



# How To: Teach Student Writing Skills: Elements of Effective Writing Instruction

The Common Core State Standards place a heavy emphasis on writing skills. Yet writing instruction in schools often falls short in training students to be accomplished writers (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012). As a help to teachers, this article identifies nine elements of writing instruction found to be effective in classrooms ranging from later elementary to high school.

Several meta-analyses are the source for these instructional recommendations (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Herbert, 2010; Graham & Perrin, 2007). Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure that aggregates the findings of various individual studies--all focusing on one writing-instruction component--to calculate for that component a single, global estimate of effectiveness. The results of these meta-analyses are calculated as 'effect sizes'. An effect size is the estimate of the difference between a treatment group (in this case, students receiving a specific writing-instruction treatment) and a control group that does not receive the treatment (Graham & Perrin, 2007). The larger the effect size, the more effective is the treatment. Below is a scale that can be used to evaluate the importance of the effect-sizes that appear with each writing-instruction element (Cohen, 1992; Graham & Herbert, 2010):

- 0.20: Small effect size
- 0.50: Medium effect size
- 0.80: Large effect size

Teachers are encouraged to use this listing of effective writing-instruction practices as a checklist against which to evaluate the quality of their own writing programs. However, the following considerations should be kept in mind:

1. *Recommendations are general--not specific.* Descriptions of these elements of writing instruction are quite general. This lack of specificity is an unavoidable product of the meta-analysis--which isolates from a collection of varied studies the broad, underlying instructional practice common to them all. Nonetheless, teachers can have confidence that, so long as their own classroom practice incorporates these general writing recommendations, they are more likely to deliver high-quality writing instruction.
2. *Ordering and weighting of writing strategies is unknown.* While the instructional strategies presented here have demonstrated their effectiveness in improving student writing, researchers do not yet know the relative importance that each component has in developing student writing skills or in what order the components should appear (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Teacher judgment in the weighting and ordering of each component is required.
3. *Writing components should be explicitly taught.* Struggling writers will need explicit instruction in the various writing components (e.g., in how to work effectively on collaborative writing projects) in order to enjoy the maximum benefit from them (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

## Recommended Writing-Instruction Components

Listed in descending order of effectiveness are these components of effective writing instruction:

<b>1</b>	<b>Students follow a multi-step writing process.</b> Effect sizes: 1.2 (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012); <b>0.82</b> (Graham & Perrin, 2007).
	Students are trained to use (and can produce evidence of) a multi-step writing process, including the elements of planning, drafting, revision, and editing (e.g., Robinson & Howell, 2008). They make use of



this process for all writing assignments.

**2** **Students work collaboratively on their writing.** Effect sizes: **0.89** (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012); **0.75** (Graham & Perrin, 2007).  
 Students work on their writing in pairs or groups at various stages of the writing process: planning (pre-writing), drafting, revising, editing.

**3** **Students receive timely feedback about the quality of their writing.** Effect sizes: **0.80** for adult feedback, **0.37** for student feedback (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012).  
 Students receive regular performance feedback about the quality of a writing product from adults, peers, or through self-administered ratings (e.g., using rubrics). It should be noted that the impact of timely teacher feedback to young writers is especially large (effect size = 0.80).

**4** **Students set writing goals.** Effect sizes: **0.76** (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012); **0.70** (Graham & Perrin, 2007).  
 At various points in the writing process (planning, drafting, writing, revising), students are encouraged to formulate specific goals; they later report out (to the teacher or a peer) whether they have actually accomplished those goals. Examples of goal-setting might include locating at least 3 sources for a research paper, adding 5 supporting details during revision of an argumentative essay, writing the first draft of an introductory paragraph during an in-class writing period, etc.

**5** **Students use word processors to write.** Effect sizes: **0.47** (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012); **0.55** (Graham & Perrin, 2007).  
 Students become fluent in keyboarding and have regular access to word-processing devices when writing.

**6** **Students write about what they have read.** Effect sizes: **0.40** (Graham & Herbert, 2010); **0.82** (Graham & Perrin, 2007).  
 Students are explicitly taught how to summarize and/or reflect in writing on texts that they have recently read. Each of the following writing activities has been found to be effective in promoting writing skills -- as well as improving reading comprehension:

- paraphrasing the original text as a condensed student summary
- analyzing the text, attempting to interpret the text's meaning, or describing the writer's reaction to it
- writing notes (e.g., key words or phrases) that capture the essential text information

**7** **Students engage in pre-writing activities.** Effect sizes: **0.54** (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012); **0.30** (Graham & Perrin, 2007).  
 Before beginning a writing assignment, students take part in structured tasks to plan or visualize the topic to be written about. Activities might include having students draw pictures relevant to the topic; write out a writing plan independently or in pairs or groups; read articles linked to the writing topic and discuss them before developing a writing plan, etc.

**8** **Students produce more writing.** Effect size: **0.30** (Graham, McKeown, Kiuhare, & Harris, 2012).  
 Students have more writing included in their daily instruction (e.g., through daily journaling).



<b>9</b>	<b>Students study writing models.</b> Effect size: <b>0.30</b> (Graham & Perrin, 2007).
	Students are given models of the kinds of writing that they will be asked to produce: e.g., argumentative or informational essays. Students closely study the structure of these models and attempt to incorporate the important elements of each model into their own writing.

**References**

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