

Build Writing Power

by Ms. Gretchen Bernabei

RECENT SCHOLARLY REPORTS highlight the importance of writing proficiency and provide an important research base for improving writing instruction for middle school students, especially striving readers and English learners (Graham and Perin, 2007; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005). These reports make clear that if students are to improve in writing, they must spend significant classroom time writing, and they must learn about writing through explicit instruction, feedback, and reflection.

Assignments that involve extensive writing can be spread out over several class periods. This allows time for teachers to present models for writing and for students to practice using the models as they generate ideas for writing topics, collect information about the topic, prepare and revise drafts, and solicit feedback from teachers and classmates.

Writing instruction is most successful when it encourages generative thinking — thinking that explores questions deeply, rather than simply producing an expected answer. Teachers prompt generative thinking by creating meaningful activities and helping students form questions that lead to deep understanding of a topic. Classrooms that foster generative thinking are more effective in increasing student learning (Strong, 2001).

Effective Elements of Writing Instruction

These and other aspects of writing are summarized in *Writing Next*, the important research summary by Graham and Perin. *Writing Next* highlights these effective elements of writing instruction:

“If students are to improve in writing, they must spend significant classroom time writing, and they must learn about writing through explicit instruction, feedback, and reflection.”

- 1. Study of writing models:** analysis of examples of good writing and the elements of the type of writing represented
- 2. Specific goals for writing products:** identifying the target form of writing (such as persuasion) and its characteristics, and setting specific goals for how to develop or improve the end result
- 3. Explicit writing strategy instruction:** systematically teaching the steps for planning, revising, and editing text
- 4. Instruction in summarizing:** teaching students how to summarize texts
- 5. Instruction in sentence-combining:** learning to combine two or more basic sentences to create more complex sentences
- 6. Opportunities for collaborative writing:** students work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing
- 7. Support for idea generation and prewriting:** activities to help students gather information, develop and organize ideas, and plan their writing

- 8. **Process writing approach:** extended writing opportunities for real purposes, involving planning, development, and revision, and lessons to address students' writing needs
- 9. **Writing for content learning:** using writing as a tool to enhance students' learning of content material

The Traits of Good Writing

In addition to the elements of effective teaching, writing power depends on an understanding of the traits of good writing:

- **Focus and Unity:** how well the parts of the writing go together and how clearly the writing presents a central idea
- **Organization:** how well the paper presents ideas in a structure that is appropriate to the writer's purpose and how smoothly the ideas flow together
- **Development of Ideas:** how well the ideas are explained and supported with details and examples and how thoughtful and interesting the writing is
- **Voice and Style:** how real the writing sounds and how it reflects the writer's unique style with powerful, engaging word choice and fluent, varied sentences
- **Written Conventions:** how understandable the paper is because it is free of errors in sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling

Students need ample opportunities to compare and evaluate papers that exhibit and do not exhibit these traits of good writing. They benefit from improving writing samples created by others and then applying these solutions in their own writing.

Applying the Research: *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content features explicit, intensive writing instruction that aligns with the findings of recent scientific research, including the points listed above. Throughout Levels A–E the program features opportunities to write in response to literature as part of the instructional plan, and at Levels C–E to write in response to the Guiding Question in each unit.

In Levels A and B, writing projects that teach and use the writing process offer extended writing assignments. In Levels C–E, this elaborated writing instruction occurs in the Writing Student Book with projects carefully

coordinated to each week's instruction in the Reading & Language Student Book.

Across the levels, these projects address the writing forms required by state standards, including narrative, expository, and persuasive writing.

Elements of Effective Teaching Writing projects include research-based best practices. For example, the projects in the Levels C–E Student Books contain:

1. **Writing models** Each project begins with a student writing model which is analyzed for the elements of the writing represented. In addition, an extensive collection of professional writing models is provided for extension. Writing models extend beyond the introduction. As students explore writing traits, strategies, and use the writing process, models provide concrete samples that make abstract concepts clear and provide a source for evaluation and inspiration.
2. **Specific goals** Characteristics of the target writing form are explicitly examined and goals established for students to incorporate these characteristics in their work. Students learn and consistently utilize planning resources that focus attention on the form, topic, audience, purpose, and writing process. Through the use of this clear and consistent organizer, striving writers learn how to focus and structure their work and stay on track as they compose.
3. **Strategy instruction** Each writing project includes explicit, intensive instruction in strategies for improving student writing, such as using transitions, establishing a central idea, choosing and using precise words and sentences, writing strong introductions and conclusions, and more. By engaging students in extensive strategy instruction with shorter writing assignments, *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* builds skills and confidence in the craft of writing and then provides an authentic opportunity to apply learning in engaging projects.
4. **Summarizing** Summarizing is a key strategy taught throughout the levels of *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*. In addition to writing summaries as part of reading instruction, a writing project at each level focuses on writing a summary. As noted above, clear and explicit instruction in strategies and extensive use of student models support instruction in this critical element of literacy.
5. **Collaborative writing** Partner and group writing activities are incorporated in teaching routines that

clarify their purposes and show students how to build their collaboration skills. A range of cooperative learning structures provide support for collaboration and clear management and grouping strategies. There's a craft to weaving in this collaboration during the writing process. One way not to do it is to say, "Get a partner and give each other feedback," without teaching students how. The importance of explicit instruction mentioned above is not just about the writing part of the process, but for all of the steps throughout. There are partner and group writing activities and peer response activities throughout the Writing Student Books, broken down into short, concrete tasks so that students can build their collaboration skills.

- 6. Sentence combining** As students extend their writing from simple sentences to more complex linguistic structures, sentence combining is used as a vehicle for building and revising phrases and paragraphs.
- 7. Idea generation and prewriting** Early in the program, students receive extensive instruction in the techniques and benefits of prewriting. These concepts are reinforced and extended through every project that follows. *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes a rich array of graphic organizers and student models of idea generation and prewriting to bring these concepts to life.
- 8. Process writing** The writing process is taught in explicit detail at the beginning of each level. The

stages of the writing process are reinforced and extended through all writing projects in the program. As they learn and apply the writing process, students study models that show works in progress and are provided with clear and extensive opportunities to follow the steps in the *Writer's Workout* activities. At the end of each step in the writing process, students are prompted to reflect on their work, focusing on the goals of the project and the particular stage of the writing process. This ongoing self-analysis builds habits of reflective writing and promotes metacognition. In addition, regular Check Progress features help teachers monitor student progress so students are well prepared before moving to a new stage of the writing process.

- 9. Writing for content learning** *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* includes many opportunities for students to write about content topics they are exploring in the unit literature. In addition, the program provides explicit instruction in the research process and how to use a variety of information resources.

Writing Traits Beginning at Level C, writing projects in *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* include robust instruction in writing traits. Each project targets one trait, such as Organization, which is taught using the direct instruction model. Students use the writing trait rubric to discuss and analyze the treatment of the trait in writing samples. They then critique the application of

Lesson 11W
PERSONAL NARRATIVE: PREWRITE

OBJECTIVES
Vocabulary
• Use Academic Vocabulary: *specific*
Writing
• Writing Process (Prewriting): Collect Ideas, Choose and Narrow a Topic, Gather Details

PREVIEW AND PLAN

Model How to Choose a Topic
Study the Sample Topic Chart. Read aloud the chart above the chart. Then describe how Josh chose a topic. Say: First he brainstormed ideas and read them in a class. Read the ideas in the left column of the chart. Introduce the second column. Display the following and say: To come up with key points, most writers ask themselves questions like these:

Questions for Choosing a Topic	Answers
• What are you interested in?	• I like to read.
• What do you know about it?	• I know a lot about it.
• How do you feel about it?	• I love it.

Read aloud the items in the second column. Point out how they relate to the above questions. Explain: After brainstorming, evaluate your ideas and choose a topic. Chorusly read column 2. For each point, ask students to give a thumbs up (good) or a thumbs down (bad). Assign a class volunteer to keep score. When you are finished, have the volunteer share the results.

Choose a Topic
Writer's Workout, pp. 67–68 Have students form pairs or triads and make their own topic charts. Partners can evaluate their ideas by asking each other the Questions for Choosing a Topic above. Students should then circle their topic.

• If students struggle with generating ideas, review the Collecting Ideas lesson on pp. 48W–51W.

PREWRITE

Model How to Narrow a Topic
Study the Diagram. Chorusly read the first paragraph on p. 123W. Use the diagram to model how Josh narrowed his topic. Start with the top section of the diagram. Ask: How long would your writing need to be to cover this topic? (very long; bad) Would a personal narrative for your classmates be the right form and audience for this topic? (no)

Repeat for each section. For the last section, say: Like in comics, this topic zooms in. It focuses on one event, one day, one person. When you narrow your topic, it is easier to get ideas down and meet your goals.

Narrow Your Topic
Writer's Workout, pp. 67–68 Have students return to their pairs or triads to narrow their topics.

• If students have problems narrowing a topic, use the Writing Plan. Ask: What will your audience want to know about? What is your purpose for writing?

Update the Writing Plan Have students add the topic to their Writing Plan. (see p. 110WV)

Model How to Gather Details
Study the Five-Senses Diagram. Have a volunteer read the paragraph. Point to the word *specific*.

• **Academic Vocabulary** Remind students: Something *specific* is the opposite of something general. If I say, "People come to help," I am using general words. But if I say, "Five firefighters came to move away big pieces of concrete," I am being specific.

Then explain: This organizer helps you think of and record *specific* details. Notice how the first column includes the five senses. Include details for each sense to help your reader understand and enjoy your narrative.

Use gestures as you read and point to each row. For example, for the first row, put your hands over your eyes and say: *Look*. Put your hand next to your ear and say: *Listen*. Repeat for the remaining rows.

Gather Details
Writer's Workout, pp. 67–68 Tell students to gather details in the Five-Senses Diagram. Have them work with new pairs or triads. A fresh audience will promote description.

Collecting Sensory Details
Use the **Multi-Level Strategies** to help students collect specific details and attach language to them.

DIFFERENTIATE INSTRUCTION

Building Toward Independence
Lessons 11W–15W are written to support you in teaching, modeling, and guiding students through the steps of the writing process, including guiding the use of the **Writer's Workout**. Adjust the levels of support to help students become independent writers. See PD2–PD3.

More Support
For students who need more supports, follow this lesson, stopping after each step to think aloud as you write a personal narrative and have students contribute to the work. Then guide the use of the **Writer's Workout** as a class.

Less Support
For students who are moving toward independent writing, analyze the prompt and review the organizer as a group. Then encourage students to complete the **Writer's Workout** independently, using the checklists and supports. Check progress frequently to ensure success.

MULTI-LEVEL STRATEGIES

Prewriting Support: Collect Sensory Details

Beginning
Students might express details through drawings or individual words. For drawings, ask with students and supply labels for the pictures. Stretch words into phrases that students can employ in their writing. For example, if a student writes about "I saw," expand on: "I saw broken glass everywhere."

Intermediate
Before individuals complete their diagrams, have groups brainstorm and list sensory adjectives, such as:
bitter broken dark hard rough
blinking borisy dizzy rotten sharp

Have students incorporate sensory adjectives to describe the main details they write in their diagrams.

Advanced
Have partners with similar topics work together. Each partner collects sensory words and phrases on their own. Then they exchange diagrams and come up with suggestions for enriching the sensory language in their partner's diagram.

1234W Write About Your Life

Personal Narratives: Prewrite 1235W

Lessons allow teachers to adjust levels of support to meet their students' varied writing abilities.

the trait in four differentiated student essays on the same topic, analyzing how to raise the score of each essay from a 1 to a 2, or a 2 to a 3, etc.

Differentiated Instruction Lessons are designed to help teachers deal with the diversity of language levels and writing proficiency that may exist in the classroom.

For example, each writing application follows a gradual release model in which more and more responsibility is turned over to students. For each stage of the writing process, teachers model the step, and students then carry out the step in the *Writer's Workout* while the teacher provides guidance and support.

Each application also advises teachers on how to differentiate instruction further (see the box titled “Differentiate Instruction” in the pictured TE lesson).

For example:

- If students need more support, the lesson directs teachers to move from the modeling to carrying out the writing step as he or she thinks aloud to create the work, inviting participation from students. This structured practice provides the bridge to the guided practice that students do next in the *Writer's Workout*.
- If students need less support, they can work more independently in the *Writer's Workout* using the checklist and rubric that tie to the writing project.

These approaches help students build toward independence, moving from an “almost” stage to an “I got it” stage.

For further differentiation, lessons include:

- Strategies to help students build banks of personal topics
- Multi-Level Strategies to help teachers adjust the writing lesson so that students at all language levels can participate
- Academic Language Frames that support students in learning academic language and expressing their ideas about writing concepts
- Specific guidance to the teacher in providing immediate corrective feedback

Conclusion

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content approaches writing with all the elements of effective teaching. It involves students in studying and trying out the traits of good writing, learning writing strategies, and engaging in writing applications that will grow their writing proficiency. Lessons are set up for collaboration and differentiation so that teachers can meet the needs of their students regardless of their language levels and writing proficiencies.

Bibliography

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Gretchen Bernabei

Northside Independent School
District, San Antonio, TX

Ms. Bernabei's teaching career spans more than twenty-five years. She most recently taught high school English in San Antonio, Texas, where she was named Educator of the Year.