



Chapter 4: Basics of Writing and the Role of the Teacher

We believe all teaching stems from certain beliefs that each teacher holds. These beliefs are sometimes articulated and sometimes not, but they are always there. Such beliefs tend to determine the choices of strategies, resources, organization, and assessment procedures we use. Therefore it seems appropriate that as authors we make explicit our beliefs and share how these beliefs would be reflected in our teaching of writing whether our students are teachers in our workshops or children in our classrooms. We acknowledge that there is a great deal of overlap and repetition as these basics are unpacked into classroom actions. However, this only serves to illustrate the strong connections between a consistent theoretical base and its respective classroom practice.

We encourage our readers to explore their personal theory or beliefs about the teaching of writing and share with their colleagues how such beliefs are reflected in their classroom practice. When we ask teachers in workshops to do this, we find it is often easier for them to first jot down their classroom writing practices: strategies, resources, organization, and assessment procedures they use. Once these are listed each person is asked to explain why they do what they do in the name of teaching writing. These discussions begin to help teachers make explicit their beliefs or personal theories that underpin their daily classroom practice in the writing context. This activity is a very worthwhile professional learning experience.

In the next chapter, we provide a model for teaching writing (Figure 5.1). As the model is “unpacked” we describe what each of these considerations looks like in our classrooms. Finally, we describe the things the students can do to learn, apply, and develop the skills of writing and to develop a love for writing.

OUR FOUR BASICS OF WRITING

These four basics of writing are ours. We recognize that other teachers may have quite different basics. What is important is that there are strong

links between teachers' basic beliefs and their classroom practice. In what follows we share our basics with our readers. We then explore each in more detail and outline what each basic belief would mean for our classrooms.

BASIC 1: WRITING IS A LANGUAGE ACT

Basic 1: Effective writers need to understand that like talking, listening, and reading, writing is also a language act and therefore draws on similar semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic knowledge.

In classrooms, this means:

- Teachers give students time for talking and listening before, during, and after writing.

Students need time to talk about their topics before they start to write. Talking and listening are used before writing with the purpose of helping the students focus and get an initial sense of audience for their writing. During writing, talking and listening can help students clarify and check for meaning and will often lead to revising and rewriting. After writing, talking and listening can be a way of getting audience response to writing as well as giving the writer a sense of satisfaction, which will lead to a desire to write again.

- Teachers take every opportunity to make links between reading and writing.

We acknowledge whenever possible the link between reading and writing. This might be during modeled writing lessons or when we read to students. Through these demonstrations and discussions we can focus on specific aspects and skills that we want students to learn. This might include how a particular genre such as an information report is structured, aspects of grammar or vocabulary, and various stylistic devices used by authors. Most importantly we want students to learn what good writing sounds like.

- Teachers support a developing awareness of the social nature of writing, in particular the notion that writing is a form of communication.

Teacher demonstrations and teacher talk can help young writers notice and appreciate the role of writing as a form of communication to oneself as well as to others. As students develop a sense of the social nature of writing, a more sophisticated knowledge of audience and purpose will evolve.

- Teachers provide opportunities for students to share the sources of their inspiration for their writing.

As young writers talk about their writing, their ideas, and even the crafting of their writing, this talk can be a source of new knowledge for other students. Therefore, many opportunities are provided for this talk to take place. Sharing sessions are short and focused, with teacher support.

- Teachers provide students with opportunities to develop content knowledge for their writing (building the field).

Semantic knowledge or content knowledge is part of the writing act. Not only do writers need control of the process of writing, but they also need to have content knowledge to engage in the writing act. This is important for writing in all genres, but particularly important when writing factual text. Give time to discuss plans for writing and to assist students in gathering content knowledge when the need is identified.

BASIC 2: WRITING IS WORTH LEARNING

Basic 2: Effective writers need to be confident writers. They need to understand that writing is life empowering and therefore worthy of learning.

In our classrooms this means:

- Teachers give students the opportunity to write every day in a supportive, risk-free environment.

While there is much to teach in the writing classroom, teachers must also give time to providing opportunities to use and practice what students are learning. Daily writing takes a variety of forms and is one of the most important parts of the writing program for students of all ages. Daily writing includes students being provided with regular opportunities to write creatively about themselves and their world. It also includes opportunities to write across all learning areas in a range of genres.

- Teachers value students' writing explicitly through sharing and meaningful feedback.

Regular writing is encouraged through quality teacher response. All writers, young and old, experienced and inexperienced, need feedback, particularly reluctant writers. Feedback in our classrooms is meaningful and responds to the writing content and form. While this feedback needs to be supportive, it also needs to be constructive and honest. Providing meaningful feedback is time consuming, but done well it is very encouraging for the writer.

- Teachers provide appropriate scaffolds to ensure success and to boost students' confidence in themselves as writers.

Writers need to feel successful. An important part of our role as teachers is to provide appropriate scaffolds for our learner writers so that they experience a sense of achievement and success. Scaffolds can take the form of students working in pairs or groups, retelling known stories, adapting existing texts, and using wall print, checklists, and other forms of teacher support as required.

- Teachers provide many opportunities for students to reflect on their writing and to share their writing with peers.

We aim to build a community of writers. Providing students with time to reflect on their own writing and to share their writing attempts with each other begins to build trust and respect for each other as writers. In such a community students feel safe to experiment in their writing, trying new ideas and new genres, as well as sharing personal insights and information. All writers in this community have much to offer each other and all writing is valued.

BASIC 3: WRITERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLES OF AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Basic 3: Effective writers need to understand the roles that audience and purpose play in shaping the different types or genres of writing.

In our classrooms, this means:

- We read aloud to students (at all grade levels) as often as possible. When appropriate, we discuss the author's perceived purpose for writing and its intended audience.

Listening to a range of well-written texts helps students to hear what good writing sounds like. When reading aloud, taking one or two minutes to refer to the author's purpose for writing and intended audience is a reminder for students of the reading-writing connections.

- Students are engaged in a range of writing tasks that demand a response such as letter writing or writing via e-mail.

In our classrooms a genuine response to even a simple piece of writing is considered important. We want writers to develop a sense of audience, and this can be challenging for us as teachers. We use a number of simple ways of introducing students to audience, such as the use of a class message board where children can leave messages for each other or writing thank you notes to class visitors or helpers. We provide opportunities to publish students' writing in a range of formats wherever possible, such as in the

school newsletter or on the class or school website. Sometimes, however, the purpose of the writing may be to learn how to write something in particular, such as a character description, and the audience will be self, the teacher, and other class members. Whatever the writing task, we make sure that we discuss the purpose and intended readership for the writing before we begin. Classrooms are busy places so we try to make use of the many simple measures that will reinforce audiences and purposes for writing so students learn that writing can take many forms because of the range of audiences and purposes.

- Students are regularly involved in “author’s circles” or “helping circles,” where they receive an oral response to their writing from their peers and teacher.

These circles are unique opportunities for students of all ages to get an initial response to their writing. Because the feedback is oral, it does not tend to focus on the surface features of writing but rather remains focused on meaning. We find that teacher modeling of this strategy is crucial, as it depends on developing good questioning and listening skills.

- Teachers always give students opportunities to talk about the purpose and audience for their writing before they begin writing.

In the same way that helping circles can assist students in getting genuine audience feedback for their writing, so too can “getting started chat groups” in the focusing stage of the writing process. Students in these group chats focus each other on their respective writing tasks, and in doing so they clarify the purpose and audience for that writing.

- Teachers make appropriate models of various genres readily available in the classroom.

Our classrooms offer many demonstrations of the various genres we want our students to learn. If we want students to learn to write a particular genre, we make sure we have a collection of books in the class library for the children to read and refer to. We read aloud to students and discuss many of these books with them. For instance, if we want students to learn how to write a science report, we explore in detail “what makes a science report?” by unpacking published examples. We think about how the author structured such texts at the whole text, sentence, and word levels. We make a criteria chart that identifies the key criteria for a science report and display this in the room. We might write a group science report, referring back to our criteria chart and modeling for our students how to structure such a report (as well as

modeling the process of writing). We encourage students to draft their own science reports while referring to such charts as they write. And finally we make sure we display examples of our students' completed science reports for all to read.

BASIC 4: WRITERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE WRITING PROCESS

Basic 4: Effective writers need to have an understanding of the process of writing, including an understanding of why it is important to learn to spell, punctuate, and understand appropriate use of grammatical features.

In our classrooms, this means:

- Teachers regularly model all aspects of the writing process in an explicit and systematic manner.

We use modeling and teacher talk to demonstrate to students all the processes of writing, including focusing, composing, editing, and proofreading. Teacher modeling is not just about the surface features of writing but is concerned with control of the process, even with beginning writers. Engagement in all the processes requires a range of skills, so teacher modeling and instruction are important to ensure the development of these skills.

- Students are regularly reminded of the process of writing.

An outline of the writing process is displayed on a chart in the classroom in an appropriate way to meet the needs of the group and is referred to regularly. This means that students also learn a language to talk about writing. Students are encouraged and supported to plan their writing before beginning, and support continues as the young writers move through the processes of writing. Students of all ages are encouraged to take responsibility for all aspects of their writing and are supported in doing so through modeling and scaffolds.

- Teachers explicitly teach and model editing and proofreading strategies.

The skills of editing and proofreading are taught explicitly and systematically within the context of writing. Giving students the skills and language to participate in helping circles can be the beginning of the editing process whereby students begin to understand the need to revise in order to make their writing clearer and more effective.

Proofreading is concerned with the surface features of the writing and is best taught once the students become readers. Once again, we believe teacher

modeling is a powerful strategy. Various approaches to proofreading are demonstrated as the writers develop. We have a proofreading guide readily available in our classrooms (see Appendix 9). The use of the overhead projector and more recent technology such as interactive whiteboards are useful tools for demonstrating and developing the skills of editing and proofreading. We use pieces of writing especially designed to make particular teaching points and therefore develop students' skills. We also provide opportunities for students to edit and proofread each other's writing. In addition, students learn how to apply the processes of editing and proofreading on the computer. Older students can learn to use the tracking tool now in word processors to make the changes resulting from proofreading and editing explicit.

- Teachers explicitly teach and model spelling strategies.

While we encourage our students to spell words the best way they can (what we like to call "temporary" spelling), we also guide our students to understand the need for correct conventions in all published work. In order for this to be successful we have a role as teachers to teach spelling strategies, which in turn become part of the proofreading process. This means firstly being able to recognize when a word is misspelled and secondly knowing how to find the correct version. Therefore our classroom needs to be supportive of the development of these spelling strategies. For instance, developing word banks of words that end, for example, in *-ough* or a list of words that are our "troublesome words" gives students reference points to check their spellings. We encourage the students to use "have-a-go" cards or books where they can practice or have a go at writing unknown or tricky words. Many resources are available to cater to the needs of the individual learners, one of the most important being a variety of dictionaries. Students are encouraged to make use of their have-a-go cards, personal dictionaries, commercial dictionaries, word lists, and other resources when writing (see Appendix 8).

APPLYING THE BASICS

The lists under each of our four basics for teaching writing are by no way complete. As we have already indicated, these basics are ours. What we have shared is not only what we believe but also how we might implement these beliefs. How these basics will look in a classroom of five year olds will differ in sophistication and complexity from how they translate into a classroom of twelve year olds. However, the same basics apply in both classrooms.