

# **Teachers Who Have the “Write” Stuff: Changing Our Mindsets to Help Improve Students’ Writing Skills**

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We’ve all been there: We ask children to write and we hear the groans and complaints, we see the shoulders slump and the eyes roll, and we are left wondering how *writing* has become such a terrible word in the minds of students. Whether we ask for a multiple-page report, a five-paragraph essay, a creative writing piece on their summer vacation, or a simple sentence, many children balk at the very thought of having to write. For these students, writing has become a chore of epic proportions that to them has no purpose or meaning.

Frequently, it is not the act of *physically* writing that makes students stressed; most often, it is the *thought process* associated with writing that makes it such a daunting task in the minds of students. Creative expression, finding one’s voice, staying on topic, and engaging in deep and expressive word choices can be difficult for students of all ages. Yet writing is a major component in the Common Core State Standards, and in today’s classrooms, children must show proficiency in both reading and writing (Morrow, 2014).

The elementary grades are when the process of writing needs to be developed and honed. We all know that writers must progress through various levels in order to advance and improve, and we also know that this progression may never be fully obtained unless children are taught the fundamentals of writing early in their academic career. One constant problem is the lack of time; often, many educators say that they struggle to have enough time to teach the content due to recent mandates and changes in standards. While

time is certainly a huge problem in our classrooms today, taking writing out of our daily routines and practices does substantially more harm than good and can potentially harm the future success of the students in our care. Whether we love them or not, the CCSS have created the need for us to dig deeper in our writing instruction. In 2005, Clay talked about the fact that we must ensure that students are actively engaged in both reading and writing; teachers must take full advantage of every opportunity we can to get students engaged in the writing process. If Clay discussed this almost a decade ago, prior to the rigors of the CCSS, think about how much more important the challenge is for us today. Therefore, changing our mindset, understanding the importance of writing and making writing a focal point in all subject areas can go a long way in classroom achievement.

### ***Focus More on the Good, and Less on the Bad and the Ugly***

As teachers, we often get so wrapped up in the *way* the students write that we forget to look at the actual *content* of their writing. We can so easily feel the need to correct every convention error that we often miss the great thoughts and ideas that the students put down on paper. Spelling errors, mistakes in sentence structure, and misuses of punctuation marks (or missing punctuation marks) can cloud us from seeing what is truly vital in a piece of writing: what a child has to say. Teachers can easily judge a student's work on how it looks without taking the time to focus on the flow and structure of the writing. Focusing intently on convention errors has caused many a weary teacher to throw up their hands in disgust and frustration.

Now, before you stop reading *this* and throw up *your* hands in disgust and frustration, feeling that I am downplaying the need for proper mechanics in writing, please allow me

to explain. Should students begin learning grammar and convention rules at an early age, and should their understanding of appropriate writing skills continue to grow throughout their formal school training? Absolutely! Is good handwriting still essential? Certainly! Do we want our students to spell words correctly and use correct sentence structure? Of course! But sometimes we as teachers focus on *only* those elements of writing. We must look at the big picture.

Students' frustrations come into play when they are consistently criticized for their writing, and this is, in part, a reason that so many children do not like to write. Therefore, instead of simply looking only at messy penmanship and mistakes in mechanics, teachers can learn to look past that to see the positives in a writing piece. Instead of criticizing a child for misspelling a difficult word, we can applaud the child for using more advanced vocabulary and for using sophisticated word choices instead of using common, every day words. Instead of becoming upset that a child often forgot to use commas in their writing passage, we can celebrate the fact that he wrote more complex sentences that actually required the need for commas. And instead of merely complaining about the incorrect grammar in a child's paper, we can appreciate the fact that the student stayed on topic and wrote in complete sentences.

The bottom line is this: We need to let students know that we recognize what they do right and we must affirm the positive traits that we see in their writing skills. When students feel that there is something worthwhile in their work, they will be more willing to want to try to improve and grow as a writer. This can help writing scores improve. No, we should not ignore mistakes made, but we must remember that there are many facets of the writing process; mechanics are simply one part. Let the students get their

thoughts down on paper first. Conventions can be corrected later during the editing process.

Students should be provided with continuous feedback to guide their revisions and editing (Peterson, 2014), but such advice can be, and should be, supportive. There is a difference between constructive criticism and just plain criticism, so let's make sure we are looking at what the child *has* improved upon as well as what needs to be improved upon. It is developmentally appropriate for students to make errors in spelling and grammar as they learn and grow—we must treat mistakes as teaching tools and writing as a procedure that will get better with time, practice, and patience.

### ***Be a Model, Not Just a Monitor***

If we truly want successful *student* writers, we must become successful *teacher* writers. According to Morrow (2014), students must “feel there is value in reading and writing to become literate” (p. 22). Wander down the hallway of any elementary classroom in the state, especially in the primary grades, and you will undoubtedly see teachers reading to students and classroom libraries brimming with books. We understand that print-rich classrooms encourage reading skills, and, as teachers, many of us find great enjoyment in reading and consider it one of our favorite hobbies. Yet this is not necessarily the case when it comes to writing; we often associate reading as a pleasurable activity but equate writing with work, and while some teachers do enjoy the process of writing, many educators do not.

The National Commission on Writing strongly believes that writing should be viewed, by both students and teachers, as a “satisfying, even joyful” experience (2003, p. 13).

This means that writing should be thought of as, dare I say, *fun and enjoyable*. While we all have our personal interests, it is important that we model writing with the students in our classrooms, and we aren't really "selling" writing if we ourselves have negative feelings. Being a "do as I say, not as I do" type of educator rarely produces positive outcomes, and telling students to write while not showing good writing practices ourselves can leave students to ponder whether writing is a necessary and valuable skill. If we expect children to write, then we must be willing to model appropriate writing skills (Calkins, 1994).

To encourage writing, teachers can utilize mini-lessons, where the instructor thinks aloud and writes down those thoughts for the students in the classroom to see (using a white board, a Smart Board, an overhead projector, etc.). "The mini-lesson is our forum for making a suggestion to the whole class—raising a concern, exploring an issue, modeling a technique, reinforcing a strategy" (Calkins, 1994, p. 193). When using this approach, teachers should make it an interactive lesson and ask the students for help on word choice, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and organization. Teachers should never be afraid to make mistakes, albeit intentional ones, when modeling writing. We can't expect children's writing to be perfect the first time, so by "accidentally" making errors in our writing, we allow the students to see the process of writing a first draft and show students the importance of looking up words, of taking chances, and focusing and staying on topic. Remember, mini-lessons should be based on the needs of students in order to help them to become more open to writing (Routman, 2005).

In addition, during designated writing time, teachers can dedicate some time to actually write. When students see a teacher sitting down and spending a few minutes writing, it validates the importance of writing to them. No matter the topic or writing genre, demonstrating that writing is a universal way of expressing thoughts, goals, ideas, and creativity helps to show its true value. As Lucy Calkins so eloquently says it, “We cannot teach writing well unless we trust that there are real, human reasons to write” (1994, p. 12). Calkins goes on to share that we must reach back in our minds and pull out positive memories we have of writing so that we can effectively teach writing to children.

Writing experts, such as Graham, often emphasize the need to help students focus, create, and organize ideas. Graham (2006) believes that the use of graphic organizers are extremely valuable in helping students establish a more generalized flow of their writing and helps children to stay focused upon the topic with which they are writing. However, while graphic organizers can be beneficial, they will only be so if teachers remember to effectively model the “hows” and “whys” of such tools. As teachers, we must be willing to consistently be a positive model of writing for our students and be willing to try new strategies and ideas in order to help them grow as writers.

### ***To Give Them a Voice, Give Them a Choice***

Children, no matter their age and developmental levels, have something to say and want to be heard. While it is true that not all of our students will find a passion for the art of writers as others do, all children have a story to share if only we allow them (Calkins, 1994). Yes, we may have to coax that story from them, but it is there, just waiting to be told. Whether it’s a kindergartener with a new baby sister or a fifth grader who is trying

out for a sports team, children constantly have events happening in their lives, and these events are major to them. Sure, they can *tell* us about grand adventures, favorite hobbies, and beloved family members, but the *written* word is lasting and beneficial.

Writing experts such as Calkins have long agreed that students need choice when selecting writing topics and feel that students will produce their best writing when they feel comfortable in the topic and can write from their heart. While it is not always possible to allow students to write about whatever they choose, we should do this as much as we possibly can. Asking a child to write about a topic that neither excites them or that they know nothing about often squelches creativity, so when possible, we must allow students to write about what appeals to them. Children need to have the chance to find their voice. Allow students to be original. If students must learn how to write a persuasive piece, allow them to pick the topic. If we want them to write a letter to a historical figure, allow them to pick the person to whom they wish to write. The possibilities are endless!

Along with giving students a choice with the topics and genre of writing, we can also allow students to keep up with technological trends and infuse technology into our writing time in the classroom. For students, infusing writing with technology can become very motivating. We must always be careful that the main focus is on the writing, and not the technology utilized (Coskie & Hornof, 2013), but this is another way that we can give students a choice in their writing. Since the CCSS for English language arts states that students will use technology to enhance writing, it is now critical that we allow this opportunity for students (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

As well, we can give students a choice about where they write and how they write. Sometimes the smaller incentives make the biggest differences: For example, early in my teacher career, by complete accident and to my complete surprise, I found that students became excited about writing when I allowed them to write with a variety of colored pens. While this was very “taboo” for them to do in most of their other schoolwork, the thought of using a different writing utensil was what it took for some of my students to actually want to put words down on paper. Using different types of paper can also enhance their desire to write; when I taught kindergarten, I had a writing station filled with lined and unlined paper, notecards, etc. In other grade levels, I allowed students to “partner write,” where one child would write a sentence, the other would write the next sentence, until a story (or paragraph) was formed. I also had a laminated list of “story starters” for those children who got stuck and could not figure out a topic on which to write, and I utilized various types of writing journals with my young writers.

Culham (2014) believes that when we intertwine our reading and writing, we have the tools to be more effective in our teaching, and this strategy also gives students greater choice. For example, we can have students pick a story (from the classroom library, a book that was recently read in class...) and then change the ending of the story, tell the story from another perspective, write about the main character’s strengths and weaknesses, etc. Again, there are unlimited possibilities for how we can help foster choice! It behooves us to give them the ability to tell their stories and write down information in a wide array of formats and ways; allowing students a choice, when applicable, also allows for individual voices to be heard.

## *Conclusion*

Our students are depending on us to ensure that they are equipped for the real world. The ability to express one's thoughts, ideas, complaints, frustrations, joys, and the wide array of other emotions we may have on a daily basis, is pivotal in the society in which we live. Writing is an expression of who we are and what we believe, and whether we use handwritten notes, e-mails, text messages, or other means, what we write is an extension of ourselves. The goal of the Common Core State Standards is to prepare students for success in college and career ([www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org)). Therefore, we must do our part in this preparation.

Pay close attention to the needs, frustrations, and concerns of the students in your care. As Ruth Culham says, "...pay attention to when students groan, when they don't want to write, when they have to be dragged through the writing process and into [writing] conferences kicking and screaming. Maybe it's the topic, maybe it's their history with writing, maybe it's just flat-out scary to think of putting words on the page. Whatever's holding your students back, figure it out—and provide an antidote quickly" (2014, p. 29).

Remember, the Common Core State Standards mandate that students are to become higher thinkers, and writing is an instrument that allows to students to think critically, utilize vocabulary, demonstrate knowledge, and make connections between the school and the real world. The most important thing we must remember is that our students' stories do matter. We must take our writing instruction very seriously, for when we do, we are helping to enhance written communication for generations to come.

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