

Setting the Goal

Through experience, I have developed some different approaches to the way in which an effective writing program should be structured. The typical method is to assess the existing level of students and then move forward from that point. While it is important to identify the ability of individual students, it is not the key to creating successful writers.

The first step in organizing your writing program is to establish the ultimate goal of the writers in your class. What should the typical fourth, or fifth, or eighth grade paper look like at the end of the school year? What is a reasonable and attainable level of success for your grade? What should your average student be able to write, and what should the variation be between the low-end, average, and high-end student's paper?

If we do not establish the fundamental goal of where we want our writers to be, we will never be able to accurately measure their level of success. We often become so mired in teaching isolated skills of how to punctuate, capitalize, structure sentences, and enrich vocabulary that we never get to the end product.

When primary teachers teach young students to read, there are letter sounds to teach, blends, diphthongs and the general phonetic rules. These sounds become words which eventually become phrases, and the phrases become sentences. With practice, the sentences become paragraphs. Since this is the fundamental way we teach reading, it would follow that teaching writing should be the same.

Teaching writing is not like teaching reading. Students do not learn to write from the word to the phrase to the sentence to the paragraph to the story; they must learn from the multi-paragraph essay or story and work back through the basic components. The primary goal of their practice should not focus on writing individual sentences or paragraphs; rather, they need practice from the start at writing lengthy compositions. For third graders, this translates to three and four paragraph essays or reports and multi-page stories. For ninth graders this means multi-paragraph essays with well-developed introductions and conclusions and stories with plot, theme, and character development. Writing is based on whole thoughts and schemes.

I believe the main reason students complete the first paragraph of an assignment and then say, "That's all I can think of," is that we have taught them, since the second grade, that a paragraph is a complete thought. A paragraph is an "isolated" thought that needs connection to other paragraphs in order to be complete.

When we begin to teach students to start thinking in terms of multiple reasons why, different approaches to, and various possible outcomes, we are beginning the mental organizational process which enables students to become effective writers. It is at this point that they begin thinking about two or three (or more) approaches, angles, or outcomes. From this, they learn to support and give examples, and this is what writing is all about.

My students can't even put a sentence together. How do you expect them to write multiple paragraph essays or stories?

We have to look at the big picture. When students write sentences, they are not thinking the same way that they do when they write essays. We must start the training early to have them think in these big “chunks.” For example, how often have you had your students write a story and watch as they immediately put pencil to paper and start writing. They do not plan, and they do not know where the story is going. At the beginning of each school year, I receive papers that are rambling, pointless, and impossible to correct because the entire concept of what they have written is fundamentally flawed.

If we ask our students to write about why they like hats, we want to train them from the start to think of multiple reasons. When students begin thinking in this way, the overall cohesion of the writing, the paragraph organization, and the purpose of the paper is clear from the start. With a unified whole, the teacher can begin to refine the parts.

I would much prefer to get an organized essay or story with horrible mechanics and weak wordings than a mechanically correct, thesaurus-filled composition which had absolutely no organizational structure. In the latter, there is no foundation—there is nothing to save.

When you write a letter, do you first worry about mechanics and sentence structure or the concept of what you're going to say? This is how we must teach our students to approach their writing.

In this long answer to the original question, your kids may have great difficulty putting sentences together, but they can organize their thoughts. This will give them a purpose to learn the mechanics and other skills they need to complete a writing assignment. Think of

the process of writing as if it were a house. Until there is a vision of how the finished product will look, learning to nail, wire, plumb, paint, and cut are random skills—important, but leading nowhere on their own.

If my students write three (or five) paragraph reports, the mechanics (spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage) will be atrocious. Do you expect me to spend days correcting them?

I wish I could say, “Oh, don’t worry, correcting is easy!” I’m a writing teacher, and I know how long it takes to correct papers. I spend many long hours on this tedious task. There are numerous ways to ease or simplify this burden which I share in the closing chapter. One aspect of correcting that you need keep in the back of your mind is that you are a teacher, not an editor. A second consideration is that students can be easily overwhelmed by your corrections.

Think back to the fundamental question of this chapter: “What do you want your students to be able to write at the end of this school year?” They are not going to accomplish this in one assignment. For each student we need to have a plan, or hierarchy, of how they will attain a desired level. If a student cannot write neatly, cannot spell, cannot correctly punctuate sentences, cannot remember to indent paragraphs, uses weak vocabulary, and is three days late in handing in his or her paper, he or she faces some major hurdles. Our job is to help him or her get over one hurdle at a time. When we correct a paper with so many flaws, it is like stacking all of the hurdles on top of one another. The student will run into them or walk away without hope.

How long does it take to correct these papers?

The task becomes manageable when you begin to correct what the student can handle. In the case given above, I would look at sentences and neatness—only. The goal on the rewrite of that paper or the next paper written by that student is to be absolutely certain that sentence structure and neatness are improved. Once you have focused the student, he now has a manageable and measurable task.

Identifying this hierarchy of skills and enabling all teachers to pinpoint the priorities of what any individual student needs to improve upon is the purpose of this book.

What is the point of having my students write pages of a story that goes on and on when the first paragraph alone is 200 words and has no periods?

I have already answered half of this question; but basically, students are going to learn writing in a very different way. When we approach something differently, it takes time to do it well. Your third or fourth graders will have great difficulty with this “whole story” concept, but if we do not get them started in these early grades, then fifth and sixth graders will have the same amount of difficulty when it is first presented to them.

I am thoroughly convinced that the reason high school students struggle so much with writing is that they simply have never had sufficient practice to master this whole paper approach. They are still practicing the habit of connecting one sentence to the next, rather than analyzing the whole paper.

We must teach this essential skill as early as possible, and

then provide practice at mastering specifics at grade- appropriate levels.

Is this one of those writing programs that is so concerned about harming the child's creativity (inner self) that everything and anything they write is acceptable?

Nothing could be further from the truth. As a classroom teacher, I am the most fussy, meticulous, and demanding person you will ever meet; yet, at the same time, I am probably as relaxed and fun-loving with my students as any teacher you will find. Since I clearly know my desired outcome and have identified the steps to get there, the pressure is off, and I can enjoy my job.

Every student must learn to punctuate properly, to spell well or to find a method to eliminate spelling errors, to know and apply capitalization rules, to select and use sophisticated vocabulary, to write neatly or type, to organize paragraphs properly, to vary sentence length and structure, and to be responsible to turn in work on time.

At each grade level a student can attain a level of success. When students do reach this proficiency, there is no need to create a false sense of self-worth by accepting or praising mediocrity. Students who know “they can” develop a sense of “inner praise.” I know this is true because I see it in my students’ eyes each year. My experience is that the closer they get to grade level mastery, the more confident and creative they become.

We still must create the “goal paper,” but before we discuss that, we need to establish ground level or as I prefer to call it, the bottom of the quicksand.

If we are going to adopt this “whole paper” approach, students must be able to spell basic words and at least understand the concept that words come together to make sentences. A sentence explains a basic thought. Typically, most students achieve this basic understanding somewhere between the end of first and the middle of third grade. Of course, there are exceptions.

Students must have knowledge of general penmanship and the organization of paragraphs. They need not necessarily know that a paragraph reflects a unified thought, but they must know the concept that paragraphs divide a longer bit of writing into “subgroups.”

Understanding what a sentence is and that a paragraph is a part of a whole are pretty basic concepts. Most third or fourth graders know this and are therefore ready to begin writing. Do not assume that since they cannot write in complete sentences, cannot spell all the words they are writing, and do not have a rich vocabulary that they cannot begin a writing program. They are ready.

How does one go about creating an end product or goal?

As an eighth grade writing teacher for many years, I have a clear concept in my mind as to how a quality paper, written by a fourteen year old, should look. It is not enough, however, to simply know it when I see it; I need to describe it, to put it into words, and to break it down into fundamental parts. It almost becomes a formula. The more clear I am in my mind of the component parts, the better I will be at explaining this to my students. The following is a list of ingredients:

The Organizational Structure

- » The paper should be of multiple-paragraph length, preferably four or more paragraphs, with a clear opening and closing paragraph.
- » The opening paragraph must begin with at least three sentences which create interest or intrigue for the reader. There are a number of ways to accomplish this.
- » The last (or second to the last) sentences of the opening paragraph must introduce the topic of the essay (as in a thesis) but must not give any information about the topic. The topic(s) should simply be stated within one sentence.
- » Body paragraphs must be of similar length and develop different aspects of the thesis. They must give at least one or two supporting examples.
- » The closing paragraph must link or connect to either the title or the way in which interest was created in the opening paragraph. The thesis or purpose must be restated in different words, and there must be a “twist” or final statement which causes the reader to either nod with agreement or smile.
- » A clever or thought-provoking title should be included.

The Internal Structure

- » Sentences within each paragraph must switch between simple, compound, and complex sentences.
- » No two sentences may begin the same way within one paragraph, and at least two sentences in each paragraph should begin with a transition word or phrase.

- » No two paragraphs may begin with the same word or phrase.
- » The word “and” must not appear more than once in any sentence.
- » Each body paragraph should end with a sentence which brings the topic to a natural close. Transition statements between paragraphs must start, but never end a preceding paragraph.
- » There should be a transitional sentence or two between the opening three sentences of interest and the thesis or purpose statement.

Vocabulary

- » Highly descriptive adjectives, adverbs or verbs should not be repeated within a paragraph.
- » Each sentence should contain a blend of single and multi-syllable words.
- » Vocabulary should stretch for the perfect word but should not over-stretch (thesaurusitis).
- » Verb tense should be consistently past tense.

Mechanics

- » Spelling, punctuation, usage, and capitalization should be near perfect with no more than three to five mechanics errors in the entire paper.

Personal Traits

- » The interest in the opening, the examples in the body, and the twist at the end should be creative and unique to the writer.
- » The arguments and conviction of the paper must show depth, sophistication, or thought. The writer must avoid a superficial presentation.
- » The entire essay must be unified around the theme of the thesis.

Basic Omissions

- » Avoid slang.
- » Never refer to your essay (in this paragraph, etc.).

There are probably some requirements which may have raised some eyebrows. Please keep in mind that this is my criteria for my eighth graders in my classroom. It is not a recommendation for every eighth grade teacher. We must each decide the level of expectation for the children with whom we work.

Realistically, unless a teacher has many years of experience teaching writing, the development of the “goal paper” is a challenging process. I am not suggesting that you attempt to create your goals at this point. As the chapters unfold, continue to make mental notes, and by the time all the information is presented, I believe you will be ready to define your own “goal paper.”

My approach to teaching writing ascribes to the philosophy that structure creates freedom. I believe that when students understand the structure, parameters, and formula of a complete essay or

composition, they can blossom as creative writers.

In my class, I compare a good writer to a good artist. Anyone can put a brush to a canvas, but until an artist learns to mix and blend color, masters brush strokes, uses light, understands the mathematics of proportion, knows the secret of what must be painted first, and knows when to stop painting, he or she will never be a complete or accomplished artist.

There is a hierarchy of skills in art and writing. The sooner a student learns to work within this hierarchy, the more accomplished his or her writing will be.