

# Inside Writing<sup>®</sup>

## Research Base

### Introduction

Learning to write is a process that is often intimidating to students who fear that their lack of skill will be discovered when they put pen to paper. Writing is also a lifelong skill that every student needs to communicate effectively. Through scaffolded writing instruction, teachers help their students to write at their own level while moving them to the next stage of their development as writers. Teachers guide students as they develop questions, search for answers and learn to articulate their thoughts and observations (Dyson & Freedman, 2003, p. 967). Because writing is a complex act that requires students to orchestrate many skills, teachers need to observe their students' processes and help struggling writers overcome their specific difficulties. *Inside Writing* can serve as the core of a writing program, a supplement to an existing writing program, an alternative for struggling writers, a special-needs resource, a test-prep program, and as a resource for cross-curricular planning.

### Scaffolding writing instruction helps struggling writers become fluent, confident writers.

Struggling writers often have poor organizational skills, become easily frustrated, and believe that people who are good writers are lucky and do not have to work towards writing well (Wong, 1995). Explicitly teaching each step in the writing process helps struggling writers see that good writing is the result of effort and can be improved with practice. *Inside Writing* offers two week units on writing sentences, paragraphs, narratives, descriptive writing, expository essays, persuasive essays, responses to literature, research reports, and letters that help students learn the steps in the writing process as they are applied to specific forms of writing. Understanding that the writing process steps are recursive, students visit and revisit the steps within each writing task.

In a review of studies on effective writing instruction for struggling writers and students with language learning disabilities, Graham & Harris (2002) identified "frequent writing in a supportive, collaborative, and motivating environment, where students are encouraged to direct and assess their own efforts, and the skills and processes underlying effective writing are modeled and directly taught by the teacher" as keys to teaching struggling writers. *Inside Writing* includes numerous models of student writing and highly-scaffolded, structured writing lessons that break down the writing process into manageable pieces. Students are better able to stay organized because they do all of their work in the *Inside Writing* workbook that also doubles as a writing portfolio. Optional extension activities with cross-curricular thematic units (with ideas for science, music, speech, art, and more) and activities for multiple intelligences can also give struggling writers additional ways to become involved in the writing process.

### If teachers are to effectively teach the writing process approach they need support materials to guide instruction.

"Although the terminology related to the writing process—often referred to as process writing—may vary slightly among states, the overall perception of how the process functions remain steadfast. States regard prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing as the essential features of the process and stress that the process itself is recursive" (Woodward, 1999, p. 83). Although the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and most state standards have adopted the process writing approach as the recommended way of teaching writing, many teachers struggle with implementing a process-writing approach in their classrooms. In Kathleen and James Strickland's 2002 book, *Engaged in Learning: Teaching English 6-12*, they report that the "teaching of writing in American schools is still stuck in

a traditional mode focused on the alignment of a completed theme or essay with what is considered standard, edited English. This traditional method of teaching writing focuses on the product—the finished piece, the composition, fixated with the format of the essay and research paper, and obsessed with polite usage and correct style” (79).

This conflict of process approach to writing and traditional approach to writing lies within the teachers who teach writing. Many teachers who teach writing are not writers and struggle with the process approach to writing. *Inside Writing* gives teachers a lesson plan to help them as well as their students see how writing develops through a process that benefits both experienced writing teachers and teachers new to process writing. *Inside Writing* provides support materials and examples of student writing that can provide a bridge between research in best practice and implementation in the classroom.

### **Teaching writing as a process demystifies the magic of writing (and the fear of writing) and makes it more attainable for all students.**

*Inside Writing* illustrates to both student writers and their teachers the different stages/steps in the writing process with student models and activities for each step of the process. Britton’s 1975 model suggests that learning to write is a process of learning an increasingly diverse array of uses of language in general and writing in particular. The writing process is a recursive cycle of generating ideas, drafting, revising, editing and sharing (Emig, 1971) that the writer uses to create a product.

*Inside Writing* includes nine writing units per grade level (grades 4-10) focusing on the process approach to writing and highlighting strategies and techniques that will aid students to be more successful in writing. Each unit focuses on a specific genre to illustrate how student writers can develop a process piece through prewriting, drafting, revising and editing activities appropriate for each grade level. The units include the smallest unit of writing such as sentences, paragraphs, and letters as well as longer, more sophisticated writing such as narratives, descriptions, expository essays, persuasive essays, responses to literature, and research reports. Each unit provides practical strategies and activities that writers can use for that particular unit but also transfer to other writing activities.

How a student writer chooses his or her subject during prewriting plays a critical role in classroom-writing workshops. When student writers are encouraged to discover what they want to write about as opposed to the teacher assigning a topic, they are more motivated to write. Giving student writers this powerful responsibility allows them to write about what is important to them or what they know about—just like real writers. Teachers can suggest or lead students to particular topics, but students produce the best writing when the authors are passionate about their subject (Graves, 1994). *Inside Writing* gives students activities that show them how to select topics within a certain genre. This strategy of selecting the right topic is critical for the writer because without interest, a desire to investigate, or some background on the topic, the writing will lack any depth. In addition to finding or selecting a topic, *Inside Writing* units demonstrate how a writer can organize their thoughts and gather details to assist in writing their first draft.

The craft of writing the first draft (*drafting*) is often the most difficult for students. Knowing how to begin and deciding on the organization of the information can paralyze struggling or inexperienced writers. Graphic organizers and samples of student writing (included in *Inside Writing*) are the best tools for any writer to begin their process. *Inside Writing* units provide students with key concepts on writing a powerful lead, the importance of details, support information, and graceful endings. Each lesson includes “Drafting Tips” that teachers and students can employ to complete their drafts.

Student writers often do not revise their writing because they do not know the difference between revising and editing, nor do they have any concrete skills that they can apply to their writing. Revision is the process of improving the ideas, organization, and voice in a piece of writing. The *Inside Writing* units provide skill-building activities appropriate for each type of genre (i.e. using linking words and phrases in a persuasive essay), guidelines for peer responding, a revision

checklist, and “Revising Tips” to help students understand the difference between revising and editing and give them tools to help guide them through the revision process.

Student writers often feel more comfortable editing their writing because many can check for miss-spelled words and incorrect or missing punctuation with ease. Students who are English language learners (ELLs) or who struggle with academic English may need extra help editing their work. Teachers often spend a great deal of time teaching conventions with worksheets in hopes that students will make the transfer to their own writing. By imbedding skill-building activities and editing checklists in the writing units, *Inside Writing* helps students make the connection between skills practice and their own writing and encourages students to transfer that skill to their own writing. *Inside Writing Skills* activities are available for more skill practice for students who struggle with a particular skill and the Teacher’s Guide includes guidance on skills that ELL students struggle with most to help guide instruction.

## Focused Mini Lessons

Students need instruction on the front lines of their writing, and they need a structure to help them consciously apply these skills (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). *Inside Writing* offers teachers’ skill practice to help their students in learning and practicing a particular convention of the language through mini lessons for the nine types of writings required in most language art curriculums.

Mini lessons are short, focused language lessons that include defining the skill, showing models of the skill and following up with practice of the skill. The practice can come in the form of a worksheet or activities using students’ own writing. Mini lessons can be planned strategy lessons, where the teacher wants to teach a particular skill that will enhance the students’ writing or a perceived need of the skill in the students’ writing. The teacher needs to be aware of the strengths and short-comings of their students’ writing.

An impromptu mini lesson is the “teachable moment” during a writing lesson where many students are struggling with the same skill. The teacher can use this highly motivated time to demonstrate to students how to use a new skill in their writing. This lesson is often prompted by students and their need to know how to write or use a skill.

The review mini lesson, or the repeated mini lesson, is the same lesson previously taught but used to scaffold a new skill and to review one already taught (Robb, 2001). The repeated mini lesson is critical because students learn at different rates and at different times but also out of need. If the connection is made to their own writing, different mini lessons will be more important to some students’ writing at different times. The key is to teach students the skill not in isolation but in conjunction with their writing, demonstrating how scaffolding one skill into another, such as the use of action verbs, can help students improve their writing; to show rather than to tell. Over time mini lessons need to be repeated until they are internalized by the student writer so they become part of their writing process.

## Assessment: Six Traits of Effective Writing

“Good assessments...guide and enhance instruction. Good assessment is never about entrapment of students (or teachers, for that matter); it’s about giving students an opportunity to show what they *can* do. It’s also about giving teachers an instructional spark. It all begins with—in fact, almost hinges upon—solid sound, clear criteria. Without that piece of the puzzle, the whole puzzle never comes together” (Spandel, 2001, p. 19).

The assessment rubrics included in the *Inside Writing* units are based on the six traits of effective writing (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence variety, and conventions). The traits of effective writing give students and teachers a common language, which can be both an effective instructional and assessment tool. Criteria and traits are often confused and interchanged. Traits are characteristics of writing and criteria is the language we use to define how those traits look at various levels—beginning, developing, proficient—along with a continuum of performance.

To best teach the traits, according to Vicki Spandel, and for students to understand their functions, teachers should define each of the traits, read examples from literature that best illustrate that particular trait, have students engage in a writing activity that demonstrates the particular trait, and revise a student writing sample focusing on one particular trait.

“Rubrics can define the quality. They can give students the criteria and terminology to respond to their own and others’ work. With rubrics, students can use the criteria to point to strengths and recognize specific needs of their own...” (Strickland, 1998). Rubrics can be used during the writing process (as an excellent revision checklist—“What do writers need to do to make their writing successful?”—and as an evaluation tool at the conclusion of the process. Students and teachers alike need to view evaluation (the rubric) as part of the learning process and to build on the strengths of one piece of writing into their next writing. Focusing upon the 6-traits in the evaluation of their own writing helps students develop the metacognitive and self-assessment skills they need to become strong writers.

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