

Research-Based Writing Instruction

Recent research reviews have gathered what we know about effective practices for teaching writing to adolescents. This fact sheet examines the research on writing instruction for youth and adults, with attention to those who struggle to learn. Extrapolating from these major analyses provides guidance for adult educators to boost their writing instruction for adult learners.

About Writing Instruction

Recent reviews of research have gathered what we know about effective practices to teach writing. *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007), and a companion analysis, *What We Know, What We Still Need to Know* (Graham & Perin, 2007), examine the research on writing instruction in grades 4-12, with attention given to those whose writing skills need improvement. *Writing to Read* (Graham & Hebert, 2010) analyzes the research on how writing instruction and practice can improve reading skills. Although these studies focus on students younger than most of the adult education population, they provide direction for instruction with adults. This Fact Sheet provides a thumbnail sketch of these three major studies and the implications for adult educators and learners.

Elements of Writing

Writing is multifaceted and includes a number of skills that must work together. Evaluating writing can be subjective when instructors and learners alike are unsure of what makes “good” writing. Writing “quality” is defined in *Writing Next* as “coherently organized essays containing well developed and pertinent ideas, supporting examples, and appropriate detail” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 14). Sentence structure and vocabulary are other key elements that contribute to the quality of a piece of writing. Learners who find writing difficult may experience challenges in any of these areas as well as in spelling, handwriting, prior knowledge of the topic, and familiarity with models of academic literacies or genres. Because writing is such a complex act, high quality writing depends on this large constellation of skills and abilities. The goal of writing instruc-

tion is to help writers become flexible and proficient, able to adapt to various purposes, contexts, and formats, and, in so doing, to synergize literacy development in **both** writing and reading.

Why Teach Writing to Adult Learners?

Adults encounter writing tasks on a daily basis, especially informational or expository writing such as notes to children’s teachers, grocery lists, work activity logs and forms, e-mails to family and co-workers, online service forms, and so on. The pervasiveness of writing in daily life underscores the need for learners and their instructors to focus on helping adults become flexible, confident writers.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that many adults of all ages in America are **not** flexible, confident writers. *Writing Next* and *Writing to Read* provide grim statistics showing that poor in-school performance and high drop-out rates from high school lead to a situation in which adults are underprepared for post-secondary education or successful employment. For example, they report that nearly a quarter of community college registrants show the need for developmental writing instruction. Similarly, the reports document that the writing demands of most jobs—even at the entry level—are increasing and businesses may have to provide the remedial writing instruction that workers need. Preparing adult students for further education or work advancement requires that adult educators help learners improve their writing skills and increase their confidence in their ability to write.

What's the Research?

Writing Next and *Writing to Read* are meta-analyses, that is, large-scale statistical reviews of studies that compare treatment and control groups. A meta-analysis allows researchers to combine multiple studies of a single instructional intervention and report “effect sizes” as an effectiveness measure. An effect size tells whether statistically significant findings are also educationally meaningful. *Writing Next* analyzed 142 studies and *Writing to Read* analyzed 93 studies. *What We Know* extends the conclusions of *Writing Next* by reviewing articles that did not fit the strict inclusion criteria, including 48 single subject studies of

writing, many of which were focused on students who had learning disabilities or were otherwise low achieving. Because there is very little rigorous research on the effectiveness of literacy interventions for adult learners, it is necessary to refer to studies with younger students. The challenge for the adult education community is to extrapolate from reports on younger students and apply these findings in instructional design for adults. We already know, for example, that many native English speaking adult learners were low-achieving students in K-12 and many have undiagnosed learning disabilities (Corley & Taymans, 2002; National Institute for Literacy, 2009). We also know from adult learning theory that adults show different learning patterns and levels of motivation from adolescents and younger children, and it is necessary to take these differences into account when drawing from work with younger populations to plan for instruction with adults. There are also some studies of writing development in adults and youth in postsecondary settings that fill in some of the gaps and help us develop approaches to helping adults improve their writing abilities.

Recommended Instructional Strategies

All three reports find that writing instruction should emphasize explicit, direct, and systematic instruction with many opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful, extended writing. Learners who wish to improve their writing skills will benefit from learning strategies, and from assistance given by peers, mentors, and technology tools.

Writing Next, What We Know, and Writing to Read found the following instructional interventions to be effective. Those that are especially helpful for low-achieving writers are noted. This TEAL Center Fact Sheet offers in *italics* suggestions for contextualizing instruction in the adult education setting.

- **Strategy instruction**, especially self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), and summarization described below, are the most effective approaches identified in these reports. Writers who are explicitly taught strategies that are reinforced in class over time can internalize these strategies and draw on them for support when writing. Strategies replace negative self-talk with positive self-instructions to help students overcome frustration and past failure. *Strategy instruction has been introduced to adult education through the profes-*

sional development programs, Bridges to Practice and Learning to Achieve, developed by the National Institute for Literacy to address the needs of students with learning disabilities. It is an instructional approach that requires professional development and practice leading to instruction that is consistent and explicit.

- **Summarization.** Explicit teaching of the elements of a summary of a text leads to improved ability and increased confidence in writing summaries. Having learners write summaries about what they read is a key recommendation from *Writing to Read*. In addition, summarization is an increasingly common expectation as students advance in their education and are assigned more complex texts to read and comprehend. *Connect this instruction and practice with increasingly complex texts to reinforce learners' comprehension as well as writing skills.*
- **Collaborative writing.** Making arrangements for students to work together through the entire process of writing—planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing—results in higher quality writing products. *Use technology to support and share writing, especially for classes that do not meet daily, or assign writing as an out-of-class activity.*
- **Setting specific product goals.** Understanding the nature of goals for a written product, setting the goal in advance during planning, and then monitoring and editing one's work for adherence to the goal all result in higher quality final products. Setting specific goals (e.g., “to persuade a voter”) are more effective than general goals (e.g., “write a 200-word essay”). *Discuss writing quality with learners and identify areas for improvement. Help learners set explicit goals to guide their writing, and work with them to track progress. For example, learners may want to write more words during a Quick or Free Write exercise, others may identify that their sentences are all of a similar type and want to focus on adding variety and using combined sentences. Tracking goals works!*
- **Word processing** and other technology tools are especially supportive for struggling writers, providing the means to move more easily from idea to composition, supporting spelling, revising, and proof reading. Technology-assisted writing also makes collaborative writing (see above) more feasible and productive.

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- **Sentence combining**, that is, practicing how to combine two simple sentences into a compound or complex sentence, has a positive impact on overall writing quality and can boost learners' reading comprehension skills as well. *Use this technique in conjunction with other effective writing techniques, such as encouraging peer discussion as part of collaborative writing, to help reinforce the practice.*
- **Prewriting activities**, or brainstorming before beginning to draft a composition, has a positive impact on the final written product. Prewriting activities can be done individually or as a collaborative process. This planning strategy may be particularly important to low-achieving writers for compensating and overcoming documented weak prior knowledge and vocabulary (Graham & Perin, 2007). *Engaging learners and supporting vocabulary development and background knowledge through pre-reading strategies can support writing about the topic, too. Generate lists, word webs, and personal glossaries that can help writers demonstrate what they know.*
- **Inquiry**, in which learners engage in a focused investigation with "immediate and concrete data" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 19) that they gather and analyze, is a springboard to higher quality writing. *Assign authentic activities and materials as inquiry writing, either inquiry in the community (i.e., is there consensus for the public library to expand?) and/or online as a web quest.*
- **Process writing approach** includes many related activities, including a greatly increased quantity of writing (only some of which is completed to publication) and a focus on writing throughout the course, along with mini-lessons on embedded skills. It is a professional development model as well, and results seen in students' writing are correlated to teachers' training in the approach. It is worth noting that the instructional activities of sentence combining and inquiry are part of the approach. Another key component is the modeling of writing by instructors. *Model writing and responding to feedback and model applying the strategies you teach. Many adult educators have participated in local National Writing Project chapters; see www.nwp.org for a local chapter that can offer professional development and a community of writers.*
- **Study of written models with direct, guided practice** was found to be an effective instructional strategy, especially for students with low skills.

Many adult education students are not familiar with different types of written genres; the explicit study of formats, styles, tones, vocabularies, sentence structures, etc., can provide new frames and words for their own work.

A cautionary note about **grammar instruction** emerges from the meta-analyses: Studies of grammar instruction alone or as a primary writing instructional approach produced **negative results** for students' overall writing quality. However, the authors argue that it is important to teach grammar. It seems most helpful to the learner to use grammar approaches that involve active learning (such as sentence combination) and are integrated with other writing activities.

References

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