

REVIEW OF

Research on Teaching Writing

FUNDED IN PART BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA'S ADULT
LEARNING, LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS PROGRAM



The following reference document provides a brief review of academic research and relevant reports on best practices for teaching and assessing writing skills. The purpose of this research was to support the development of the Skills for Success Practitioner Competency Framework and was part of a series of research reviews on best practices for teaching each of the Skills for Success. This summary provides an overview of evidence-based teaching methods in the area of writing, key considerations when applying these practices, and a list of resources for further consideration.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this review, several search queries were conducted on Google and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: education, writing skills, adult education, instruction, learning strategies.

STATE OF THE LITERATURE

The literature on writing instruction is extensive, with several research studies completed in the past 10 years. While some of the literature on writing focuses on adult education, most of these studies pertain to the instruction of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). Most resources on teaching writing skills are intended for instructors and practitioners that work with children and youth, namely elementary, high school, and college students.

The review of the literature identified several reference materials for instructors that provide research-based strategies for designing and administering effective curriculum for developing writing skills.

- The following reports are specifically tailored to the needs of adult learners and detail different teaching approaches and assessment methods:
 - Effective Teaching and Learning: Writing (Grief et al., 2007);
 - Just Write! Guide (American Institutes for Research, 2012).

- While the majority of reference materials for instructors concern younger learners, many of the principals and strategies are applicable to adult learners. Two particularly helpful resources include:

- Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction (Troia, 2014);
- Writing and writing instruction: An overview of the literature (McLean, 2022).

CONCEPTS

The following are the definition and integral constructs of writing as specified in the Skills for Success Framework (SRDC, 2021):

DEFINITION:

“Writing is your ability to share information using written words, symbols, and images.”

CONSTRUCTS:

- Identify the task that requires you to write
- Plan the writing task

- Use written words and phrases so you can achieve the purpose of the writing task
- Chose the appropriate language and style for the writing task
- Choose the appropriate format for the writing task
- Review and revise your writing

APPROACHES TO TEACHING WRITING SKILLS

Writing as a social practice

Bazerman (2015) understands writing as a social practice that is learned through complex sociocultural situations: “**Writing is a complex social participatory performance** in which the writer asserts meaning, goals, actions, affiliations, and identities within a constantly changing, contingently organized social world, relying on shared texts and knowledge” (p.18).

From this perspective, **writing is a context-driven problem-solving process** through which learning best takes place by exposing students to varied conditions. The following are some considerations based on this approach (Bazerman, 2015):

- Writing skills develop through experiences with different situations, problem solving, and by introducing learners to writing styles that suit varied social norms and practices;
- Teaching and assessment methods need to account for adult learners’ prior experiences with writing;
- Learning to write for real world situations requires new learning processes.

Instructional approaches

Grief et al. (2007) led a study in England to support reforms in adult literacy instruction and to inform

teaching practices. The study provides the following recommendations for instructors:

1. Focus on writing as a key method of communication;
2. Provide learners with ample opportunities to write their own texts;
3. Contextualize technical writing skills (i.e., spelling, grammar and punctuation) within meaningful writing tasks;
4. Ensure that learners are supported through the writing process (e.g., drafting, revising and proofreading their work);
5. Highlight the real-world applications of writing to demonstrate the importance of literacy skills in the daily lives of learners.

Grammar instruction: A key recommendation echoed in numerous studies is to weave the technical aspects of writing (e.g., grammar, sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation) into meaningful writing assignments and active learning strategies that mirror real-world contexts (UK Department for Education, 2012; Troia, 2014; McLean, 2022).

- While grammar is fundamental to improving writing skills, teaching grammar alone can produce negative outcomes for students’ writing quality (AIR, 2012).

Increasing time spent writing: Several studies on writing skills conclude that the most effective strategy for improving learners’ writing ability is to increase the amount of time students spend producing their own texts (Grief et al., 2007; Graham & Herber, 2010; UK Department for Education, 2012; Graham, 2019).

- However, Kellogg (1994) argues that frequency alone is not sufficient in developing effective writing skills: “Writers, just like musicians and athletes, must be trained, so that what they know is retrieved and creatively applied during composition,” (as cited in Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007)). In effect, Kellogg and Raulerson (2007) recommend deliberate practice that endeavors to build self-regulation and internalize technical writing skills through the following ways:

1. "Exertion to improve performance;
2. Intrinsic motivation to engage in the task;
3. Practice tasks within reach of the individual's ability;
4. Feedback that provides knowledge of results; and
5. High levels of repetition over a period of several years," (p.238).

The connection between reading and writing

skills: The development of learners' writing skills can help to support their reading skills (Graham & Herbert, 2010):

- Reading and writing can be combined to accomplish specific goals, such as learning new ideas;
- Reading and writing skills rely on shared knowledge and cognitive processes;
- Learners can develop reading skills by composing their own texts, as writing enables them to better comprehend the written works of others.

Instructional strategies and practices

In the *Just Write! Guide* produced for the Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy Center, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) (2012) suggests the following instructional interventions.

- **Strategy Instruction**, especially self-regulated development: Explicitly and consistently teaching strategies to students that are reinforced through classroom activities, so that they may internalize them over time.
 - For a fulsome analysis of strategy instruction in writing for adult learners, see MacArthur and Lembo (2008).
- **Summarization:** Having learners write summaries to strengthen both writing skills and reading comprehension.
- **Collaborative writing:** Instructing students to work in groups through the entire process of writing (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing), which results in higher quality writing products.
- **Setting specific product goals:** Providing students with specific goals to help structure their writing (e.g., writing for a particular audience), as well as feedback based on the adherence to the assigned goal.
- **Word processing:** Using technology-assisted writing tools to support students with spelling, revising, and proofreading. These tools can also help facilitate collaborative writing assignments.
- **Sentence combining:** Practicing combining two simple sentences into a more complex sentence can help improve students' writing quality and reading comprehension skills.
- **Prewriting activities:** Planning or brainstorming strategies that help students guide their composition, such as building vocabulary, generating lists, word webs, and personal glossaries. These strategies can be done either individually or collaboratively.
- **Inquiry:** Learners engage in a focused investigation into a particular topic to gather and analyze to springboard their writing process.
- **Process writing approach:** Using several instructional activities to incorporate writing activities throughout the course, such as increasing the quantity of writing assignments, instructor modeling (instructors apply the strategies they teach), and some of the aforementioned interventions (e.g., sentence combining and inquiry).
- **Study of written models:** Instructing students on diverse written genres (styles, tones, formats, vocabularies, structures, etc.) to provide them with different ways to frame their own writing.

Other instructional approaches advocate for methods designed to provide learners with opportunities to write more informally, which enable them to lean on their own personal experiences, knowledge, and opinions.

- **Reflective writing:** Reflective writing allows students to express their thoughts related to course content and allows them to practice their writing in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way (Beebe, 2006; McGuire et al., 2009). This instructional technique helps foster student-teacher relationships, and creates a supportive learning environment (Beebe, 2006).
 - Reflective writing may be especially beneficial for adult learners, many of whom have a breadth of professional experiences but little academic experience (McGuire et al, 2009).
- **Journaling:** Similar to reflective writing, journaling offers learners an opportunity for open and creative expression, and a motivation to write regularly (Nielsen, 2015). Journaling activities should incorporate the following guidelines:
 - “Students should develop the habit of regularly contributing to their journals with class-time for dedicated and focused writing;
 - Students at all levels should keep their ideas flowing, with limited initial focus on grammar and spelling;
 - Once finished writing a short sentence, paragraph, or essay, they can stop and return to check their work, with instructor support as needed;
 - Last, students are given options for writing that allow them to engage their interests,” (Nielsen, 2015, p.147).

ASSESSMENT OF WRITING SKILLS

McLean (2022) recommends the following assessment practices for providing instructor feedback:

- “Allowing students to use the writing modality in which they are most proficient (that is, handwriting or typing);
 - Minimizing the impact of handwriting bias when judging writing quality;
 - De-identifying writing samples prior to marking;
 - Randomly ordering writing samples before marking;
 - Collecting multiple samples of students’ writing;
 - Ensuring marking is reliable through consensus and/or consistency approaches, which aim to reduce subjectivity” (p.18).
- Formative assessments:** Several studies recommend that instructors use formative assessments, which enable students to learn from their mistakes (AIR, 2012; MacArthur, 2015; Graham, 2019; McLean, 2022). Formative assessments consist of “informal, interactive, ongoing assessment, instructional adjustments, and feedback” and differ from summative assessments, which test students’ knowledge at the end of the learning unit (AIR, 2012, p.58).
- Formative assessment occurs iteratively through the following processes (AIR, 2012):
 - Rich conversations between teachers and learners that continually build and go deeper;
 - The provision of constructive, timely feedback to enable learners to advance their learning;
 - Teachers modifying instructional approaches to respond to shared learning goals or outcomes.
 - Assessment of writing products can use rubrics, checklists, and informal evaluation, and students can learn to evaluate their own writing as well as provide peer review of other students’ writing.
 - AIR (2012, p.6) provides the following examples of formative assessments for writing.
 - **Quick Write**
 - Pre- or post-assessment tool.
 - Limited time to write about a particular topic or idea.
 - Demonstrates what students understand about the topic and highlights their reasoning process.
 - **Graphic Organizers**
 - For example, venn diagrams, word/idea webs or concept maps, cause/effect charts, flowcharts, and sequence charts.

- Used to assess prior knowledge, record learning during a lecture or class reading, or organize knowledge after learning.
- **Student Reflection:**
 - Learners reflect on their accomplishments and challenges.
 - Questions used to incite critical thinking.

Feedback and revision: Feedback and revision are critical to supporting writing skill development, and research indicates that peer review and feedback is as effective as instructor feedback (MacArthur, 2015).

- The benefits of peer review are twofold: students often provide each other with more frequent, immediate, and detailed feedback than instructors do, and they benefit from both giving and receiving feedback (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007; MacArthur, 2015).
- However, students can be reluctant to provide criticism to their peers and/or accept critique. As well, effective revision is a learned skill that requires explicit instruction and structured guidance (MacArthur, 2015).
- Embracing flexible teaching practices that meet student needs as well as curriculum goals;
- Organizing writing assignments that are meaningful to students and promoting ownership and choice to engage learners as writers;
- Exposing students to a plethora of materials written for different audiences and purposes;
- Providing opportunities for students to receive constructive feedback and to offer responses to other writers' work;
- Enabling students to write often and to engage in collaborative writing processes;
- Offering instruction on technical writing skills through 'mini-lessons' that are conducted through a workshop structure.

A significant challenge to teaching writing skills is the time required to develop effective writing skills, given the complex and multifaceted nature of writing (Graham, 2019):

- Writing requires frequent and sustained exposure to diverse texts through reading different genres;
- Writing development is an interactive process nurtured through mentoring, feedback, collaboration, and instruction;
- Writing instruction is an intensive process for teachers, who must dedicate a significant amount of classroom time to writing, as well as develop curriculum that encompasses multiple strategies and approaches to ensure efficacy.

Automated assessments: While many scholars dismiss the efficacy of automated essay scoring software, there is potential in using these technologies to increase the amount of writing assigned to learners, while not burdening instructors with higher marking workloads (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007).

CONSIDERATIONS

Whitacker (2019) summarizes the key considerations for instructors when designing and implementing writing curriculum:

- Establishing a positive learning environment through an inviting classroom, nurturing respect for and among students, teachers modeling and sharing their writing, and establishing consistent routines and clear expectations;

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