

Writing Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Surviving School Reform

Jay Simmons

“That writing workshop stuff sounds like pie in the sky. I have to teach my students the five-paragraph essay for MCAS.”

—Massachusetts middle school teacher

KEY POINTS AND STRATEGIES

Strategies That Writers Use

Brainstorming

Persuasive Essay Writing

Specific Product Goals

The Study of Models

Collaborative Writing

Inquiry Activities in Writing for Content Learning

The beginning middle school teacher quoted above was describing how her colleagues had told her to teach writing—present a prompt and a five-paragraph graphic organizer for each week’s day or two of writing—all in the name of better performance on the state test. When I asked who had issued the order, she checked and found it had been the principal. I was working on a state standards committee at the time and asked a person writing the test items if such a mandate were state policy. She winced. “No, Jay,” she explained. “In fact, we wish we didn’t get so many five-paragraph essays. It’s all they turn in now.”

The bad news here is that our schools are shooting themselves in the foot. The good news is that the state will be happy if we stop. Ravitch (2008) writes, “All of this test prep ... leads to higher scores but worse education” (p. 5). As teachers of English we must, and can, change this condition. Graham and Perin (2007) in *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* have conducted an analysis of selected research on teaching writing. They spell out principles of instruction found to be “effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 4). Unfortunately, they also describe unduly prescriptive methods for teaching to those principles. We can adopt their principles, but do so in a less narrow way than the report’s authors, and

the principal mentioned above, suggest. Specifically, we can teach students writing strategies, incorporate specific product goals, incorporate the study of models, use collaborative writing, use inquiry activities in writing for content learning, and follow a process writing approach (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Instructional Practices That Work

Perhaps because Graham and Perin (2007) specialize in educating students with learning difficulties, their meta-analysis of research about writing and their suggestions follow a scripted, clinical model. In many settings over the years, good teachers of writing have taught using the principles on which the *Writing Next* suggestions rest. Therefore, this chapter will demonstrate ways to incorporate these principles, not scripted models, into their daily work.

Writing Strategies

The *Writing Next* report calls for direct instruction in strategies that writers use. In the report, Graham and Perin (2007) note success for teaching brainstorming, collaboration for peer reviewing, and writing persuasive essays. The following paragraphs describe brainstorming strategies and persuasive writing strategies that I've used successfully in my classroom. I discuss collaboration at length later in the chapter. The *Writing Next* report cites Graham's own 2002 study of self-regulated strategy development (De La Paz & Graham, 2002) with six stages: (1) develop background knowledge, (2) describe the strategy, (3) model it, (4) memorize it, (5) support it, and (6) use it independently. Of course, these are the steps of direct instruction used by many of us in the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Routman, 2003), with the exception of drilling the steps into memory.

The following teaching ideas meet some of the suggestions from *Writing Next*, but they are techniques that teachers have used successfully in classrooms intended for all learners, not simply those thought to learn only through rigid drill.

Brainstorming. I suggest a procedure I call Write with Me (Simmons, 2000) for brainstorming. It is based on Murray's (1985) First Hour of the First Day and mimics what he did with a teacher workshop I attended in 1976. I have done this lesson as an assessment with students who have never received useful writing instruction; that is, students who have never been taught what writers do.

1. Explain that you will be asking the students to write with you to begin a piece of writing, but probably not to finish it. The whole process won't take more than 20 minutes.

2. Ask the students to list as quickly as possible the people, places, or things they care about and know about. Say you will be doing this, too. (Allow 3 minutes.)
3. Stop the students and share your list. Ask if anyone else would like to share. If no one volunteers, discuss at least how you would group your list into a set of items that go together. Ask students to group their lists. (Allow 3 minutes.)
4. Ask the students if they would like to share their groups. If they would not, share yours and pick one group to write about. Ask students to choose one of their groups to write about. Think of one or two titles that might work for a piece that includes the ideas in your group and share the title ideas with the students. Allow the students about 3 minutes to write as many titles as possible for their group. You write, too.
5. Share your titles with the class and ask them to share as well. Pick one title you might write about and share reasons. Ask the students to select one and think of why they selected it.
6. Take 3 minutes to write a sprint draft on that title.
7. Share yours and talk about what you might write next, if you continue it. Ask students to share and talk about what they might do next.

Notice what we have done here: We have given students the background knowledge that writers often start a piece but don't always finish it. It's the starting that counts! We have described each step of the process and then modeled it by doing it with students. Because writing is an internal process, we have talked about what we were thinking so that students can observe the invisible part of writing, too. This is the first of 10 strategies I normally teach students to use to begin writing. The complete list is shown in Figure 2.1.

It is important to support students in their first attempts to use each strategy with an in-class minilesson. Students can then keep the lists, notes, and sprint drafts in their writing notebooks or folders for reference in those dry spells when they are stuck. Students can also use the strategies independently, at first to finish the initial piece and thereafter to begin others.

Persuasive Essay Writing. Most of us have struggled getting students to write the dreaded persuasive essay. We have assigned topics, provided sample readings, given them outlines, or asked to have the outlines submitted in advance, all with more or less deadening results (at least in terms of our Sunday evening reading time). I have observed colleagues brainstorming evidence with class members writing on the same given thesis statement in addition to providing a list of transition words and a graphic organizer with space for each sentence in the five paragraphs.

FIGURE 2.1
10 Ways to Get Started Writing

<p>1. List/Group/Title/Write (Write With Me)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brainstorm a list of things you know about and care about. b. Group the items that go together in some way. c. Pick one group. d. Write as many titles as possible for pieces about items in that group. e. Choose one title. f. Write a sprint draft under that title, using as many of the items as possible.
<p>2. Sprint/Circle/Write</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Write a sprint draft, not stopping or letting your pencil come off the page. b. Reread the draft, circling any words or phrases that interest you. c. Choose one circled part or group of circled parts and write a new, focused draft about those.
<p>3. Read the World/Question/Choose/Write</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Think back over the last 24 hours of your life. On the left half of the page only, write down what has happened and occurred to you. b. Reread your draft and, on the right side of the page, write questions that occur to you. Think about which experiences or thoughts might be of interest to other people. c. Choose one question or set of questions and write a sprint draft in answer to it.
<p>4. Daybook/Reread/Highlight/Write</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Keep a daybook, a collection of journal entries, reading clippings, or reading responses collected by you as a writer. b. Reread your daybook (or a manageable section of it) and highlight any parts that interest or surprise you. c. Choose one highlighted part or group of parts that might interest someone else. d. Write a sprint draft about that section.
<p>5. Read/Write Back</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Choose a book, magazine, pamphlet, handout, commercial package, or newspaper to read. b. As you read, write your reactions, thoughts, or questions in the margins or on a separate paper. c. Write back to the author, telling what you thought or felt about the piece.
<p>6. Read/Write an Extension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a, b. Follow steps for #5. c. Continue the piece after the point at which the author chose to stop. This might be, for instance, a sequel to a story, the other side of an argument, or a new story or argument using some part of the original reading.
<p>7. Read/Write in the Manner of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a, b. Follow steps for #5. c. Write a new piece imitating the style and tone of the original. d. As an alternative, you may “down write,” or exaggerate, the original writer’s style to poke fun at it by doing it badly.
<p>8. List/Group/Concept Map/Write</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brainstorm a list of things you know about and care about. b. Group the items that go together in some way. c. Pick one group. d. Create a concept map from the items in the group. e. Write a sprint draft, using the concept map as a guide.

(continued)

FIGURE 2.1
10 Ways to Get Started Writing (continued)

9. Sprint/Summarize/Topic Sentence/Write

- a. Write a sprint draft on one topic, not letting your pencil come off the page.
- b. Read over your draft.
- c. Draw a line across the page at the end of the draft.
- d. Below the line, write one sentence that summarizes the main idea of the piece.
- e. Use that sentence as the topic sentence of the first paragraph of a new piece.

10. Object/List/Write

- a. Select an object that means something to you.
- b. Place it on the desk in front of you and write down as many impressions describing it or memories associated with it as you can.
- c. Write a sprint draft about the list.

Note. Modeled after Graves, 1994; Hall & Birkerts, 1998; Murray, 1985.

Guided writing (Meeks & Austin, 2003) serves as an alternative to these scripted measures. My version has four parts:

1. Concept Introduction

- Give a definition of the type of writing. Example: A persuasive essay attempts to convince a reader to adopt a particular opinion or course of action.
- Run a discussion in which students briefly define this type of writing in their own words. Example: “It means get them to agree with you or do what you want.”
- Present an example from literature. Read aloud, or have the class read silently, an example to find out how the piece attempts to move the reader to believe something or take a particular action. Example: An editorial opposing off-shore drilling.
- Run a discussion in which students say briefly why the example fits the definition. Example: “The paper wants people to see that drilling will harm local beaches but not produce much oil. They want people to conserve oil and contact their reps in Congress to vote against it.”

2. Teacher Demonstration

- Draft an example of the type of writing introduced.
- Think aloud to show how you make decisions.
- Write on the chalkboard or an overhead.
- Invite questions about process.

3. Shared Writing

- Lead a brainstorm session about characteristics of, techniques for, and examples of that type of writing.
- Write on the chalkboard or an overhead projection sheet.
- Ask why students make their brainstorm suggestions.
- Display examples of the type of writing or reproduce examples for writing folders.
- Include strategic steps in examples.

4. Independent Writing

- Students write their own piece of the same type.

Given a brief sample piece (for instance, an editorial from the local paper or *The New York Times*), the first two steps might occur in one class period. The next day, you might do the shared writing on a topic brainstormed by the class at the end of the first day. This gives students a chance to think about the topic under discussion overnight as well as think about issues they might like to address for the independent assignment. I gave this assignment to an eighth-grade class, producing with class members a letter of protest to the manufacturer of my car after the engine seized up. Customer service had assured me I was not covered, but our letter (sent via registered mail to the CEO of the company) produced reimbursement for my loss! A science class testing crackers for the presence of starch or sugar before and after partial digestion via immersion in saliva found that the crackers contained sugar, although the listed ingredients did not. A letter to the company received an apology and an assortment of classroom snacks!

Specific Product Goals

In 1966 educators from all levels in American and British schools and colleges attended a conference at Dartmouth College sponsored by the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. One conservative website calls the Dartmouth conference “the Woodstock of the composition professions” (MacDonald, 1995) because the educators gathered there allegedly favored openness and expression over rigor and accurate use of the language. Certainly, Murray’s (1985) *First Hour of the First Day* asks students to write about what they know about and care about, unlike a more traditional assignment that asks for a carefully constructed essay giving three reasons why Emily Dickinson’s work was daring in her lifetime. Still, Murray warns us that if we have expectations for the final piece, we need to share them with the writers in advance.

We can follow Murray’s advice without telling students what to think (about Emily Dickinson, for instance) or how many reasons there are for believing it. The

2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (ACT, Inc., 2007) will include prompts such as the following:

1. Write a response for the newspaper in which you define a good community and explain what elements make a good community. Be sure to use specific examples and details to explain your ideas. (p. 31)
2. Write a response for the contest on “Achieving Goals,” telling about the experience of achieving a goal and the importance of that experience in your life. Be sure to include details in your response that help readers understand your experience and its importance. (p. 32)

The first prompt is for grade 12, and the second for grade 8. The NAEP planners avoid the constraining suggestions of studies in *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007). They do not dictate how many details, what sorts of paragraphs, or which common elements of persuasion or exposition to include.

Spandel (2008) provides open student checklists for narrative, informational, persuasive, and literary analysis writing. The simple persuasive checklist includes the following goals: helps reader think through issues; makes writer’s position clear; shows why others might not agree; gives facts, quotations, and examples; and saves the best argument for last (p. 399). Our rubrics and assignments can, like Spandel’s, tell students what good writers do in argument or exposition while not dictating what the correct opinion must be, or the number or order of specific pieces of proof.

The Study of Models

As in the guided writing model mentioned earlier (Meeks & Austin, 2003), writers study the work of published authors to see how others have tackled similar tasks. Historically, students copied ancient texts because printed versions either did not exist or were prohibitively expensive even after the invention of fixed-type printing. This is no longer the case, but strict imitation of models is also inappropriate because it is based on an associative model inappropriate for language learning. Rather, in the style of Portalupi and Fletcher (2001), writers can be shown, for example, how to examine the use of personal experience by Peter Lourie in his non-fiction writing or how writers of *Time* use transitions. Portalupi and Fletcher also show student writers how to use what professionals have done to solve problems in their own writing. Therefore, models of writing have moved from being associative practice and repetition to being literature-based lessons in the procedural knowledge writers must have to put what they read to work in their own writing.

Collaboration

Graham and Perin (2007) found sizeable student gains using collaborative enterprises in writing, including collaborative peer response. My research (Simmons, 2003)

has shown that merely having students share their work with one another does not ensure that they will learn to respond helpfully to their peers. However, those who do respond well and know how to use response, write better. Clearly, we need to teach students how to talk about writing and how to use feedback they receive.

Tim McLaughlin of Bunker Hill Community College (Simmons, 2003) teaches his students using the following steps:

1. Students read one another's work in class and respond.
2. Students share the responses generated in pairs with the whole class.
3. Tim and the class members comment on the helpfulness of the response.
4. The whole class comments on the same piece, first those written by persons in class and then those by their outside partners.
5. Tim reviews the comments being given by peers.
6. Tim confers with those students still needing to improve their responses.

What were improved responses, though? Students with more experience in reading workshops offered less global praise ("Good paper!"), fewer personal comments ("You sound like a sincere person."), and fewer text edits ("Run-on sentence"). Instead, they were more likely to comment on what they were affected or confused by as readers ("I couldn't tell on the first page what confused you about your new school."). They also offered suggestions as fellow writers ("Perhaps you might start your paper on what is now page four where the action really begins.").

Rief (2003) scripts her middle-school peer conferences by having students who share consider the following points. The writer fills in line 1, and the audience or partner responds to lines 2–4:

1. You can help me by _____.
2. Tell me what phrases you hear, are surprised by, or stick with you (that I wrote).
3. What questions come to mind (as I read to you)?
4. What's one suggestion you could give me (based on what I asked for as help)?

I use the following format, which is based on Murray (1985) and Graves (1994), for sharing a new or extensively revised piece of writing:

The Writer must do the following:

1. Tell the one thing the piece is about
2. Tell what works in the piece
3. Tell the audience what to read or listen for

The Writer may do the following:

1. Tell where the idea came from and what has been done so far
2. Tell where the piece is going and what needs to be done next
3. Identify problems with the writing process or the paper and ask for suggestions

The Responder must do the following:

1. Tell what you remember from the piece
2. Answer the writer's questions

The Responder may do the following:

1. Tell what you liked
2. Ask for clarification or more information
3. Make suggestions, if requested

I find that middle school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate students all have trouble with the second thing the writer must do: Tell what works. Most of us are used to people (teachers) finding fault with our writing, so we apologize in advance. University of New Hampshire poet Mekeel McBride uses an “apology pig” in some of her classes. Students who apologize before reading a piece are fined 25 cents, which they must deposit in the piggy bank. At the end of the course, she says, there is always enough for pizza! Ralph Fletcher (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2007) says that a writer needs to be able to find the good parts of his or her writing and make the rest live up to those parts. In my peer response form, the writer needs to know what he or she is working on (the one thing it's about) and both Rief (2003) and I ask writers to know where they need help.

Inquiry Activities in Writing for Content Learning

Graham and Perin (2007) in *Writing Next* and the National Writing Project (NWP, 2006) list many of the same activities for content area learning: logs or journals, essay questions, and summaries. Graham and Perin also mention studies that showed positive effects for student note-taking, while the NWP cited work by Robert Tierney in which students wrote for audiences other than the teacher. With the increased test preparation in schools today, we probably don't need to worry about students writing test-like essays in all content areas. Specific ideas for teaching inquiry, however, are another issue. Graham and Perin (2007) note that when last studied in 1986, inquiry activities generally asked students to analyze data before writing.

As a high school teacher, I taught a course called Exploring Contemporary Issues. Students selected it because they could choose the issues to study. I wanted

to teach the research process to students who might not always be planning to attend a four-year college.

We spent the first week brainstorming issues to be covered. The Middle East, witchcraft, the John F. Kennedy assassination, and rape were among the first set. Groups then divided the topics among themselves, and each group further divided the individual topic into sections, assigning one person to cover each part. In the group covering rape, there were people investigating rape on college campuses, services for victims, and the history of rape.

All students kept two journals. In one journal, students reported findings they had made during each week in one-page research summaries. Students read one another’s findings in group meetings, and the team members decided how to extend the work or reshape their questions. Early on, one young woman was shocked to encounter statistics about the number of male victims of rape. She and the group decided to focus one part of their report on that phenomenon.

The second journal kept track of the research process, noting both successes and frustrations in attempting to find information. Again, the groups shared these experiences through the journals, and I sat in to provide solutions as needed. We had access to both the high school and university library databases, stacks, and interlibrary loan, so the ability to search online sources, e-journals, and digital card catalogues provided a steep learning curve for most of the students.

To teach note-taking, I provided students with a version of the I-Chart (Tierney & Readence, 2005) shown in Figure 2.2. Presented electronically, the columns and rows can expand to fit the information collected. In the numbered boxes at the top of the columns, students write their questions. In the boxes to the left, students write the sources in which they expect to find answers to the questions. Summary

FIGURE 2.2
I-Chart

TOPIC		Guiding Questions				Interesting Facts and Figures	New Questions
		1.	2.	3.	4.		
S O U R C E S	WHAT WE KNOW						
	1.						
	2.						
	3.						
	SUMMARY						

writing, included in both Graham and Perin (2007) and NWP (2006), is captured in the I-Chart and the weekly journals.

One young woman had been a victim of rape and convinced her group to present their findings, in part, through a structured viewing of *The Accused*, a film about a rape set in a neighboring state. Working with the principal, we wrote permission slips to go home and developed a viewing guide, and we spent three days viewing and discussing the film.

Other groups presented more traditional research reports, written and distributed in advance of in-class presentations of their findings. Their classmates, informed by the reading the night before and the ongoing discussions during the course, made much better audiences than typical book report “victims”!

Process Writing Approach

Finally, the *Writing Next* authors (Graham & Perin, 2007) say that research supports following a process writing approach. This is good news in an era of mindless reform that has produced the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. More disheartening is the testimony of a third-grade teacher who told a researcher (Sullivan, 2007) that before reform

you would have seen more of a writing workshop model.... I can remember my kids having folders with different topics, you know, and they got to choose what they wanted to write about that week or that week and a half. They constantly had different items, and I would say, “Oh, that is a great idea! Why don’t you write that down in your folder, and we will use that later.” (p. 80)

Today, unfortunately, these same teachers are drilling students in five-paragraph essays, despite the fact that they feel it is developmentally inappropriate to do so (Sullivan, 2007). The good news is that all of the procedures outlined in this chapter constitute a process approach to writing, and they are supported by the most accepted research currently in print.

Overcoming Challenges

Where Will I Find the Time?

We know students need to write more to write better, but secondary teachers in this country regularly face five sections a day of as many as 35 students. Reading even 500 words a week from each of them requires 87,500 words per assignment. At an average of 250 words per minute, that activity alone occupies nearly 6 hours, or a full day of reading. No commenting, no editing, not much time for thinking. Just good-bye Sunday.

Until communities support smaller class sizes, we can at least read the papers in front of students, as Don Murray did with me in the workshop I attended. I bring a piece of my writing to class and begin each conference by handing it to

my student to read while I read his or hers. Then we trade responses. A number of birds with one stone: conferring, modeling response, spreading six hours over all the periods devoted to writing that week, treating students like contributors to your writing process.

How Can I Prepare All Those Minilessons?

Luckily, we as a profession have been at this process since Woodstock. Atwell's *Lessons That Change Writers* (2002), Fletcher and Portalupi's *Craft Lessons* (2007), and Portalupi and Fletcher's *Nonfiction Craft Lessons: Teaching Information Writing K–8* (2001) all provide middle school teachers with literature and process-based, classroom-proven lesson plans for a reasonable price. *Come to Class: Lessons for High School Writers* (Jago, 2008) does the same thing for high school teachers.

In the long run, you'll want to save good records of your own lessons, including handouts and student work samples. Also, trade lessons and handouts with colleagues!

Looking Ahead

Clearly, governments both local and national must commit to funding schools so that the smaller class sizes promised by No Child Left Behind actually come to pass. School leaders need to heed the words of Ravitch (2008) and others who have called for an end to education as test preparation. As is clear in Massachusetts, the state officials who mandated the tests and created the prompts never intended that students from the earliest grades onward would write nothing but responses to test prompts scripted with graphic organizers that codify outdated pedagogy from two centuries past.

In this chapter we have seen that it is possible to follow the dictates of current research and still allow students to choose their topics, craft their own arguments, apply the lessons of their reading to writing, and help themselves and others by commenting frequently and in-depth on one another's writing (and ours!). We can engage students in long-term investigations into topics that concern them, and they will amaze us with reports and presentations crafted for living audiences of their peers and their community. We call on our leaders to end reductive test preparation and help our schools live up to these challenges, but we're not waiting around. We can start today!

EXTEND YOUR THINKING

- How might I package the conclusions of the *Writing Next* report to convince my principal, school board, or community to support the conditions necessary to teach writing well, including smaller class size?

- What is one change that I can make in my classroom immediately that will move me closer to a process writing approach or improve the process I already have?
- Think about the best piece of writing you have ever produced. It doesn't matter what it is or whether it happened in school or whether anyone has ever read it. How did it come to be, step by step? What conditions allowed you to take those steps? How can you create those conditions for your students?

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