In the past forty years, writing instruction has shifted its emphasis from product to process (Smith, 2000). In today's classrooms, most instruction includes a multistep process model—a series of strategies—to help students develop competency as writers. This model involves three stages: prewriting, which begins long before the student puts ideas on paper; writing, in which students produce their very first drafts; and postwriting, which includes editing, revising, and, ultimately, publication.

Prewriting
All writers, whether composing a personal journal entry or a prize-winning novel, face a series of decisions. The first involves deciding on a topic. In Write to Learn (2000), novelist and writing coach Donald Murray suggests that a good topic is one the writer knows about, cares about, and can communicate about. Young students often think that they have nothing to write about, though their lives are full of adventures—and great writing topics. Introduce literature such as A Snowy Day, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, or Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street to the elementary classroom to help students discover that the events of their everyday lives can make unique and interesting stories.

Once the student has decided what to write about, he or she must usually narrow down the topic. Impossibly broad topics are not necessarily good subjects for students' writing. Novelists have written volumes about the events of a particular season, yet teachers often expect their students to tell in 100 words or less “what they did on their summer vacation.”

One way to select and focus a topic is to suggest titles or topic sentences. Writing prompts can be excellent ways to begin the writing process, but one must be very careful, as they may not reach everyone's interests, cultures, and strengths. Writer and teacher David LeCount (2002) warns that one must “give creative questions in order to get creative responses.” Rather than What I Did on My Summer Vacation try offering one of the following: The Day I Pitched for the Dodgers, Attila: The Worst Camp Counselor Ever, Vacation on the Moon, or The Most Side-Splitting Moment of My Summer.

Another way to choose and develop a topic is through brainstorming. With the use of a story web or other graphic organizer, students can generate details related to their topic. Often the goal of brainstorming is for the writer to produce as many details about a topic as he or she can, then to choose the most vivid, lively, and important ones to include in one's composition.

Journaling is also an excellent vehicle for brainstorming. It allows students to explore their thoughts, experiences, and ideas through private and unedited writing. First, in keeping an ongoing record of their thoughts, students “gather the seeds” for topics of special interest. Second, they “nourish the seeds” by writing expressively. Finally, by revisiting their journals regularly, they “harvest” ideas, potential topics, and interests that they may not have known they had (Craig, 1993).

Deciding on form is yet another part of the prewriting stage of the writing process. Some forms of writing (haiku, sonnets, or limericks, for example) demand strict adherence to a prescribed form, but the options for writing are usually wide open. If asked to write about an object like a tree, one child might be inspired to compose song lyrics, others might write an adventure story, a persuasive essay about conservation, a research report on the species, or an imaginary first-person account of what it's like to be a tree. One simple topic can produce as many works in different forms as there are students in the classroom.

One often overlooked decision involves the writer's audience. Will the writing be for the child's own use—a diary or journal? Will it be a shared personal experience—a letter to a pen pal? Will it be written for parents—a Valentine greeting or invitation to a school event? Or will it be written or posted for the public—a newspaper article or campaign speech? Writing is a form of communication, and communication requires that language be both produced and consumed. Research shows that even very young writers...
can demonstrate audience awareness (Ryder et al., 1999) and should be encouraged to consider their audiences’ needs. Even minimal cueing is sufficient. If your students are writing an invitation to Grandparents Day, remind them to “Make sure you tell your grandparents everything they need to know.” If they are writing a persuasive essay about preserving the environment, ask them “How can you convince your classmates to recycle?” (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001).

Once students understand their audience, those with whom the writing is to be shared, they are faced with still more decisions, such as elements of style, tone, and voice. Educational consultant and young-adult author Ralph Fletcher says, “Your writing voice is like your handshake; it makes the connection with the reader.” As teachers, we can help each child develop that handshake in order to make the connections between writer and reader strong, personal, and real.

The prewriting stage also involves some incubation time for student’s ideas to take shape. While some students will be ready to plunge right into their writing, most need time to talk, share ideas with others, seek help from the teacher, and reflect about what they want to say and how they want to say it.

Writing
As students compose their ideas on paper, there are sometimes overwhelmed with the choices they must make. They must decide on what they want to say, what words to use, and how to construct and convey their ideas in meaningful sentences. In the writing phase of the process, the focus should be on the higher-level aspects of writing (content and cohesion rather than spelling, handwriting, and mechanics). At this phase, writers at all levels need the freedom to get their thoughts down on paper without worrying about mechanical accuracy.

This is especially true for students with language-based learning differences, who tend to focus intently on these lower-level aspects of writing. The nontransient and malleable features of written texts often appeal to these kinds of students, who require repetition or extra processing time. Encourage students to record thoroughly every idea, even the ones that are initially unclear or underdeveloped. Remember, it is the process, not the product, that is important at this stage (Sturm, 2000).

Postwriting
Improving, correcting, and polishing are the goals of the postwriting stage, and editing and revising are integral parts of this process. Decisions abound as students edit and revise their work. Donald Murray (2000) says that “writing is rewriting” and most adults—let alone children—are not trained to revise. Students must receive guidelines during the revision process; merely requiring that they revise—or spend time revising—their work will not necessarily produce better writing (Adams, 1991). Direct intervention focusing on specific goals and skills is often needed to ensure positive results (Hillsocks, 1982; Robinson, 1985).

Collaborative efforts play an important part in the revision process. Peer-conferencing helps students gain important perspectives about clarity, sequence, word choice, and voice of their works—and can lead students toward “more thoughtful, sophisticated writing habits” (Dale, 1994). Encourage students to respond honestly to one another without judgement or criticism. Ask them to ask one another questions like What kind of person is the main character? Do you like him or her? Could you visualize the setting in your mind? If not, how can I help you see it? Writer and teacher Tom Romano says, “By revising, [we] construct meaning that [we] are unaware of . . . . [we] create scenes and characters, support and extend ideas that [we] didn’t do in just a draft or two or three.”

Many teachers encourage students to revise their work on the computer. Richard Jester describes the computer as a hammer, a tool with unique qualities that allow students to read, manipulate, and reconstruct texts in ways that the pencil and paper does not. Teachers also encourage students to use spellcheck and grammarcheck features of word-processing software. But be careful of encouraging dependence on the computer as well—it should not be a substitute for a final proofreading. Encourage students to read their almost final drafts aloud in their natural voices, to pay attention to each word. Here, one hopes, they will notice if they have not punctuated their dialogue correctly, inserted a comma in the wrong place, or have used an incorrect homonym (Romano, 2000). They will also notice as they hear their own words aloud that they have written a piece that they can be proud of.

The final decision involves what to do with a piece once it is written. It is important to save students’ work in a writing folder or portfolio to record their progress over time. A
piece of writing should be made available to its intended audience, however, whether it is a private correspondence or written for all to read. High school writing instructor Susanne Rubenstein tells her students “You are not writing for me. You are writing for the world.” And slowly, with encouragement, they start to see that their voices and opinions matter. Rubenstein (2000) asks teachers to expand their definitions of publishing and recognize the many opportunities that exist for student writers. Certainly, students can publish their work on the classroom wall or bulletin board, but they can also publish their work school-wide by arranging an event including other classes, teachers, and administrators. Many schools publish literary magazines or maintain Web sites that display student work. Communities often offer places to publish student writing, such as the public library, town hall, or youth center. Letter writing—to a legislator, a newspaper editor, or a corporation—is also an excellent way to introduce students to publishing. If your students are ready for other types of publication, many print and online magazines accept student writing—from movie reviews to comic strips. Publishing student writing, in any form, is often a powerful incentive for revising, perfecting, and taking pride in one’s work.

Teaching students how to write cannot be reduced to a simple formula or recipe—a cup of motivation, a pound of ideas, a pinch of brainstorming, and ten minutes of writing to be served to the teacher as a vehicle for correction. The practice of writing—and of teaching writing—is not easy, but helping students make the crucial decisions that define the process always pays rich rewards.

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