



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, April 2025

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

****This is the first in a two-part series on writing instruction, where Dana and I (Krista) each take a part. Analyzing children's writing development showcases what children know and where they are in their literacy learning. Our two-month focus on writing comes from our belief that writing is one of the most constructivist learning processes children possess.*

The #1 Thing About Teaching Writing

QUESTION: **What is the single most important thing to remember about teaching children to write?**

...Letter formation?
...Skills for writing a complete sentence?
...Using the steps in the writing process?
...Coming up with ideas/content?
...Having a foundation of oral language?
...Knowing how to spell?

ANSWER: None of the above. The single most important thing to remember is: **Writing every single day.** (Of course, all of the above are important, too.)

In a constructivist classroom, writing is approached developmentally. Students build on prior skills daily through meaningful instruction and practice. Students write in journals, on dry-erase boards, in notebooks, on sticky notes, and on electronic devices. All of it counts. Through this daily writing, we can monitor each student's progress for evidence of writing growth.

There's often little time scheduled in the school day for children to learn to write. But like reading, writing is a tool for all content areas, and we can embed writing across the learning day. This includes writing in math. Writing in science, writing in art, writing in social studies, writing in phonics, and writing about reading + writing to convey a message. Writing for multiple authentic purposes is foundational to developing writers. Once children have these experiences, larger writing projects, such as personal narratives, poetry, how-to, or writing a report – are easier to tackle.

Constructivist teachers use daily writing exercises to support children's increased writing skills, enjoyment, and confidence. Seven high-return teaching strategies to develop young writers follow:

1. Employ the **1-minute edit**. Using the 1-minute edit creates a disposition for checking over writing, and students start to anticipate the 1-minute edit and edit their work more on their own, even before I (Krista) require it. Without this practice, students can make the same errors day in and day out, solidifying the confusion rather than working it out.

For example, each time I ask students to write, I have them check capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. It sounds like, “Now that you’ve finished, check your capitalization. Beginning of the sentence? Names of nouns? Check your punctuation. Is it correct? Find one or two words that you can spell better. How can I help? While I am saying this, I am quickly looking at the writing pieces and handing them back to the student to fix something if necessary (“Recheck those capitals!”).

Maybe a first grader had three spelling errors in their reading response – such as wen (when), Rogr (Roger-name), and neclis (necklace). In the 1-minute edit, you can prioritize and require them to work on spelling ‘when’ correctly. It’s different if I am going to publish (display) these reading responses. Then, we would work out other edits in the next lesson.

2. Use a **practice page**. I learned this in Reading Recovery training years ago, and I still use it with elementary students of all ages. In a notebook, the left side is the practice page and the right side is for continuous writing. (If the seam is at the top, then above the seam is the practice page and below the spiral is for conveying the message.) Students get used to using the practice page to try out spelling and letter formation, possibly correcting a confusion (such as backward letters or spelling ‘they’ t-h-a-y). I teach with the practice page. When a child spells ‘went’ w-e-t, we tap out the sounds and write it on the practice page. Research has shown that students who had more entries on their practice pages gained more proficiency in reading and writing.

3. **Share the pen**. Writing together or co-constructing texts with your students is how we move them to the next level. Together we practice what we want them to be able to do on their own. On chart paper, dry erase board, or an electronic board, share the pen with students. This is the often omitted “we do” part of the lesson. Squeezing in the “we do” between demonstration and releasing students to independence by writing together is powerful because the students experience “how the sausage is made.” They work through all aspects of the writing, helping each other, crossing out mistakes and trying again. When it comes time to write on their own, they already have had the experience.



4. **Quickwrite**. I use this in Kindergarten, with graduate students, and everyone in between. Sometimes, these quickwrites are on a sticky note for individual reading responses within the text the students are reading. Sometimes, I read aloud and students have a sticky note to quickwrite their response to my question. Sometimes students quickwrite about a question they have developed. In elementary school, quickwrites are 1-5 minute short, authentic writing tasks to convey a message about a pertinent topic. Examples:

- Quickwrite in your math notebook describing how you solved that equation.
- Before you go to recess, Quickwrite how you are going to be kind on the playground. We’ll read them after recess to see how we did.
- Stop and jot how you notice the main character changing.



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- After watching the video about the rainforest habitat, quickwrite one fact you learned about the rainforest that you didn't know before.

Students with learning difficulties can use speech-to-text software for larger writing projects, but their day-in and day-out writing activities can be manageable.. Quickwrites add up to a whole lot of writing experience. (You can 1-minute edit your quickwrites!) When we write things down, we also remember them better. What a powerful tool for learning.

5. Teach and reteach **letter formation**. It is practically painful to watch children start making the letter e from the bottom and then use three strokes to complete the letter. I have seen almost every letter made in a highly inefficient manner. Imagine how laborious writing becomes when not using an efficient process for letter formation. Teaching young students to form the letters correctly helps them easily write, reduces letter confusions, and makes them quicker, leading to more words on the page. For older students, teach this using the practice page and 1-minute edit targeting those letters that make their writing unintelligible.



6. Write in **phonics** instruction. I regularly ask students to write dictated sentences to check on their high-frequency words, use of taught spelling patterns, and sentence structure. These dictated sentences provide powerful data for phonics learning. This isolated encoding skill practice helps students use phonics when reading and writing connected texts. For example, when using sound boxes, I use magnetic letters about half the time and have students write half the time.

7. Teach with **mentor texts and author studies**. Reading aloud mentor texts and celebrated authors offers high-quality, engaging content rife for discussion and offers the class a sense of community through shared experience. We analyze texts together, “borrow” writing techniques from an admired author, and read and discuss quality books more than once. We become discerning readers, writing about what we learned from the books.

Reading and writing are interconnected. Readers are writers, and writers are readers. We can't set writing aside to focus on reading. Each builds on the other through decoding and encoding, understanding the context and message of a text, and then using the language from reading to write. Writing about reading offers children a chance to increase their vocabulary and comprehension skills.

We all know the feeling of sitting in front of a blank page. As constructivist teachers, we can help our students by offering these bite-sized daily learning experiences with real-time feedback. Through many opportunities for practice and guidance, our goal is for students to get the information they need **next**. Not the whole enchilada. When students become comfortable transferring their own language and understanding to the page, they are developing a disposition for writing. Once this disposition is developed, they will be prepared to take their writing even further - learning the nuances of genre, grammar, and figurative language while writing longer and stronger because **they are a writer**.



Citations:

Clay, M. M. (2016). *Literacy lessons designed for individuals*. Heinemann.

Graham, S., & Hebert, M. (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence of how writing can improve reading*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.

The #1 Thing About Teaching Writing Reflection Questions:



What high-return strategies from your teaching would you add to this list?



What are one or two actions you can take to support your children's writing development?

*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **The #1 Thing About Teaching Writing** [here](#).*

Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: Many of my second grade students are having a hard time writing a sentence without a sentence stem offered. I am worried that I am using them too often. Are sentence stems an effective way to teach writing? What other ways could I scaffold sentence writing until the students can do it on their own?

A: Sentence stems can be very helpful for students because they offer language structures, vocabulary and spellings that may not yet be in students' repertoire. Yet children also need to learn to write using their own language from start to finish. Consider your goal and be selective about when you use a sentence stem or starter. Are we learning something new, difficult, or with a lot of technical vocabulary? Then possibly use a sentence stem. Is the student learning English? Then a sentence stem could support that process. Otherwise, require students to write their thought(s) from start to finish. When you are discerning about when and why you are using sentence stems, children benefit from an important scaffold **and** from regularly encoding their own language into written form independently.

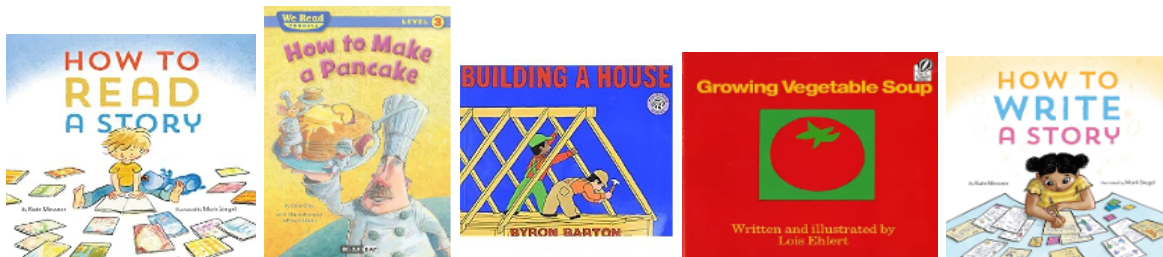


Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Writing a How-To (procedural writing) can be fun and within reach for all young writers. Children can use their own language to explain something they know how to do. Techniques such as using ordinal words, numbers, or steps to transition from one direction to another can be taught. How-To writing lends itself to supporting writing development. Teachers can scaffold the process to support individual writers from Kindergarten on up.

Try out these text sets - including a set of literal How-Tos and a set of very imaginative How-Tos. Or you can adopt one or two titles as mentor texts, giving your students models to discuss, “borrow” ideas, and enjoy!

Literal How-tos:



How-tos with an Imaginative Spin:



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)

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