Effective Writing Instruction

By Douglas Fisher
Writing is an excellent way for students to clarify their ideas and consolidate their knowledge. Assessing student compositions also provides teachers with information about what students do and do not understand (Frey & Fisher, 2007). Teachers should model processes and provide writing prompts constructed to ensure that students engage and think as they write. Unfortunately, many schools are content to simply have their students write without providing the intensive vocabulary and composition instruction, practice, and support necessary for students to become successful and articulate writers.

A systematic approach to writing instruction can increase students’ performance in both writing and reading. The gradual release of responsibility model is an effective way for developing students’ writing. This model stipulates that the teacher gradually moves from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task . . . to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211).

Using a gradual-release model requires that the teacher clearly establish the purpose of the lesson. Educators have known about the importance of establishing purpose for several decades (Hunter, 1976). A clearly articulated purpose focuses instruction, allows for assessment of outcomes, and provides students with an answer to the question “Why do we have to learn this?” It’s a critical component of quality teaching, yet one that is often neglected. In too many classrooms, students are left to intuit the purpose of the lesson. Simply said, establishing the purpose of the lesson facilitates student achievement (Marzano, 2009).

SRA FLEX Literacy provides specific learning targets and objectives for each lesson and project. These are labeled as Individual Outcomes, Project Team Outcomes, and Content-Area Outcomes. The table below shows the outcomes for one project within the Elementary System.

### Outcomes for Elementary System project “Sky Book.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Individual Outcomes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students show evidence of their understanding of constellations by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creating a Project Portfolio to collect and store project materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• developing Star Chart graphic organizers to support writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• using the writing process to develop an informative constellation wiki entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• learning and applying key academic vocabulary terms related to space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Project Team Outcomes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project teams show evidence of their understanding of constellations by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• researching three constellations to identify what they look like, when and where they can be seen, and stories people have invented about them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• plotting each constellation on a Star Chart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• presenting information about constellations that contains facts and details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• selecting appropriate media to support their presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Content-Area Outcomes</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By the end of the project, students will understand that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• constellations are patterns of stars visible in the sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• people throughout history have created stories about constellations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• visual displays and other media can support understanding of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• research information can be shared in a wiki</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers using gradual release of responsibility models regularly use modeling and demonstration to show students how a skill, strategy, or concept is used or applied (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2008). While often associated more closely with performance tasks like swinging a tennis racket or playing a musical instrument, modeling is equally effective for cognitive and metacognitive tasks. Modeling includes naming the task or strategy, explaining when it is used, and using analogies to link to new learning. The teacher then demonstrates the task or strategy, alerts learners about errors to avoid, and shows them how it is applied to check for accuracy. Modeling is often accompanied by a think aloud procedure (Davey, 1983) to further expose the decisions made by an expert as he or she processes information. For this reason, the think aloud consistently contains “I” statements to invite the learner into the mind of the teacher.

For example, in SRA FLEX Literacy’s digital rotation, each new skill is introduced through a gradual-release direct instruction model. The first time a student is introduced to a skill, basic information about the skill and its applications are presented. The next exposure shows intensive modeling, with the program’s digital instructor walking through the skill’s concept and application, as well as the thinking process and use by a successful reader. As the student progresses, the amount of modeling provided by the program lessens, until the student can successfully complete the tasks alone.

Understanding the purpose of the lesson and knowing what is expected are important aspects of high-quality writing instruction, but are not sufficient to ensure that students will be able to produce high-level writing. In their study of struggling writers, Fisher and Frey (2003) noted that the use of writing models, such as sentence and paragraph frames, provided students with scaffolds that enabled them to write more sophisticated compositions. Dutro (2005) noted that writing frames are especially effective with English language learners.

Sentence frames can help students learn grammatical structures, and paragraph frames can teach the preferred organizational structures. College composition experts Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (2006) recommend the use of frames (they call them templates) as an effective way for developing students’ academic writing skills. They defend the use of frames or templates by noting that even the most creative forms of expression depend on established patterns and structures. Most songwriters, for instance, rely on a time-honored verse-chorus-verse pattern, and few people would call Shakespeare uncreative because he didn’t invent the sonnet or dramatic forms that he used to such dazzling effect. . . . Ultimately, then, creativity and originality lie not in the avoidance of established forms, but in the imaginative use of them (p. 10-11).

As Graff and Birkenstein correctly note, writing frames help students incorporate established norms of academic writing into their own compositions. They provide students with practice using the discourse patterns expected of educated citizens. In addition, many educators have found that writing frames improve students’ writing volume and fluency as they incorporate the modeled patterns into their craft.
**Figure 1: Verbs for Introducing Summaries and Quotations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbs for Making a Claim</th>
<th>Verbs for Expressing Agreement</th>
<th>Verbs for Questioning or Disagreeing</th>
<th>Verbs for Making Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>argue</td>
<td>insist</td>
<td>endorse</td>
<td>advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assert</td>
<td>observe</td>
<td>extol</td>
<td>implore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>believe</td>
<td>remind us</td>
<td>praise</td>
<td>plead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>claim</td>
<td>report</td>
<td>reaffirm</td>
<td>recommend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emphasize</td>
<td>suggest</td>
<td>support</td>
<td>urge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>verify</td>
<td>warn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the most basic level, frames around specific academic words help students incorporate target words into their writing. The goal of this is automaticity: students should automatically use academic terms in their writing and not need to revise for their choice of words. For example, the word list in Figure 1 contains a number of verbs useful for introducing summaries and quotations. Over time, these verbs should become part of a student’s repertoire as he or she writes. This is equally important for Standard English Learners, who often do not use academic language automatically and in fact may not know many of these words. Many native English speaking students are also novices at using academic language proficiently, in part because they are still mastering the unique nomenclature and communication style of various academic disciplines.

Complicating matters further are the various complex language registers, or linguistic features, that English speakers use throughout the day. Five registers have been identified:

- Fixed or frozen—static speech that rarely changes, such as the Pledge of Allegiance
- Formal—one-way speech, such as a sermon or lecture
- Consultative—two-way speech used to discuss ideas, such as communication at school or the workplace
- Casual—two-way speech among friends, marked by fragments, interruptions, and inside humor
- Intimate—reserved for close friends and family, such as a mother cooing to her baby

The consultative register is the language of the classroom. Students read, write, speak, and listen using a language style that can be challenging to nearly all students. The language register of classroom discourse is specialized (Joos, 1967), making it more difficult for even native speakers to follow academic lectures. Consider the discourse demands of a science classroom. Using complex language structures, students discuss a concept that is abstract and likely to be far removed physically and temporally from the room they sit in. Meaning is derived from written texts as well as spoken ones, and there is a higher expectation placed on the language user to be accurate in grammar as well as in content (Scarcella & Rumberger, 2000).

Students are often unfamiliar with how the language of the classroom differs from more informal registers they commonly use. The presence of academic language, vocabulary, and structures makes it especially difficult. Instruction, then, must provide students with ample opportunity to interact in ways that require them to use academic language. Of course, simply assigning more difficult writing assignments won’t do the trick. Students need to witness how their teachers (experts in using academic language) model its use and expose their thinking. Students need instruction on how to use vocabulary in context, extensive interaction with academic language, and support such as sentence or vocabulary frames to foster and extend their writing proficiency.
References


