2. Six Principles for Teaching Writing

In this article in *American Educator*, Judith Hochman (The Writing Revolution) and Natalie Wexler (an education journalist) report that on national tests, only 25 percent of U.S. students are writing at the proficient level. This is a problem, they say, since expository writing “is essential for success in school and the workplace. Students who can’t write at a competent level struggle in college. With the advent of e-mail and the Internet, an increasing number of jobs require solid writing skills… No matter what path students choose in life, the ability to communicate their thoughts in writing in a way that others can easily understand is crucial.”

How did we get to this sad state of affairs? Hochman and Wexler blame a mindset about how writing should be taught – the idea that if students read enough, they’ll pick up writing skills by osmosis, and that teaching grammar and syntax will improve students’ prose. “But writing is the hardest thing we ask students to do,” they say, “and the evidence is clear that very few students become good writers on their own. Many students – even at the college level – have difficulty constructing a coherent sentence, let alone a fluid, cohesive essay.” Teachers have been told to show their students models of good writing and have them emulate them, or describe the elements of a good paragraph or essay. “But for many students, that’s not enough,” say Hoffman and Wexler. “For them, the techniques of good writing are a secret code they just can’t crack.”

The solution, they say, is to teach writing systematically from K to 12 and not let students’ problems pile up to the point where middle- and high-school teachers are confronted by “page after page of incoherent, error-riddled writing” and don’t know where to begin. Writing instruction needs to be broken down into manageable chunks that students practice repeatedly, at the same time as they are learning content. For students to get better, say Hochman and Wexler, “they need a series of strategies that specifically target the skills they haven’t yet mastered, while building on the skills they already have, in a gradual, step-by-step process. They also need clear, direct feedback that helps them identify their mistakes and monitor their progress.”

The authors describe the woeful state of one student’s writing when she arrived at New Dorp High School on Staten Island in New York City. Asked to write an essay on Alexander the Great, she managed six simple sentences, one of which made no sense. An actual essay, the ninth grader said, “wasn’t going to happen. It was like, well, I got a sentence down. What now?” Teachers at New Dorp went to work implementing six principles of writing instruction, and by this special-needs student’s junior year, she was writing coherent essays, scoring well on state Regents exams, and planning to apply for college. Here are the principles (described in more detail in Hoffman’s and Wexler’s forthcoming book, *The Writing Revolution*, Jossey-Bass, August 2017):
• **Explicit instruction starting young** – Being a good reader is not enough to become a good writer; writing requires far more decisions. And students who can speak fluently don’t necessarily transfer that to coherent writing. Students need to be taught how the conventions of written language differ from those of spoken language, communicating with much more precision and clarity, anticipating what the reader needs to know and understand, and using punctuation and key words (*despite, although, for example, specifically*) to indicate nuances in meaning, connections, and breaks in the narrative. It’s also important that they avoid errors in spelling and grammar that will distract readers. All this needs to begin in the early elementary grades, and although it’s important that students enjoy writing and get to use it as a means of self-expression, there should be plenty of explicit instruction, practice, and feedback to hone skills.

• **Sentences as the building blocks** – “In many schools, the quantity of writing has long been valued over its quality,” say Hochman and Wexler. “The Common Core and other standards have only increased the pressure on teachers to assign essay-length writing. But if students haven’t learned how to write an effective sentence, that is where instruction needs to begin.” Students need to do plenty of sentence-level writing in which they explain, paraphrase, or summarize sophisticated content, use correct spelling and grammar, and get feedback on form and content. Then they can move on to paragraphs and essays.

• **Writing embedded in curriculum content** – To maximize the benefits of writing instruction, say Hochman and Wexler, teachers need to go beyond personal narrative assignments like arguing the pros and cons of school uniforms and speculating on what it’s like to be famous. “Having students write about topics unrelated to content represents a huge wasted opportunity to boost their learning,” they say. “Writing isn’t merely a skill; it’s also a powerful teaching tool.” Students should be asked to write about ancient Egypt, tornadoes and hurricanes, Jane Eyre, and other subjects they’re studying. And all teachers should see themselves as teachers of writing, even if it’s only a 5-15-minute do-now activity, check for understanding, or exit ticket.

• **Curriculum content as a driver of writing rigor** – Hochman and Wexler suggest writing activities that build writing skills and get students thinking deeply about subject matter. One sentence-level exercise is for students to complete a sentence stem adding *because, but, and so*. Here are examples from three subject areas at different grade levels:
  - Rocket learned to read *because*/*but*/*so_________________________________.
  - Fractions are like decimals *because*/*but*/*so______________________________.
  - Aerobic respiration is similar to anaerobic respiration *because*/*but*/*so______________.

“No matter what content you use with these kinds of activities,” say the authors, “the specificity of the prompts makes them far more powerful than an open-ended question such as, ‘Why did Rocket learn to read?’” In a science class, students at New Dorp High School were asked to write
three sentences about hydrogen and oxygen, starting with *Although, Unless,* and *If.* Here’s what one student came up with:

- *Although* hydrogen is explosive and oxygen supports combustion, a compound of them puts out fires.
- *Unless* hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they are explosive and dangerous.
- *If* hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they lose their original properties of being explosive and supporting combustion.

This was the student who was unable to write more than six simple sentences as a ninth grader.

*• Grammar taught in the context of writing* – “Research has consistently found that teaching grammar rules in isolation doesn’t work,” say Hochman and Wexler. For many students, learning parts of speech and diagramming sentences just adds to the confusion, takes up valuable cognitive real estate, and doesn’t carry over to their own writing. “But that doesn’t mean teachers can’t, or shouldn’t, teach grammar,” continue the authors. “What does work is to teach writing conventions and grammar in the context of students’ own writing.” One particularly helpful exercise is sentence combining, which students find engaging and gets at many of the same skills as dry grammar instruction.

*• Planning and revising* – “Although experienced writers may be able to turn out a well-developed paragraph or essay on the fly,” say Hochman and Wexler, “most of the students we work with find it overwhelming to organize their thoughts at the same time they’re choosing words and figuring out the best way to structure their sentences.” A planning template helps students think through the main idea or theme, the points they will make, and the order in which they will make them. This helps them think through what additional information they need, connect ideas or claims with relevant details or evidence, and avoid irrelevant information and repetition. Having jotted this outline, writing a first draft is quite straightforward. Then comes revising, which is where students apply what they’ve learned in sentence-level exercises to insert transition words, vary sentence structure, and use subordinating conjunctions, appositives, and other techniques so the writing flows and makes sense.