

# Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers

## *Practice Guide Summary*



### **Educators' Practice Guide Summary • WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE™**

The four recommendations in the WWC practice guide, *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, encourage teachers to help students use writing flexibly and effectively in communicating their ideas.

### **Introduction**

An early foundation in writing offers students a valuable tool for learning, communication, and self-expression. Authored by a panel of experts, the *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* practice guide presents four recommendations educators can use to help elementary students strengthen their writing skills. The recommendations in the guide cover providing daily writing time, teaching the writing process, teaching fundamental writing skills, and developing a supportive writing environment.

This summary introduces the recommendations and supporting evidence described in the WWC's *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* practice guide. For more practical tips and useful classroom examples, download a copy of the practice guide at: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=17>.

**Recommendation 1.**  
**Provide daily time for students to write.**



Students need dedicated instructional time to learn the skills and strategies necessary to become effective writers. Setting aside time specifically for writing gives students an opportunity to practice what they learn, making them more confident in their writing abilities. Teachers can observe students during writing practice to identify difficulties and assist with learning and applying the writing process.

**How to carry out Recommendation 1**

Beginning in first grade, the practice guide panel recommends spending a minimum of one hour a day on writing. The hour should include 30 minutes dedicated to teaching a variety of writing strategies, techniques, and skills appropriate to students’ levels. The remaining 30 minutes should be spent on writing practice, where students apply the skills they learned from writing skills instruction.

Time for writing practice can occur in the context of other content area instruction. For example, the activities in the table below could be opportunities for students to practice in later grades.

**Summary of evidence for Recommendation 1**

All 34 studies that the WWC identified as evidence for the recommendations in the practice guide noted the provision of time for quality writing instruction, writing practice, or both; although the time required to implement the interventions varied. Although the panel believes it is critical to allocate sufficient time to writing instruction and practice, research has not explicitly examined whether providing daily opportunities to write leads to better writing outcomes than providing less frequent writing opportunities. Therefore, there is a **minimal** level of evidence to support this recommendation. For more details see Recommendation 1, [page 10](#) in the practice guide.

**Ideas for writing opportunities throughout the school day**

Content Area	Opportunity for Writing Practice	Skill Emphasized
Science	Incorporate lab reports or science journals into experiments and hands-on activities.	Writing detailed procedures and clear descriptions of observations
Social studies	Ask students to write imaginary diary entries of people from the time period they are studying.	Narrating an experience, event, or sequence of events while holding the reader’s interest
Reading	Have students write before, during, and/or after reading to articulate what they already know, what they want to know, and what they learned.	Examining previously learned information or providing new information; analyzing ideas in text
Math	Present students with a graph from a recent newspaper and ask them to write a paragraph about what the graph is trying to convey.	Interpreting and describing information



**Recommendation 2.**  
**Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes.**



Writing well is a process that requires the writer to:

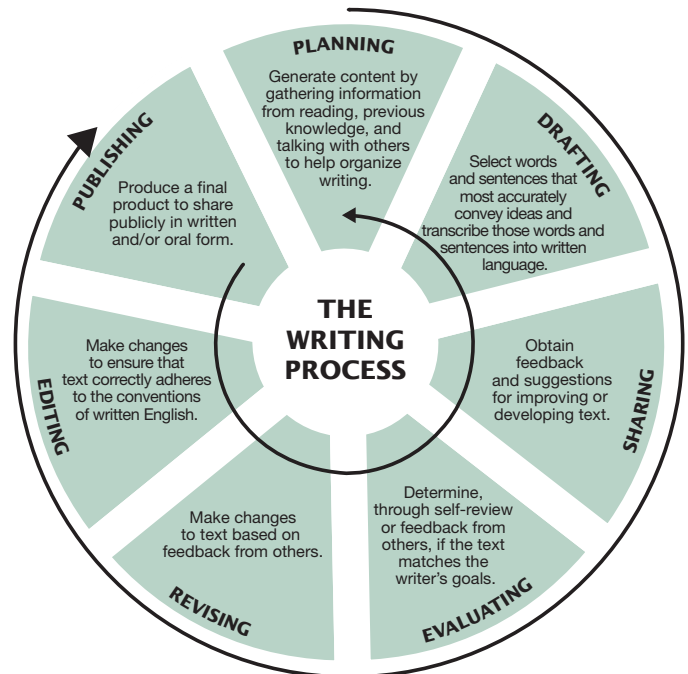
- think carefully about the purpose for writing;
- plan what to say;
- plan how to say it; and
- understand what the reader needs to know.

Components of the writing process include planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, and editing as represented in the figure at right. Students should learn to move easily back and forth between components of the writing process, often altering their plans and revising their text along the way. Teachers can help students become effective writers by teaching a variety of strategies for carrying out each component of the writing process and supporting students in applying the strategies until they are able to do so independently.

Students also should learn that writing is used for a variety of purposes, such as conveying information, making an argument, providing a means for self-reflection, sharing an experience, enhancing understanding of reading, or providing entertainment.

Because writing is a complex process, the steps needed to carry out this recommendation are separated into two sections. Recommendation 2a discusses teaching students how to apply the writing process. Recommendation 2b addresses teaching students to write for a variety of purposes.

**The Writing Process**



**How to carry out Recommendation 2**

**Recommendation 2a. Teach students the writing process.**

- 1. Teach students strategies for the various components of the writing process.** Students need to acquire specific strategies for each component of the writing process, including planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising, editing, and publishing. The practice guide offers strategies and tools to help students generate content and carry out components of the writing process (see [page 16](#) of the practice guide). Students should learn basic strategies, such as POW (**P**ick ideas, **O**rganize their notes, **W**rite and say more), in first or second grade and more complicated strategies, such as peer revising, in second grade or later.

A **strategy** is a series of actions (mental, physical, or both) that writers undertake to achieve their goals. Strategies are tools that can help students generate content and carry out components of the writing process.

## **Recommendation 2a** *(continued)*

- 2. Gradually release writing responsibility from the teacher to the student.** Writing strategies should be taught explicitly and directly through a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student. The practice guide describes this process in detail for teachers (see [page 18](#) of the practice guide). Teachers should ensure that students have the background knowledge and skills they need to understand and use a writing strategy. Once students demonstrate an understanding of the strategy, the teacher should encourage students to practice applying it as they write independently.
- 3. Guide students to select and use appropriate writing strategies.** When students initially learn to use writing strategies, teachers frequently should discuss when and how to use these strategies throughout the writing process, as well as why the strategies are helpful. Once students learn to use a variety of strategies independently, through the gradual release process, teachers should help students understand how to select appropriate strategies and use them across a range of writing tasks. For example, ordering ideas and outlining strategies lend themselves to report writing; brainstorming strategies can be useful for narrating; and setting goals, particularly audience goals, can help students improve their persuasive writing.
- 4. Encourage students to be flexible in their use of the components of the writing process.** Students need to be purposeful in selecting strategies that help them meet their writing goals. They also need to learn to apply these strategies in a flexible manner, moving back and forth between different components of the writing process as they develop text and think critically about their writing goals. Teachers should design activities in which students are encouraged to move back and forth between the components of the writing process as their text takes shape.

## **Recommendation 2b. Teach students to write for a variety of purposes.**

- 1. Help students understand the different purposes of writing.** Students should understand the purpose of each genre so that they can select the genre best suited to their writing task. The practice guide provides examples of specific genres within four purposes: describe, narrate, inform, and persuade/analyze (see [page 21](#) of the practice guide). Teachers should emphasize the purpose of each genre and how its features are related to the purpose, noting that many genres can be used for a variety of purposes.
- 2. Expand students' concept of audience.** To help students understand the role of the audience in writing, it is important to design writing activities that lend themselves to different audiences. Students should learn to adjust their tone and word choice to better convey their meaning and suit their audience. Allowing students to write for a range of audiences enables them to think of writing as an authentic means of communication they can use to accomplish a variety of goals.
- 3. Teach students to emulate the features of good writing.** Students should be exposed to exemplary texts from a variety of sources, including published or professional texts, books and textbooks, the teacher's own writing, and peer samples. Exemplary texts can illustrate a number of features, including text structure; use of graphs, charts, and pictures; effective word choice; and varied sentence structure. Teachers should explain and students should discuss how each text demonstrates characteristics of effective writing in that particular genre. Students will then be prepared to emulate characteristics of exemplary texts at the word, sentence, and/or text level, or they can use the text as a springboard for writing.
- 4. Teach students techniques for writing effectively for different purposes.** The practice guide identifies several examples of techniques that are specific to the four purposes of writing (see [page 26](#) of the practice guide). Techniques should be taught explicitly and directly through a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student until students are able to apply the techniques independently. Teachers should describe the technique, articulate how

it relates to specific writing purposes, and model its use. Students should learn to select techniques that help them achieve their writing purpose and reach their target audience.

## Summary of evidence for Recommendation 2

The WWC identified 25 studies that examined the practices in this recommendation, including

self-regulated strategy development (an approach to writing instruction), goal setting, and other practices. The studies tested the practices in this recommendation on diverse populations of students across a wide variety of settings and found positive effects on a range of outcomes, including overall writing quality. There is a **strong** level of evidence to support this recommendation. For more details see Recommendation 2, [page 13](#) in the practice guide.

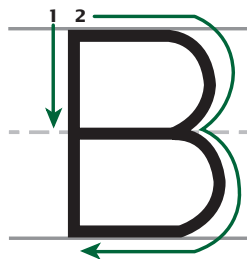
## Recommendation 3. Teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing.

Handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction are all basic writing skills students must draw upon to translate their thoughts and ideas into writing. Students also use typing and word processing skills when composing electronically. When basic writing skills become relatively effortless for students, they can focus less on these basic writing skills and more on developing and communicating their ideas. However, before younger students can become proficient writers, they must typically devote considerable attention to acquiring and polishing these skills during authentic writing experiences that *do not* take place in isolation.



### How to carry out Recommendation 3

- 1. Teach very young writers how to hold a pencil correctly and form letters fluently and efficiently.** Early writing instruction should begin with demonstrations of how to hold a pencil comfortably between the thumb and forefinger, resting on the middle finger. Teachers also should show young writers the most efficient and legible ways to form each letter, regardless of whether print or cursive script is used. Students also should practice writing letters from memory.



- 2. Teach students to spell words correctly.** Teachers should help students learn to spell words they commonly use. Although many elementary schools have an explicit spelling curriculum, teachers should connect spelling instruction with writing as much as possible. The practice guide offers sample lessons for developing spelling skills through writing (see [page 29](#) of the practice guide). Students should be encouraged to learn words they frequently misspell as well as words they wish to include in their writing. Teachers also should help students acquire the skills they need to generate and check plausible spellings for words.



**3. Teach students to construct sentences for fluency, meaning, and style.** Students should learn to write strong sentences that convey their intended meaning and engage readers. Teachers should focus sentence-level instruction on sentence construction, encouraging students to consider the meaning and syntax of the sentences they develop. In addition to the activity below, teachers will find other activities for sentence-structure development on [page 31](#) of the practice guide. Teachers also should explicitly demonstrate how sentence construction and sentence mechanics, such as punctuation and capitalization, interact to form strong sentences. Sentence instruction should include teaching students a variety of sentence types and demonstrating how to use them.

**4. Teach students to type fluently and to use a word processor to compose.** Students should learn how to type fluently, preferably without looking at the keyboard. Instruction in typing should be accompanied by instruction in how to use a word processor. Spell checkers are helpful

tools for writers at all levels, but students need to understand the limitations of the software as well as skills to compensate for those limitations.

## Summary of evidence for Recommendation 3

The WWC identified nine studies of instruction in handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, and word processing that contribute to the evidence base for this recommendation. Eight of the studies found generally positive effects on outcomes such as spelling, handwriting, sentence structure, the quantity of text produced, and the overall quality of student writing. However, in some of these studies, positive effects on one outcome were mixed with no effects or negative effects. In the ninth study, which examined spelling instruction, no effects were found. The study samples typically included small-group instruction rather than whole-class instruction. As a result, the WWC determined there is a **moderate** level of evidence to support this recommendation. For more details see Recommendation 3, [page 27](#) in the practice guide.

### Activity for Step 3: Teaching students to construct sentences for fluency, meaning, and style<sup>1</sup>

#### The teacher provides a short sentence.

The dog napped.

#### Students expand the sentence using different parts of speech.

- The brown dog napped.
- The lazy, brown dog napped on the couch.
- The brown dog napped on the couch.
- The lazy, brown dog napped on the couch while I read a book.

1. Introduce a short sentence.
2. Model how to add to the sentence using different parts of speech, and demonstrate appropriate capitalization and punctuation as the sentence is expanded.
3. Have students provide suggestions for different parts of speech (e.g., subjects and predicates) to add to the short sentences.
4. Have students work independently or in pairs to expand a sentence.
5. Encourage students to share their expanded sentences in small groups, providing feedback to their peers.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Saddler, Behfrooz, and Asaro (2008).

## Recommendation 4. Create an engaged community of writers.

Establish a supportive environment in the classroom to foster a community of writers who are motivated to write well. Instruction and activities should convey the message that writing is important, valued, and rewarding. To further develop students' motivation to write, teachers should include opportunities for students to choose their own topics and/or modify teacher-selected prompts related to the purposes and genres being taught. When students choose their own topics, they may become more engaged and motivated to write. Students and teachers also should have regular and structured opportunities to interact through giving and receiving feedback as well as collaborating on writing activities.

### How to carry out Recommendation 4

- 1. Teachers should participate as members of the community by writing and sharing their writing.** Model how the ability to write affects one's daily life, demonstrate the importance of writing to communicate, model the perseverance required to create a good piece of writing, and express the satisfaction that can come from creating meaningful text. For example, a teacher could draft a letter or an email to a friend in front of students, thinking out loud to make the invisible act of composing—which occurs internally for experienced writers—more visible to students. Teachers also should take part in writing assignments by offering their own examples.
- 2. Give students writing choices.** Provide opportunities for student choice in writing assignments—for example, choice in selecting writing topics or the freedom to modify a teacher-selected prompt. One way to foster choice is for students to keep a notebook in which they record topics for writing, such as memories, pets, vacations, “firsts” (e.g., first time riding a bike, first soccer goal, first day at camp), and favorite holidays. Other examples are discussed in the practice guide beginning on [page 35](#). In providing instruction and opportunities for students to practice writing prompts, select prompts that:



- inspire students to write;
  - ensure students practice writing skills aligned with the lesson's instructional purpose;
  - clearly state expectations with regard to content and writing skills; and
  - give students room to express themselves.
- 3. Encourage students to collaborate as writers.** Teachers can encourage students to collaborate throughout the writing process by brainstorming ideas about a topic, responding to drafts in a writing group, or helping peers edit or revise their work. Collaboration also can take the form of collaborative writing, whereby students jointly develop a single text, like in the “Star of the Day” activity.

In the “Star of the Day” activity, each student is celebrated on his or her own day. Seated at the front of the classroom, the Star of the Day answers interview questions from peers using a pretend microphone. After the interview, students compose one sentence about the Star of the Day. These sentences are shared and combined into a class paragraph, which is then displayed on the class bulletin board, as demonstrated by this example from a 1st-grade classroom:

*Jordan is the Star of the Day. He likes the color blue. He loves to eat ice cream. His favorite animal is a tiger. Jordan lives in Irvine. It's his birthday today!*<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Reprinted with permission from Ramirez (2006).

**4. Provide students with opportunities to give and receive feedback throughout the writing process.** By sharing their writing and responding to written and verbal feedback from teachers and peers, students learn whether their writing is accurately and appropriately conveying its message. Students need to be taught strategies and appropriate language for written feedback. Teachers also should model and provide sample language to encourage appropriate verbal feedback, as in the “Author’s Chair” activity.

During the “Author’s Chair” activity, one student, sitting in a special chair, reads his or her work to peers as they sit on the rug. The teacher then models and facilitates giving kind verbal comments, such as the following:



I really like \_\_\_\_\_ .

A standout line in your text for me is \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_ .

I could really picture \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_ .

**5. Publish students’ writing and extend the community beyond the classroom.** Students may begin to see themselves as writers if they have opportunities to publish their writing. Publishing can take a variety of forms, including displaying student work prominently in the classroom. Teachers also can use publishing to extend the community beyond the classroom. Publishing student work in this manner celebrates writing and helps create a physical environment that is conducive to learning.



## Summary of evidence for Recommendation 4

The WWC identified five studies that examined interventions related to creating an engaged community of writers, though the studies varied with respect to how closely they were aligned to the recommendation. The practices tested in the studies included teachers writing with their class, students choosing their topic, peers brainstorming or editing together or writing interactively, teachers or peers providing structured feedback on writing, and publishing student writing. Four studies found positive effects on writing quality and writing output; however, one study found negative effects as well as positive effects, and one study found no evidence of an effect. Given the available research, the WWC could not isolate the effects of practices designed to engage students. As a result, there is a **minimal** level of evidence to support this recommendation. For more details see Recommendation 4, page 35 in the practice guide.

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