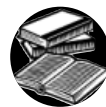




EDUCATORS PUBLISHING SERVICE



Research-Based Writing

WRITE ABOUT ME and WRITE ABOUT MY WORLD

Elise Wilmerding

JUST WRITE: CREATIVITY AND CRAFT IN WRITING

Elsie Wilmerding and Sandy Bigelow

By Cynthia Johnson

We ask that writing be considered a priority at all levels of schooling. As school leaders develop these new policies, they should incorporate writing opportunities for every student from the earliest years of school through secondary school.

—The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003

The Process Writing Revolution

When the National Writing Project was formed at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974, improving writing had been on the education agenda for more than a century, yet few visible gains had been made. Clearly, it was time for a new approach. The Project's mission was to improve writing education by improving writing instruction. It began training educators to teach writing based on the theory that children should learn to approach a composition the same way professional writers do: as a process (Allen, 2003). Ten years later, research was bearing out the theory. A 1984 meta-analysis of writing instruction found that the most effective instruction taught the entire, integrated process of writing, from brainstorming through revisions (Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003). In the two decades since, cognitive models of the writing process have been developed, refined, and tested, and found to be effective for students of all levels of mastery (Wong, 2000). Research has identified additional strategies to be used within the process framework that can boost students' success (Strickland, Ganske & Monroe, 2002). The *Just Write* series presents and reinforces these techniques to give beginning writers the skills to succeed in school and beyond.

The *Just Write* program includes five student books for grades 1–4+. *Write about Me* and *Write about My World* encourage young writers to use pictures as a starting point for writing, introducing students to the process of writing and helping young writers bridge the gap between thinking and talking about an idea and writing about it. Child-centered illustrations and activities include drawing, listing, and mapping exercises, and make connections to early science and social studies topics. Books 1 and 2 provide models, exercises, and writing activities to help guide students through the story-writing process, from planning to publishing. Book 3 covers narrative, descriptive, expository, and persuasive writing in single paragraph and multiparagraph formats.

EPS



Before the 1970s, writing was considered an advanced skill, approached only after students had mastered vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, and other mechanical language functions thought to provide the necessary foundation. This notion was particularly troublesome with students whose difficulty mastering the basics might prevent them from ever progressing to the more “advanced” lesson (Baker et al., 2003). Process writing emerged as an entirely different way to consider writing instruction. To be sure, good writing is an advanced skill, but like playing a sport or a musical instrument, it is a skill that requires years of practice. In fine arts, students adopt more advanced techniques as they become more adept with their medium; the same is true in language arts.

The process writing method of instruction mirrors the process that experienced writers use, essentially organizing their thoughts before they begin to write, creating a draft, and improving their compositions by revising them (Allen, 2003). It involves what Baker et al. (2003) describe as “repeated processes that overlap and build on one another,” and teaching the method requires the instructor to describe and model each step of the process. With process writing, the enormous goal of producing an essay is broken down into understandable, performable steps. Students who are intimidated by writing find it easier to begin—and to finish—when the route to the destination is clearly mapped (Allen, 2003).

Process writing is based on the theory that it is less important for students to produce perfect compositions than to develop comfort and confidence in writing. Stephen Tchudi, a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, advocates that teachers get children writing as often as possible in a wide range of forms. “What’s most important for elementary school writers is fluency—the ability to get out their pencils and write about whatever they want” (Allen, 2003). Research supports process writing, finding that students learn the mechanics of language more

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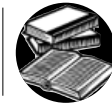
easily when they can readily apply those lessons in the framework of their writing (Baker et al., 2003). And The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges agrees, including the point, "Writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school and into college," on its Writing Agenda for the Nation (2003).

The process writing model reflects the idea that writing is more than just putting on paper what already exists in one's head; it is both a tool for and the product of careful thinking. In a 2003 article, Rick Allen described its importance beyond simple composition: "Facility with writing opens students up to the pleasure of exercising their minds in ways that grinding on facts, details, and information never will. More than a way of knowing, writing is an act of discovery." Good writers are good thinkers, equipped with a key skill for success in education, industry and democracy. Better students are afforded richer opportunities in school and in the workforce. They make more effective workers and contribute to a more effective economy, and they are informed, engaged and thoughtful participants in democracy.

Process writing methodology is at the core of the *Just Write* series. The series covers the five main stages in the writing process: prewriting, writing, revising, editing, and publishing. It provides students with explicit techniques for planning, constructing, and editing their work, helping beginning writers build sentence sense and paragraph skills, organize ideas, add detail, and produce longer stories and compositions. The assignments are designed to encourage students to write about things they are likely to be familiar with, using a step-by-step approach to enable them to become more confident writers. The student books provide tools like webs, maps, and plans to organize thoughts and, models to demonstrate how to apply new skills and checklists to encourage editing. The teachers' guides give lesson-by-lesson suggestions about introducing concepts, modeling new skills, and helping students progress.

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The Writing Revolution Today

The process writing revolution did not alleviate all worries about the quality of students' written work. In 2002, the College Board addressed the growing concern from the educational, business, and public sectors about the quality of writers emerging from American classrooms. The organization that develops and administers the SAT® announced that, starting in 2005, the test would include a writing assessment. The Board also established the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges to explore and promote improvements in writing education. The Commission soon announced that nothing short of a revolution would suffice.

In April 2003 the commission released *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, outlining the shortcomings in prevailing methods of writing instruction, describing its proposed revolutionary writing curriculum, and detailing a writing agenda to achieve the nation's full educational potential. The agenda essentially prescribes more attention to writing: more time spent writing, more types of writing, and more opportunities to write across the curriculum. With the National Assessment of Educational Progress's 2002 finding that some seventy percent of fourth-graders were writing below a "proficient" level, the need for intervention is clear.

Just Write Solutions

Students benefit by understanding the *pieces* of a task before tackling the *whole*. For example, it helps to be aware of the parts of a story before attempting to sit down and write one. Students need guidance to concentrate on specific elements in a story, practice each individual skill, and then work with the skills as a whole to produce more interesting stories. Presenting writing as a stepwise process, as it is done in *Just Write*, makes it more approachable for the students and produces final products that are clear and focused.



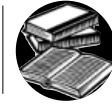
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Just Write is a classroom-tested resource that helps students become confident, expressive writers. Exercises and activities in the series encourage creativity and help children build their writing skills as they develop ideas that have personal meaning to them. Drawing from recent research about how we learn to write and following current “best practices” in writing instruction, the *Just Write* series balances form with function. It provides students a foundation in both the mechanics and process of writing, making accessible and approachable a skill that at the outset may seem shrouded in awesome mystery. It does not demand that students master skills that used to be thought of as “fundamental” before progressing to the “advanced” task of creating a composition. At first, students are encouraged to “just write” without worrying about spelling and punctuation. Later lessons discuss capital letters, basic punctuation, spelling, indenting, and constructing paragraphs. By making the tools and techniques of writing accessible to the youngest students, the *Just Write* series fosters academic success based on the ability to demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and independent thought with ease and skill.

The general format of *Just Write* is a chapter-by-chapter focus on one or two simple writing elements. It adheres to a pattern of first identifying the elements in a story then moving to reading and writing as this helps to solidify the principle being taught. The process is based on the following four steps:

- A definition of a specific writing element or strategy
- Models for the students to read and use to identify this element or strategy
- Exercises to practice the element or strategy
- Writing assignments incorporating the element or strategy.

The novice writers’ growing toolkits will encourage their advancing skill, while their growing sophistication reinforces the use of each new tool.



Mechanics

Process writing does not advocate ignoring the mechanics of language in favor of uninhibited writing; it introduces constructs like grammar, format, and punctuation side-by-side with instruction and practice with composition. Meta-analyses of teaching techniques have shown that teaching the function of content together with the form of mechanics is more effective than focusing on either separately (Baker et al., 2003). When presented as tools to help students achieve their writing goals, e.g., communicating something clearly to a specific audience, concepts like capitalization, punctuation, and point of view are easier to understand and embrace (Bromley, 2003). Experts contend that grammar must be introduced and reinforced continually in order to become habit, and that explaining grammar in the context of evaluating student work is more productive than discussing it abstractly (Allen, 2003).

The *Just Write* series advances students' mechanical skills by introducing and reinforcing basic, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, formatting, structure, style, etc., throughout the program. It also introduces new vocabulary and teaches techniques to create varied, interesting sentences, which are reinforced in writing assignments. Constant practice will result in better sentence sense, which will carry over into all written work. Students who use the *Just Write* series will see the synergy between form and function, and will enjoy writing more as their skill with both advances.

Genre

Explicit teaching of genre structures is an important instructional element in process writing. "Dialogue and feedback to improve writing quality are more productive when instruction strategically targets specific text structures and uses the text structure to build a common language" (Baker et al., 2003). To build fluency, students need to be familiar with writing for a variety of purposes, such as to persuade, inform, entertain, and narrate, and for an array of audiences,



like peers, parents, teachers, and the general public (Bromley, 2003). Whether the author is a young child writing a letter to Grandpa or an older student writing an informational report, good writing states ideas clearly and supports them adequately. Knowing the components and characteristics of different genres enables students to decide which form best suits a question, assignment or task, and helps them employ that form most effectively.

The *Just Write* series introduces students to a variety of writing genres and helps them to choose the appropriate genre for their audience. *Write about Me* and *Write about My World* focus on generating ideas and expressing ideas in written form, introducing students to story writing as a genre. In Books 1 and 2, students work on stories, letters, how-to paragraphs, dialogue, and point of view. Book 3 covers descriptive and narrative writing, as well as more complex expository and persuasive genres, and covers a variety of writing applications for each.

Planning

Students of all levels, particularly those for whom focus and organization are a challenge, can benefit from tools to help them plan their writing (Baker et al., 2003). Beginning writers are sometimes daunted by the belief that their stories should be about exciting events or fantastic ideas, and suffer writer's block as a result (Strickland et al., 2002). Sometimes young writers have difficulty generating or organizing ideas in written form. Having the child draw a picture of an idea as a prewriting activity is one strategy to help prepare for writing. During the process of visualizing, most children are able to invent and illustrate a central topic, and with encouragement, are capable of adding details to a picture for enrichment. Verbalizing and translating ideas from pictures into sentences are helpful to the whole writing process.

Write about Me and *Write about My World* use drawing activities liberally to help children bridge the gap between

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thinking and talking about an idea and writing about it. Children build their writing skills as they develop ideas that have personal meaning to them, such as themselves, their neighborhoods, their routines, their favorites, the five senses, their memories, and an expanding universe. These books ask young writers to think about themselves and to examine their own environment because this is what they know best. They also offer an introduction to journals as a way to capture observations and possible writing ideas. Students who have a reserve of writing topics are less likely to panic when taking writing assessments.

Once they become more adept at finding ideas for topics and translating those ideas into sentences, new writers must learn to organize their thoughts. Rather than beginning the process with a draft, students who use planning sheets effectively think through their assignment and organize their thoughts carefully, thereby minimizing the revisions that will be needed later (Strickland et al., 2002). The *Just Write* series features many tools—story webs, story plans, character webs, story mountains, and story maps—to encourage students to develop the habit of planning before they write, reinforcing an essential step in the writing process. Checklists for content and editing strengthen students' awareness of organization during and after the writing process as well, making revising their work more approachable and effective. The use of personal dictionaries is encouraged throughout the series as a way to improve spelling without detracting from the writing process.

Exercises

Clear definitions, effective models, and explicit instructions help students understand and achieve their objective of producing good prose (Baker et al., 2003). Writing proficiently in different genres, a critical skill for students' academic development, also depends on good models and clear objectives (Bromley, 2003; Baker et al., 2003). Clearly understanding what is expected of them makes students more comfortable and better able to execute the assigned

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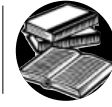
task, be it to structure sentences, craft paragraphs, or carry out the writing process. The careful guidance of supportive teachers can help students move past any obstacles in the process and enjoy the accomplishment of creating prose.

The *Just Write* series contains workbook-style texts with exercises that ask students to explore and apply new concepts. The Teacher's Guide provides additional strategies for direct instruction, additional exercises, models, and techniques for building fluency. Students using the series will always know what is expected of them and how to achieve it. Students are given ample practice and sufficient guidance to master new techniques in innovative, fun, and instructive ways. Simple steps help them organize their thoughts, arrange logical sentences, and expand those sentences into effective paragraphs and compositions.

Just Write

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges asserts that commitment to writing is the cornerstone of education: "If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write." Writing is not simply one of the things students learn in school; it is the skill they must master in order to learn anything else. The *Just Write* series lays that foundation by turning young students into young writers—with the tools, understanding, experience, and confidence to rise to the intellectual challenges before them.

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