. Students should be encouraged to apply the sentence construction skills as they write or revise.

Process writing: Implement flexible, but practical classroom routines that provide students with extended opportunities for practicing the cycle of planning, writing, and reviewing their compositions. The process approach also involves: writing for authentic audiences, personal responsibility for written work, student-to-student interactions throughout the writing process, and self-evaluation of writing.

Inquiry: Set writing assignments that require use of inquiry skills. Successful inquiry activities include establishing a clear goal for writing (e.g., write a story about conflict in the playground), examination of concrete data using specific strategies (e.g., observation of students arguing in the playground and recording their reactions), and translation of what was learned into one or more compositions.

Prewriting: Engage students in activities prior to writing that help them produce and organize their ideas. Prewriting can involve tasks that encourage students to access what they already know, do research about a topic they are not familiar with, or arrange their ideas visually (e.g., graphic organizer) before writing.



Models: Provide students with good models of the type of writing they are expected to produce. Teachers should analyze the models with their class, encouraging students to imitate in their own writing the critical and effective elements shown in the models.

Additional suggestions

With any combination of teaching strategies a teacher chooses to use, students must be given ample time to write. Writing cannot be a subject that is short-changed or glossed over due to time constraints. Moreover, for weaker writers, additional time, individualized support, and explicit teaching of transcription skills (i.e., handwriting, spelling, typing) may be necessary. For all students, teachers should promote the development of self-regulation skills. Having students set goals for their writing and learning, monitoring and evaluating their success in meeting these goals, and self-reinforcing their learning and writing efforts puts them in charge, increasing independence and efficacy.

Teachers should supplement their current writing practices and curricula with a combination of evidence-based practices that best meets the needs of their students.

*“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”
~William Butler Yeats*

For more on Best Practices for Teaching Writing:

<http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Better/articles/Winter2011.html>

Great Expectations: Classroom Expectations to Cultivate

Out With the Old?

Gone are the days of outdated classroom practices that do nothing for student learning. Our students deserve more. Our teachers want more. In this issue, we have included an excerpt of an article about *Evidence-based Practices for Teaching Writing*. In an effort to provide some practical suggestions for classroom practices with regard to writing, we have compiled a list of some of the obsolete classroom practices that must be eliminated from a teacher's toolbox, and we have given suggestions for tools that should replace those old ones. For example, the use of Daily Oral Language (DOL) or Daily Grammar Practice (DGP) does not support the CCGPS language standards. Grammar out of context is a thing of the past. According to the authors of *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*, the language standards emphasize the context-embedded language work over memorization of grammar rules. Teach the language standards in connection with the writing, reading, speaking, and listening work you are already asking students to do.

What the Research Shows

The Carnegie Corporation's *Writing Next* (excerpt published in the Jan/Feb issue of the *ELA Reporter*) found that "...grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students' writing. Studies specifically examining the impact of grammar instruction with low-achieving writers also yielded negative results." Bottom line: teaching grammar in isolation does not work! Researchers did note that alternate practices like sentence combining proved to be more effective.

Where do we go From Here?

One suggestion for embedding language instruction is to use model sentences from texts to illustrate the correct (or ideal) usage of grammar in context. Jeff Anderson, author of *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop*, provides practical instruction for having students examine "noteworthy sentences from published authors and imitate

within the context of writing instruction of all types." In contrast to the DOL practice, model sentences allow students to see the *right* way of writing, instead of incorrect sentences or incorrect grammar usage.

Further Implications for Instruction

The authors of *Pathways to the Common Core*, offer five recommendations: start with assessment—Daily writing can provide a source for assessing where students are. Using grade level CCGPS as a list of criteria, teachers can skim student writing to determine what is appropriate for whole-class, small-group, or one-on-one instruction; teach language standards in tandem—language standards cross over all areas; build from students' strengths—allow a good start to help learners have enough steam to overcome tougher concepts and teachers must model those concepts; plan ahead for repetition of skills—one time is not enough; and be current on research on best practices—know what strategies align to the standards.

Calkins, Lucy, Ehrenworth, Mary, and Lehman, Christopher. *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2012. Print

Read the Carnegie Corporations' full report: <http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/writingnext.pdf>

Eliminate These Practices

- DOL (Dumb or Lucky!) or DGP (Dull Grinding Practice)
- Grammar out of Context
- *Occasional* Writing
- Teacher Assigns
- Short Reads on Tests
- Test What You Taught
- DOK 1 Level Questions
- "Stand and Deliver"

Cultivate These Practices

- Jeff Anderson's Model Sentences
- Grammar in Context
- *Daily* Writing
- Teacher Models
- Develop Reading Stamina
- Test "Cold Passages"
- DOK 2-4 in each Unit Test
- Facilitate/Gradual Release

Update: ELA/Literacy Summer Academies

Due to overwhelming numbers of participants this year, we have secured a sixth site: the **Clarence Brown Conference Center** in **Cartersville, GA** (Bartow County). Participants of this year's ELA/Literacy Summer Academy will experience two days of original, innovative, and creative professional learning from some of Georgia's inspiring teacher leaders. Our objective is to provide classroom teachers with additional tools to sharpen their skills and stretch their instructional practices—all aimed at improving student achievement. This year's Summer Academy will inspire you! We look forward to seeing you there.



We encourage teachers to attend one of the geographic locations:

- ◆ June 3-4: Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw
- ◆ June 11-12: Coastal Georgia Center, Savannah
- ◆ June 16-17: Middle Georgia State College, Macon
- ◆ June 23-24: Darton State College, Albany
- ◆ July 14-15: UGA Conference Center, Athens
- ◆ July 21-22: Clarence Brown Conference Center, Cartersville

Making Differentiation Work for You: Small -Group Instruction



The teacher challenges students by providing appropriate content and developing skills which address individual learning differences.

—TKES Standard 4

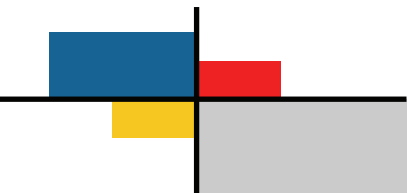


When planning for differentiation in the classroom, teachers must focus on essential learning goals and maintain those goals for all students, even while offering variety and choice.—Carol B. Dobbertin



Entice and ignite lifelong learners.

C. Chapman & R. King



Appendix A of the CCGPS states, “Students reading well above and well below grade-band level need additional support. Students for whom texts within their text complexity grade band (or even from the next higher band) present insufficient challenge must be given the attention and resources necessary to develop their reading ability at an appropriately advanced pace. On the other hand, students who struggle greatly to read texts within (or even below) their text complexity grade band must be given the support needed to enable them to read at a grade-appropriate level of complexity.”

For classroom teachers, especially teachers in K-5, small group instruction may be the means by which increasing student readability at all levels is met. According to Marcia Uretsky (2008), in a small group instruction setting, students are able “to develop a repertoire of strategies, to self-correct, to read for meaning, and to build stamina for reading longer texts independently.” Moreover, working in small groups provides opportunities for students with similar needs whether in the form of support or enhancement to increase their reading capacities (Valentino, C., 2000). Types of small group instruction are strategy groups, guided reading groups, and literature circles. In a strategy group, the teacher uses various approaches to teach specific reading skills previously identified through an assessment, whereas a guided reading group includes the teacher working with a small group of students who possess similar reading difficulties and are on the same reading level. Further, literature circles focus on reading a common text with the emphasis placed upon the text discussion.

Additionally, successful small group instruction time takes focused planning not only on the content of the work, but also on the steady practice. Guidelines for student behavior during small group instruction time must be established early and monitored consistently by the teacher. Students must know and follow the routine modeled by the teacher in order to gain the most benefit of the time spent in small groups. Some suggested guidelines are establishing rules, designing the room for teacher monitoring, placing students in a semicircle for teacher guidance, and using motivational activities.

Successful small group instruction requires implementing a model that fits the specific needs of the students. Furthermore, maintaining an environment where group learning by all can take place is critical. With these two pieces of the puzzle met, small group instruction can benefit all students. An excellent example of small group guided reading instruction may found at the following link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9F_AV4YhbK



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National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Appendix A of Common Core State Standards for English language arts and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Washington, DC: Authors

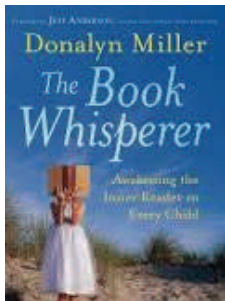
Uretsky, M. (2008). Small group instruction in the primary grades (k-2) [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://www.powershow.com/view/3b5cbe-MjUyN/Small_Group_Instruction_in_the_Primary_Grades_K-2_powerpoint_ppt_presentation

Valentino, C. (2000). Flexible grouping. Retrieved from <http://www.eduplace.com/science/profdev/articles/valentino.html>

Reading Gives Students...Something to Write About!

Carolyn Waters, GaDOE

A teacher in Camden County shared with me a poster that she made for all the English teachers in her district: "Do not write without a book on your desk, and do not read without a pen in your hand." I loved the simple message: reading and writing are inextricably linked, especially in light of our CCGPS. But the reality for most of us who teach is that reading is a tough sell, and many of our students are reading far below their grade level and far below the Lexile levels that appear in the CCRPI. Since we all know that Lexiles are only one-third of the text complexity factors, English teachers face an impossible dilemma—how do we get students to read? Perhaps it's time for a new approach. When is the last time YOU read a book for pleasure? Do you set aside time for your students to read for pleasure? Do you give them choice? Do you survey the students in your class in order to find out their reading habits and interests? Do you model reading and engage students in the metacognitive thinking that is invisible to students unless teachers actually teach the "thinking out loud" strategies and ask probative questions?



The Book Whisperer by Donalyn Miller is one of my favorite books on the subject of reading for pleasure. She shares many tips about getting students to read, and she chronicles her astonishing success with her own

sixth grade classroom. She has recently published another book entitled *Reading in the Wild*. Both books are full of practical tips for how to ignite a passion for reading in the classroom. If you are not familiar with her books, check them out.

Deeper Reading by Kelly Gallagher is another resource that I can strongly recommend. His quick wit and anecdotal exemplars of strategies he has employed in the classroom turn theory into practical practice that engages students and successfully impacts their deeper understanding and hence deeper appreciation for good literature.

Cathy Tanguis, a teacher, who reviewed Gallagher's work on a blog, says, "[Gallagher's] classroom-tested strategies enable your students to

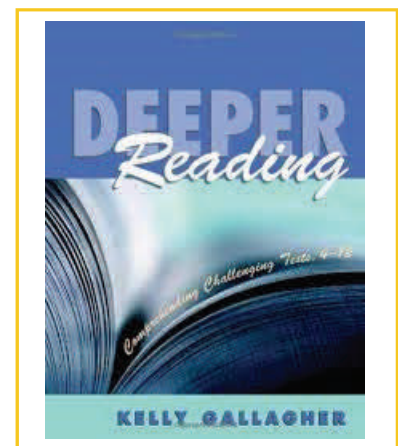
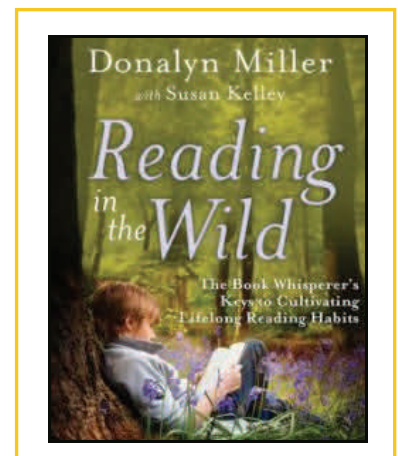
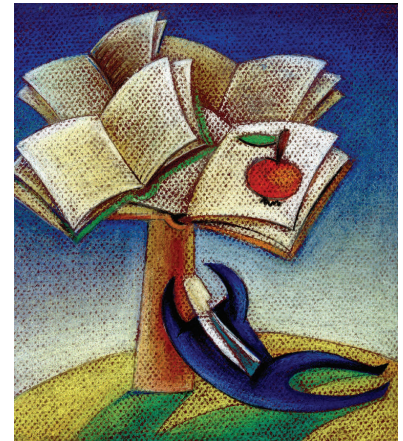
- ◆ accept the challenge of reading difficult books;
- ◆ move beyond a 'first draft' understanding of the text into a deeper level of meaning;
- ◆ consciously monitor their comprehension as they read;
- ◆ employ effective fix-it strategies when their comprehension begins to falter;
- ◆ use meaningful collaboration to achieve deeper understanding of texts;
- ◆ think metaphorically to deepen their reading comprehension;
- ◆ reach deeper levels of reflection by recognizing the relevance the book holds for themselves and their peers;
- ◆ use critical thinking skills to analyze real-world issues... "

Not surprisingly, Gallagher's strategies sound more like a prescription for what ails our students' apathy toward the reading we assign.

What happened to the sheer joy of reading? Have we turned reading into a punitive practice? Last year I passed an elementary school on my way to work and noticed the well-meaning sign out front that said, "Enjoy summer, but keep on reading." "But?" Really? Doesn't that signal an opposite? I drew an inference from that sign: *summer equals fun; reading equals anything but fun!* What subliminal message are we sending?

With summer just around the corner, Miller writes, "Reading research indicates that many children's reading ability declines between the end of one school year and the beginning of the next. My sixth graders can tell you why this happens; "they don't usually read much over the summer."

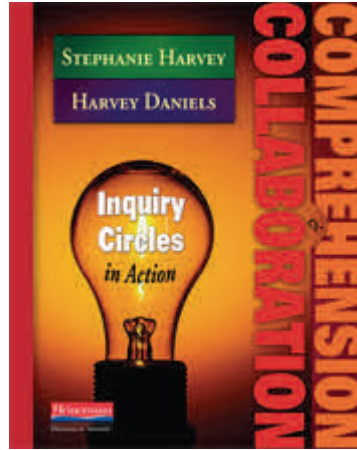
We need to change the culture and embrace reading for pleasure for ourselves and our students. Moreover, we need to tie writing to everything we ask students to read.



Resources We Recommend

Comprehension & Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action –Harvey “Smokey” Daniels.

Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action occurs at the intersection of comprehension, collaboration, and inquiry and serves as a guide for teachers who want to realize the benefits of well-structured, student-led, cross-curricular projects. Stephanie Harvey (Strategies That Work and The Comprehension Toolkit series) and Harvey “Smokey” Daniels (Literature Circles and Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles):



- lay the foundation for inquiry circles by chronicling the current research and practices behind comprehension instruction and classroom collaboration
- explain nine fundamental classroom conditions needed for active, small-group learning
- provide 26 practical lessons in comprehension, collaboration, and research
- offer how-to instructions for four types of inquiry circles—mini-research projects; curricular inquiries; extensions of literature circles; and open inquiry projects
- address characteristic management concerns, such as how to use the Internet for research and how to assess and monitor student achievement.

Throughout, chapters offer a mix of materials for you to grab and go as well as some big ideas to think through as you customize inquiry circles for your students. It is time for another stronger, more intentional era of education. *Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action* will serve as your companion and provide a guiding light on this important endeavor.

–Heinemann Editorial Review



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