

Study Guide



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10 Things EVERY WRITER Needs to Know

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SUMMARY

In this lively and practical book, author Jeff Anderson shows teachers how to guide young adolescents as they learn the essential components of good writing. Anderson focuses on ten aspects—motion, models, focus, detail, form, frames, cohesion, energy, words, and clutter—and then shares strategies to embed these concepts throughout the writing process.



PROLOGUE What Writing Instruction Is and Isn't

What makes writing good and how can we develop the skills of young adolescent writers? In this opening section, Jeff shares his thoughts, which provide a framework for the rest of the book.

Quote to Ponder

Writing, like life, is an inside-out phenomenon. If our students aren't trusted to use their own knowledge, their own ability to discover, to find and trace ideas, then they will have difficulty taking a test on their own—for academic or work purposes (xi).

Suggested Activities

- Discuss your beliefs about what it means to “always serve the best interest of students.” Provide details about how well your teaching team or school is upholding these ideals. Without blaming anyone, share concerns you have about policies or practices that are misaligned with your best intentions. What could you do to adjust them?
- Prepare for the next study session by reading Chapter 1 and taking notes about topics you'd like to discuss.

CHAPTER 1 Motion: Getting and Keeping Writers Motivated

This chapter explains how teachers can cultivate a classroom community that values the cumulative process of writing, where thinking and discussing and drafting and revising are seen as tools to keep the words flowing.

Quote to ponder:

So go ahead and make big scrawls and mistakes. Use up lots of paper. Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism, while messes are the artist's true friend...we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here, and by extension, what we're supposed to be writing (Anne Lamott).

Suggested activities:

- With your teaching team or study group, take turns sharing your worst experience as a student of writing. How did it affect your motivation to write? What form of feedback did you receive from your teacher? Discuss how these negative impressions can help you frame more positive experiences for your students.
- Choose one or more of the power-writing activities that Jeff shares on pages 9-12 to use with your students. Discuss the results with your teaching team or study group.
- Use Figure 1.8 on page 21 to analyze your own writing assessment methods. Give yourself a “grade” that reflects Jeff’s tone of the positives outweighing the negatives. Considering that “self-reflection is an important part of motion,” how can you revise your approach to provide more meaningful feedback and assessment to student writers?

CHAPTER 2 Models: Using Mentor Texts

Learning from an accomplished practitioner is one of the best ways to acquire knowledge. In this chapter, Jeff discusses the importance of modeling good writing for students, using mentor texts, and applying the scientific method to close reading.

Quote to ponder:

To learn, we don't always need a curriculum or a test. Sometimes we just watch and learn (23).

Suggested activities:

- With your colleagues or in your own writing journal, reflect on skills that you have developed through modeling. Consider, as Jeff did when learning how to cook from his mother (see pages 23-24), the many ways that a novice gains proficiency. Discuss the importance of exposure, imitation, apprenticeship, experimentation, and feedback.
- In this chapter, Jeff makes an unusual but effective link between the scientific method and modeling good writing. Review Figure 2.2, with a special focus on the last column, The Scientific Method for Studying Models. Think back to a recent unit of study focusing on writing. How well did you integrate the five stages—notice, interact, name, experiment, and reflect—into your lessons? How could you adjust going forward?
- Begin collecting effective models of writing in different genres and ask your colleagues (don't overlook librarians) for other suggestions.

CHAPTER 3 Focus: Narrowing the Scope

Teachers often encourage students to find a focus for their writing, but they may not always explicitly teach them how to do so. In this chapter, Jeff shares effective lessons that show students how to narrow the scope of their topics and then maintain that focus throughout their writing.

Quote to ponder:

When we attempt to write about everything, the task becomes an endless, fuzzy mess that swerves out of control (42).

Suggested activities:

- Review the ladder activities that Jeff shares on pages 46-50 to “take a big fat idea and slenderize it.” Using the ladder or a similar method of framing the concept, model for your students how to narrow the scope of a topic. Next, engage students in a group process to practice the same method, using another general topic. Finally, ask them to work independently as they try the technique with a writing or research topic they care about.
- Using Figure 3.7 as a guide, engage your students in the fun freewriting and reflection process of finding focus through looping.

CHAPTER 4 Detail: Selecting the Concrete and Necessary

“Show, don’t tell,” is one of the axioms of good writing instruction, but teaching students to tease out the best details of an experience to make their text more vivid takes practice. In this chapter, Jeff offers some effective strategies to get students thinking, talking, and writing about nuances that will infuse their work with rich and revealing details.

Quote to ponder:

Details are selected, not sprayed (78).

Suggested activities:

- Ask students to collect samples of fascinating details or “not-what-everybody-else-would-notice” details (69) in articles, books, advertisements, or other forms to share with the class. Analyze the samples with students to mine for effective detail-writing techniques. Create a series of anchor charts to display in the classroom so students can refer to these strategies during independent writing.
- Take your class outside the classroom on the school grounds, in the library, or at a nearby park. Randomly distribute cards with one of the five senses listed and ask them to notice their surroundings for five quiet minutes, taking occasional notes about what they hear, see, taste, touch, or smell. Then, give them five minutes to tell a partner what they observed. Finally, ask them to choose a detail to explore through a quick-writing activity.

CHAPTER 5 Form: Organizing and Structuring Ideas

To help students understand the various forms that writers use to shape and organize their writing, Jeff offers rich lessons that encourage them to take apart the texts they read and then put them back together with their own unique style.

Quote to ponder:

In truth, form is formative. It's an ever-refining aspect of writing. With form's structure and malleability, writers are able to fit their particular purpose for a particular audience, in a particular pattern (80).

Suggested activities:

- On page 80, Jeff asks: “So what do young writers need to know about form?” Review Figure 5.1 with your colleagues and discuss how well the many forms are represented in your grade-level curriculum and in your own lessons. Take turns sharing the types you are most comfortable teaching and which give you the most trouble. Offer successful instructional strategies and lessons in the first case and ask for help with the latter.
- In this chapter, Jeff shares a mnemonic, DEAN, which he uses with students to help them remember the modes for making meaning. (See also Figures 5.9 and 5.10.) What other ways can you think of to help students understand the complexities of text structures?

CHAPTER 6 Frames: Exploring Introductions and Conclusions

Introductions and conclusions are the frames that provide a solid structure for good writing. From stacks of leads to combination platter conclusions, Jeff offers innovative lessons to teach and reinforce framing techniques for young writers.

Quote to ponder:

You'll also notice that much of what works for leads works for conclusions. Imagine that—a well-balanced frame (137).

Suggested activities:

- Ask students to return to their notes from the outside activity using their five senses (see Chapter 4). Working independently or with partners, they can choose some of the observed sensory details as fodder for writing strong leads and conclusions. Share examples with the class.
- In this chapter, Jeff describes twelve types of leads (sensory, hint, shocking, comparison, context, what it's not, list, question, thought, action, people, and dialogue) commonly used in writing and offers sample lessons that bring them to life for students. Choose a range of these types to share and practice with your students.
- With your colleagues, share mentor texts to use when teaching students how to write effective leads and conclusions.

CHAPTER 7 Cohesion: Unifying the Whole

Cohesion can be a challenging concept to teach young writers, as Jeff discovered when he set out to address requirements in his school district’s writing rubric. “Before I could teach cohesion, I had to define what writers do to achieve it,” he writes (146).

Quote to ponder:

Every choice we make weaves our ideas together for our reader, threading sentences, paragraphs, and overall structure into one unit (147).

Suggested activities:

- Review Figure 7.1 with your colleagues. This is Jeff’s reasoned and researched list of strategies for teaching cohesion in writing. Discuss questions, insights, and any concerns you have about the list. Consider how well your writing rubrics reflect these qualities of cohesion.
- To improve your understanding of cohesion—how to recognize it in good writing and how to teach it to young writers—use Figure 7.10 to analyze an excerpt or text passage used in your grade level, as Jeff does with *How to Read a French Fry: And Other Stories of Intriguing Kitchen Science*.

CHAPTER 8 Energy: Creating Rhythm and Style

Need some concrete ways to show students how to give their writing energy? In Chapter 8, Jeff starts off with ways to consider writing as performance and then focuses on sentence length, punctuation, rhythm, and style.

Quote to ponder:

The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart (Maya Angelou).

Suggested activities:

- At your next team meeting, ask each teacher to share a text passage that creates energy, personality, tone, and voice. Have a short discussion about what effects the writers used, what makes the text energetic, and how you might share the excerpts with your students.
- Start a notebook or a file folder to collect examples of energetic writing. In the notebook, use a two-column format so you can reflect on the features that make the writing lively.
- Have you ever read your own writing aloud to your students? Consider modeling the process of reading text aloud to find and improve rhythm and fluency. Use the bulleted list of questions that Jeff includes on page 197 to guide your students as they think about writing energetically.

CHAPTER 9 Words: Crafting Precise Diction

Selecting the best words to express an idea is the art of good writing. In this chapter, Jeff shares strategies for choosing words that “thrill, chill, and spill across the page” (221).

Quote to ponder:

If students don't have any notion of how to choose words wisely, how will they ever find the right words (203)?

Suggested activities:

- In Figure 9.1, Jeff shares five strategies to help students find the “just-right words” when revising their writing. Consider your own editing instruction in this context and determine if you need to expand or amend your practices.
- Building on the sensory words activities from Chapters 4 and 6, ask students to expand their thinking and writing using the lists in Figures 9.2 and 9.3. Create new lists for the senses not covered in the charts.

CHAPTER 10 Clutter: Deleting the Extraneous

Just as some people need professional organizers to help them de-clutter their homes, young writers often need coaching to learn how to polish their prose.

Quote to ponder:

Delete freely and often, but do it with a surgeon's scalpel, not an explorer's machete (240).

Suggested activities:

- With your students, craft an editing rubric that incorporates the components of clutter-free writing: appropriate focus, selective detail, cohesive message, ample energy, and just-right words. Using a mentor text or a sample of your own writing, model how to apply the rubric during the revision stage.
- Use the strategies in this chapter to develop a series of mini-lessons that will help your students revise their writing skillfully.

EPILOGUE What Stays?

“What we spend our energy and time on creates larger connections in students’ brains” (242). In this final chapter, Jeff shares his vision for having a positive, lasting impact in the lives of young adolescent writers.

Quote to ponder:

What forever rings am I leaving in my students? What attitudes am I etching? What do I emphasize? What do I quite literally co-construct in my students’ brains that will forever shape their interactions with the printed word and all that surrounds it (241)?

Suggested activities:

- Use chart paper to draw a cross section of an ancient tree. Based on your experiences in the classroom and the insights gained from this book, write down the “rings” you want to leave behind in your students’ brains. How will you work toward these goals in the next semester?
- For further study, check out some of Jeff’s other books. If you’re interested in learning more about revision, see *Revision Decisions: Talking Through Sentences and Beyond*, Jeff’s book with Deborah Dean. If you’re interested in grammar and editing, see *Everyday Editing: Inviting Students to Develop Skill and Craft in Writer’s Workshop* or *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer’s Workshop*.