



## WRITING SKILLS

Diana Hanbury King

By Cynthia Johnson



## Research-Based Writing

### Writing Skills

Writing is more than just putting on paper what already exists in one's head. It is not an exercise in grammar, spelling, or memory. It is an exercise in 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 an essential skill for success in school, in the workforce, and in life.

Following recent research about how students learn to write and current best practices in writing instruction, the *Writing Skills* series balances form with function. It provides students a foundation in both the process and mechanics of writing, making accessible and approachable a skill that at the outset may seem daunting or impossible. It does not demand that students master skills that were previously thought of as "fundamental" before progressing to the "advanced" task of composition. Rather, exercises in grammar, sentence structure, composition strategies, and other skills are integrated and ongoing.

The *Writing Skills* series is based on the idea that students should not be so inhibited by grammar, spelling, or handwriting skills that they neglect the larger goal of self-expression. For struggling writers, however, these basic skills are especially important for building fluency and confidence, and can be easily learned in a step-by-step fashion. The *Writing Skills* program is ideal for differentiating instruction in the classroom. For the reluctant, at-risk, and beginning writer, it provides an essential foundation in thinking and writing skills. For the proficient and advanced, it offers strategies, techniques, and opportunities to apply them.

### Expository Writing

Expository writing is writing that explains. It is the single most important kind of academic writing, from elementary school to college. Students are expected to be able to organize information and to be able to support their ideas. While creative writing has a valuable place in the curriculum, it will not give students the skills necessary for answering a short-paragraph test question or for writing a research paper.

Students need to be able to write for a variety of purposes such as to persuade, narrate, or compare and contrast. They must also be able to write for a variety of audiences such as their peers, parents, teachers, and the general public (Bromley, 2003). Understanding audience and purpose are key skills for success on standardized tests, where prompts ask students to write in a variety of genres for an unknown scorer or team of scorers. Expository writing is almost always required on these exams, and the earlier the student is

The *Writing Skills* series is a structured, comprehensive program for teaching composition and the grammar and transcription skills necessary to good writing. The series comprises the *Writing Skills Teacher's Handbook* and seven student books: *Writing Skills Book A*, *Book 1*, *Book 2*, and *Book 3* for grades 2–4, 5–6, 7–8, and 9–12, respectively; *Cursive Writing Skills* for right-handed students and left-handed students; and *Keyboarding Skills*.



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introduced to this type of writing, the better. A goal of the National Commission on Writing, as stated in *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, is to bolster this kind of analytical, expository writing: "While exercises in descriptive, creative, and narrative writing help develop students' skills, writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions" (2003).

Of all the different types of writing, expository writing helps in all subject areas by allowing students to demonstrate their understanding of other material (Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003; Strickland et al., 2002). Writing across the curriculum is ever-important, and learning to express and support one's ideas is almost as essential in social studies and science classes as it is in English and language arts.

Knowledge of expository writing improves reading comprehension as well, for textbooks are exposition. According to Gale Tompkins, writing encourages reading development by building "literacy concepts and procedures" and "intellectual strategies" (2001). By learning to organize, monitor, question, and revise their thoughts in writing, students also learn to perform these tasks while reading the writing of others. "Better writers are better readers," concludes one review of fifty years of reading and writing research (Stotsky, 1983). The *Writing Skills* series helps build the reading/writing connection through expository instruction and strategies.

### **The *Writing Skills* Process**

In the past, writing was considered an advanced skill, taught only after students had mastered vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, and other mechanical language functions thought to provide the necessary foundation. This approach was particularly ineffective with learning disabled students, for whom difficulty mastering the basics often prevented progression

to the more "advanced" writing lesson (Baker et al., 2003). Process writing emerged as an entirely different way to teach writing. Now, it means different things to different instructors, but is based on a multi-step process, including planning, composing, and revising.

The process writing method of instruction mirrors the process that experienced writers use (Allen, 2003), breaking the enormous goal of producing a composition 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).

In writing, it is less important for students to produce perfect compositions than to develop confidence and facility, and the first exercises should be ones that allow the student to write freely, without concerns about mechanical errors. In writing instruction, the emphasis should first be on fluency—the seamless transmission of ideas from thought to paper—and then on improving grammar, spelling, and mechanics as opportunities arise (Allen, 2003).

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges asserts that "writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school and into college" (2003). For students at every level of development, Diana Hanbury King breaks the writing process down into smaller, more manageable steps. The *Writing Skills* program presents skills in careful order, from the parts of speech to sentence structure to paragraphs and essays. A feature unique to this series is that it teaches supporting sentences before topic sentences and concluding sentences—because the idea of the supporting sentence is less abstract, and therefore more developmentally appropriate to the beginning writer. Likewise, assignments are designed to encourage students to write about things with which they are familiar, appealing to



their level of development in both writing and thinking and with their experience in the world.

### **Grammar and Mechanics**

Grammar and mechanics—the rules of the written language—play an important role in writing instruction, especially in the age of high-stakes testing. According to the NAEP Writing Assessment, the Nation’s Report Card, samples that are scored at the “proficient” level “have few errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization.” And though writing assessments vary widely from state to state, many state rubrics emphasize grammar, mechanics, and spelling as well as development, organization, and coherence.

Though writing is best taught through this step-by-step, cumulative process, it is important to recognize that isolated grammar study fails to improve student writing. Research shows that these types of exercises are relatively ineffectual as compared to integrated grammar study (Hillocks, 1984; Weaver, 1998). Students learn the mechanics of language more easily when they can readily apply those lessons in the framework of their writing (Baker et al., 2003). *Writing Skills* aims not only to provide an “integrated series of lessons” but also to help teachers to understand the best methods of incorporating mechanics into writing instruction.

When presented as tools to help students achieve their writing goals, e.g., communicating something clearly to a specific audience, concepts like capitalization, action verbs, 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).

Research suggests that rather than teach every grammar rule to every student, instructors should

provide guidance in grammar rules that most affect their students’ writing. The *Writing Skills* books are designed with this in mind, containing the most important grammatical concepts to the level of writing associated with each student book. Careful attention is paid in each volume to errors common to student work at each level. Capitalization and punctuation are stressed in Book A, for example, where students are learning and reviewing sentences. Books 1 and 2 teach students to recognize and correct run-on sentences and sentence fragments, which often appear in the writing of students in the middle grades.

The *Writing Skills* student books advance students’ mechanical skills by explaining and revisiting punctuation, capitalization, parts of speech, types of sentences, verb forms, transitions, style, etc., throughout the program, while the *Teacher’s Handbook* provides strategies for incorporating grammar and mechanics into individual instruction. As they advance, students build upon a working knowledge of sentence structure to improve the quality and variety of their sentences. Regular practice will result in better sentence sense, which will carry over into all written work. Students who use the *Writing Skills* series will see the synergy between form and function, and will begin to enjoy writing as their skill with both advances.

### **Transcription Skills**

Transcription, the process of transforming thoughts into written symbols, includes spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding—essential skills that are increasingly overlooked in the classroom. “Mastery of transcription skills is important because their execution can consume a great deal of a writer’s attention when they are not carried out fluently and efficiently” (Baker et al., 2003). Poor presentation, in the form of illegible handwriting and spelling, can prejudice audiences against writers—even though they may display a good understanding of their topic and write about it well. On the other hand, too much focus

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In this age of standardized assessments, transcription skills are more important than ever. Students who spell correctly and write legibly receive the highest scores on writing assessments (Lamme & Farris, 2004).

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on these aspects of writing—transcription skills—leaves little time for planning thoughtful writing (Allen, 2003).

In this age of standardized assessments, transcription skills are more important than ever. Students who spell correctly and write legibly receive the highest scores on writing assessments (Lamme & Farris, 2004). More importantly, students with good spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding skills are likely to be more fluent writers, and therefore more expressive in their writing and confident in their ideas.

Students with learning differences often experience significant difficulty with transcription skills (Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1991). For these students and for students showing difficulty with spelling, handwriting, or keyboarding, these skills must be taught explicitly and systematically. Failure to do so can discourage these students' ability to adequately express themselves in writing, which can impede not only their academic performance, but their self-esteem.

The *Writing Skills* program is one of very few to address spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding skills. The *Teacher's Handbook* provides tools, techniques, and strategies for improving students' spelling and handwriting skills at various stages, and the supplemental student books *Cursive Writing Skills* and *Keyboarding Skills* provide innovative instruction in handwriting and keyboarding for students of various ages and ability levels.

### **Explicit Instruction for Struggling Writers**

Recent research into effective writing instruction holds promising news for struggling writers. Rather than toiling in the abstract with punctuation, grammar, and syntax, students can expect to advance as writers and master grammar and mechanics as they move forward. Direct and explicit instruction, teacher modeling, clear expectations, and mechanical proficiency provide the theory for success; practice provides achievement.

Clear definitions, effective models, and explicit instructions help students understand and achieve their objective of producing good compositions (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 task, be it to write sentences, paragraphs, or an essay. The careful guidance of supportive teachers can help students move past any obstacles in the process and enjoy the accomplishment of creating a well-crafted composition.

The *Writing Skills* series contains workbook-style texts with exercises that ask students to explore and apply new concepts. Students using the series will always know what is expected of them and how to fulfill those expectations. Simple steps help them organize their thoughts, arrange logical paragraphs, and expand those paragraphs into effective expository compositions.

In order to improve the state of writing in schools, the National Commission on Writing calls for an increase in the time allocated to writing instruction as well as for professional development for teachers. "Teachers need to explicitly teach students how to plan and author a text and give them knowledgeable feedback on their effort" (Baker et al., 2003). The *Writing Skills Teacher's Handbook* addresses the increasing need for teacher support, providing strategies for direct instruction, additional exercises, models, and techniques.

### **The Writing Revolution**

In 2002, the College Board addressed the growing concern from the educational, business, and public sectors about the quality of writing 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, which 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 prescribes more attention to writing at the classroom and administrative level: more time spent writing, more types of writing, and more opportunities to write across the curriculum, as well as increased budgets for writing programs and professional development for teachers of writing. With the National Assessment of Educational Progress's 2002 finding that 70 percent of fourth and eighth graders and 75 percent of twelfth graders were writing below a "proficient" level, the need for intervention is clear.

The *Writing Skills* series synthesizes these grammar, transcription, and composition techniques and strategies to give beginning, struggling, and even proficient writers the tools to succeed in school and beyond. The step-by-step approach builds writing competency from the ground up, teaching students to organize, format, and edit many different types of expository compositions. This writing series targets elementary and high school students, but can be adapted effectively for students of any level who need to strengthen their writing skills. The series combines direct instruction and practice with the elements of language and the process of expression, motivating and empowering students of all levels to become better writers.

**Diana Hanbury King** founded The Kildonan School in 1969 and served as its director for twenty-two years. In 1955, she founded Dunnabeck, a summer camp for dyslexic students that is now the oldest established program of its kind in the country. Over two thousand students

from several different countries have attended these two programs.

At The Kildonan School, Ms. King planned curricula and was active both in working with students and in training teachers. Throughout this period she lectured and held workshops in this country and abroad. Working in the New York State public schools, she led sixty-hour courses for over four hundred teachers and made hundreds of classrooms visits. She served as Executive Director of the Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators and continues to serve as a member of the Board.

Prior to founding The Kildonan School, Ms. King taught in Washington, D.C. at the Sidwell Friends School, where she was trained by Helene Durbrow and Anna Gillingham, and at the Potomac School in Virginia. She has been a member of the Orton Dyslexia Society, now the International Dyslexia Association, since 1951. In 1985, she received the New York Branch Annual Award and in 1990 she was awarded the Samuel T. Orton Award, the highest honor bestowed by the Society.

Ms. King holds a B.A. Honors degree from the University of London and an M.A. from George Washington University. She has developed and published a variety of teaching materials.

She continues to tutor students every day at The Kildonan School.

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