

Teaching Writing in Elementary Schools: Using the Learning-to-Write Process

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Abstract

To write well, students need to have confidence in their ability to write. Writing teachers can build that confidence by providing students with a safety net, a writing process that guides students in their writing—how to begin, how to proceed along the way, and how to conclude a piece of writing. In this article, we present a five-stage writing process, which includes activities identified through research. The stages are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Prewriting is the preparing-to-write stage and includes choosing a topic; considering purpose, audience, and genre; and generating and organizing ideas for writing. Drafting is the process of getting ideas on paper. Revising involves refining the writer’s ideas. Editing is proofreading the piece of writing by correcting mechanical errors to make the writing optimally readable. Publishing is the culminating stage of the writing process and includes sharing the finished product with an audience.

Learning to write is a difficult, multiskilled process. Fortunately, the skills necessary for competent writing can be learned and improved. Students must learn how to generate, analyze, and develop ideas. They must learn how to compose sentences, develop paragraphs, and express ideas within the conventions of formal written English. They must learn to say precisely what they want to say with fluency and clarity (Muschla, 2011a).

Teachers will find the information provided in this article to be useful for classroom instruction or as a supplement to their own writing program. Students will learn how to generate ideas for writing, how to write a draft, how to revise their writing, how to edit their work, and how to publish their writing. This article, which is based on the stages of the writing process, will provide students with the confidence they need to acquire the skills for effective writing.

As a writing teacher, you must build your students’ confidence before you can expect competent writing. Confidence, however, is a word that is difficult to define. A series of past successes builds confidence; a professional blueprint builds confidence; training wheels on a bicycle is a safety net that builds confidence. As writing teachers, you can build confidence for beginning writers by equipping them with a writing safety net—the writing process (Bratcher, 2012).

The writing process is a structure for how to write, a procedure to follow, a map leading to a final destination. It builds confidence in students, because it gives them a place to start, suggestions for how to proceed along the journey, and informs them when they are finished

writing (Bratcher, 2012). Tompkins (2010) viewed the writing process as a way of looking at writing instruction with an emphasis on what students think and do as they write instead of looking solely at students' finished products. Janet Emig (1971) and James Britton and his colleagues (1975) each studied the writing processes used by high school students and found that students writing processes differed according to the type of writing. Later, Donald Graves (1975) examined elementary school students' writing processes and found that young children, like high school students, used a variety of writing processes during their writing.

A survey of books about writing provides many models of the writing process. Britton (1970) divided the writing process into three stages: conception (writers choose topics and decide to write); incubation (writers develop the topic by gathering information); and production (writers write, revise, and edit the composition). Linda Flower and John Hayes (1977, 1981; Hayes & Flower, 1986) divided the writing process into three activities: planning (writers set goals to guide writing; translating (writers put the plans into writing; and reviewing (writers evaluate and revise the writing). A significant finding from their research is that the writing process is recursive; writers go back and forth from one process to another as they write.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) discovered that even though children used a writing process, young children were less capable of moving back and forth from one process to another as they wrote. Proett and Gill (1983) categorized the writing process as groups of activities that occur "before students write," "while students write," and "after students write" (p. 3). Murray (1987) compared the writing process to the electrons in the brain. Root (1994) referred to the writing process as "wordsmithery," consisting of "commitment," "string-saving," "starting," "drafting," "revising," and "going public" (pp. 1-15). Nelson (1995) referred to the writing process as a "river of writing and being" (p. 35) beginning with feelings and experiences, progressing through personal journals, and arriving at public communication.

Nancy Sommers (1982, 1994) described writing as a revision process in which writers generate ideas, that is, focus on content not mechanics. She is critical of teachers who focus on small, word-level changes and errors rather than content during the early stages of the writing process. Similarly, Sondra Perl (1994) noted that high school and college teachers focus excessively on mechanical errors rather than content.

The five-stage writing process presented in this article incorporates activities identified through our survey of writing process models. For our purposes, Thomas (2005) identified a common model made popular by National Writing Project sites across the United States [www.writingproject.org] and the National Council of Teachers of English [www.ncte.org] The stages are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The ordering of the stages does not mean that this writing process is a linear series of sequential activities; research has indicated that the writing process involves recurring cycles and labeling the stages is only an aid for discussing writing activities (Barnes, Morgan, & Weinhold, 1997; Thomas, 2005). In reality, the stages merge and recur as students write. And students personalize the process to meet their own needs and vary the process based on the type of writing assignment (Bratcher, 2012; Tompkins, 2010).

Prewriting

Prewriting is the first stage of the writing process. Prewriting has been the most neglected stage in the writing process (Tompkins, 2013). Pulitzer Prize—winning writer Donald Murray

informs us that more than half of writing time should be devoted to prewriting (Murray, 1982, 1985, 1987). Prewriting typically includes (Tompkins, 2010, p. 10):

- Selecting a topic
- Identifying purpose, audience, and genre
- Generating and organizing ideas

Selecting a Topic

The traditional approach is for teachers to provide a list of topics from which students can choose to write or assign topics. This approach forces students to write about topics they know little about and for which they lack interest. Instead, children need to take responsibility for selecting their own topics for writing. Teachers can help dependent students brainstorm a list of topics and then identify the topic they have the most interest in and know the most about.

Brainstorming is the process of generating a large number of ideas in a short amount of time. The goal is to (a) start generating ideas before beginning to write, and (b) teach writers how to generate ideas (Sunflower, 2006). Brainstorming, developed by Alex Osborn (1957) more than fifty years ago, is a powerful technique for creatively generating young writers' ideas. The unique feature of brainstorming is the separation of ideas from evaluation. The following rules are central to brainstorming (Osborn, 1957):

1. *Do Not Evaluate or Discuss Alternatives.* Evaluation comes later. Avoid criticism of your own or others' ideas.
2. *Encourage "Freewheeling."* Do not consider any idea outlandish. An unusual idea may point the way to a truly creative decision.
3. *Encourage and Welcome Quantities of Ideas.* The greater the number of ideas generated, the greater the number of useful ideas will remain after evaluation.
4. *Encourage "Piggybacking."* Group members should try to combine, embellish, or improve on an idea. Consequently, most of the ideas produced will belong to the group and not to a single individual. (pp. 50-51)

As an idea-generating technique, group brainstorming may not be any more effective than individual brainstorming. However, the technique is in widespread use today in all types of organizations, including schools (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012).

Identifying Purpose

Before children begin to write, they need to identify their purpose for writing. Are they writing to entertain their readers, inform them, or persuade them to accept a particular point of view about an issue? The decision about purpose influences other decisions, including audience and genre. Halliday (1973, 1975, as cited in Tompkins, 2010, p. 12) identified seven language functions that apply to both oral and written language:

1. *Instrumental language*. Language to satisfy needs, such as in business letters.
2. *Regulatory language*. Language to control the behavior of others, such as in directions and rules.
3. *Interactional language*. Language to establish and maintain social relationships, such as in pen pal letters and dialogue journals.
4. *Personal language*. Language to express personal opinions, such as in learning logs and letters to the editor.
5. *Imaginative language*. Language to express imagination and creativity, such as in stories, poems, and scripts.
6. *Heuristic language*. Language to seek information and to find out about things, such as in learning logs and interviews.
7. *Informative language*. Language to convey information, such as in reports and biographies.

Children use writing for all of these purposes.

Identifying Audience

Children should identify their target audience, the people for whom they are writing. Children may write for themselves, to express their ideas, or they may write for others. Possible audiences include teachers, classmates, friends, parents, and children's authors. Other audiences may include letters to businesses requesting information, articles to be published in school newspapers or local newspapers, or stories and poems to be published in literary magazines.

Identifying Genre

Genre is essentially the idea of a category or type (Lattimer, 2003). A genre is a rough template for accomplishing a particular purpose with language (Hampton, Murphy, & Lowry, 2009). Charles Cooper (1999) explains, writers shape texts to accomplish different purposes by using particular techniques to develop the text, and by making particular language choices. Texts in a particular genre follow a general pattern.

Proficient writers make adjustments when sitting down to write. In *Time for Meaning*, Bomer (1995) explains the role of genre as follows:

Every piece of writing...will take the form...both as a text—the piece it is and as a *kind* of text—an instance or genre. And what kind of thing it is puts some limits as to what we expect to find there. (p. 27)

Writers view the world through the lens of their particular genre. Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Donald Murray (1982) explains,

Most writers view the world as a fiction writer, a reporter, a poet, or a historian. The writer sees experience as a plot or a lyric poem or a news story or a chronicle. The writer uses such literary traditions to understand life. (p. 112)

In other words, genre provides the writer and the reader with a common set of assumptions about what characterizes the text (Devitt, 2008). For example, if the text is labeled a mystery story, there is an assumption that the story line will be built around some puzzle to be resolved or some crime to be solved. Similarly, when a piece of writing begins with “Once upon a time . . .,” there is the assumption that we will be reading or writing a fairy tale. However, if the first line of text is “Men are different than women,” we expect a different genre—a report of information instead of a story. Letters require “Dear . . .” and “Sincerely.” These are examples of writing genres that use special language patterns.

There are a wide variety of writing genres. The six most common writing genres include the following: descriptive writing, expository writing, journals and letters, narrative writing, persuasive writing, and poetry writing (Tompkins, 2013). Children need to be introduced to these writing genres and have opportunities to experiment with them. Through reading and writing, children will learn about the unique requirements of the formats and how they are structured (Lattimer, 2003; Mulvaney & Jolliffe, 2004; Pasquarelli, 2006).

Teaching children to make decisions about purpose, audience, and genre is an important part of writing instruction. Decisions about these aspects of writing are interrelated. For example, if the purpose is to entertain, a genre such as a story, poem, or script might be chosen. These three forms look very different on paper (Thompkins, 2010). A story is written in the traditional block format. Scripts and poems have unique arrangements on the page. For example, in a script, the setting of the scene appears first at the top of the page in all caps. This is followed by an explanation of the scene. Next, the character’s name appears in all caps followed by dialogue beneath (see Figure 1):

INT. LAUREL’S HOUSE – KITCHEN – NIGHT

Laurel arranges vegetables while Armando watches.
Tension is palpable

LAUREL

I’ve never done anything like this.

LIVING ROOM

Laurel sets the hors d’ oeuvres on the coffee table. Armando hands her a glass of wine.

ARMANDO

You’re going to be fine.

Figure 1. Movie script format.

Action and dialogue, rather than description, move the story line in a script. In contrast, poems have unique formatting considerations. Note below that poems require a special arrangement on a page; words are used judiciously, and each word and phrase is selected carefully to convey a maximum amount of information (see Figure 2).

All Around the World, They're Just Like Me

All around the world
There are children like me,
In many strange places
They happen to be.

Their dress and their food
Are different from mine;
Their homes and their customs
Are hard to define.

But all around the world
They're still just like me
In living and giving.
Good friends are we.

By Iris M. Tiedt and Lisa Johnson

Figure 2. Poem format.

Generating and Organizing Ideas

Clear expression begins with a good idea. Experienced authors spend much time and effort generating, developing, researching, and organizing ideas before they begin writing. Children generate and organize ideas for writing by:

- reflecting on personal experience
- drawing pictures
- talking with classmates and the teacher
- reading stories and other books
- writing
- making graphic organizers

Everything children experience can be the substance of an idea. Children's personal experiences—all the things they have ever done, seen, or heard about—can lead to ideas they can use for writing (Muschla, 2011a). Children must learn to identify these ideas. For example, writing teachers can help children think about topics such as: interests and hobbies, things that are important to them, things that they like, and things that they dislike.

Writing teachers can help children think about examples that can be included under the topic. For example, under "interests and hobbies," children might think of reading, downhill skiing, music, and so on. Some possibilities how each of the aforementioned examples can lead to an idea for writing follow: (a) for reading—a review of a book, (b) for downhill skiing—a description of the techniques necessary for proficient skiing, (c) for music—a biography of a famous musician.

Drawing is another way young children generate and organize ideas for writing. Primary teachers observe that students draw before they write. As young children become better writers, they use drawing and other symbol systems as they begin to mature as writers (Dyson, 1993). Learning about something in class and talking with classmates and teachers is another way children can generate ideas for writing.

Children use a wide variety of writing activities to generate and organize ideas before beginning to write (daSilva, 2001). Brainstorming is a powerful technique writing teachers can use to help young writers generate ideas. Word webbing, sequencing lists of events, clustering main ideas and details, mapping, outlining, or freewriting to discover what they know about a topic are helpful prewriting techniques. Most of these traditional prewriting activities can be useful for advanced writers but are not recommended for younger writers (Tompkins, 2010).

Reading is another way for children to search for ideas. The benefits of reading for writing expand children's world and experiences. Reading also introduces children to various genres of writing, idea development, and authors' techniques (National Council of Teachers of English, 1989). All experienced writers are readers (Lunenburg, 1999).

Focusing ideas. Once children gather broad, general ideas, they must be focused. Focusing an idea narrows it, so the writer can concentrate on a very specific topic. Focusing ideas is important for further development of the topic.

Consider the topic "Music." This is broad and unfocused. Does the topic mean studying music in general? Or performing music? What kind of music—instrumental or vocal? What kind of instrument? What types of music—Country Western, Rock and Roll, Pop, or Opera? For example, the topic "Studying How to Perform Opera Music" is focused and serves as a clear guide for writing.

Developing ideas. Ideas for writing must be explored, analyzed, and developed. Developing ideas is difficult. Nevertheless, there are steps children can take to make the process easier. These steps include identifying relationships, brainstorming, and researching. Writing teachers need to teach students to look for relationships. For example, cause and effect (heavy rains cause floods), interdependence (the pollination of flowers and the production of honey), and parts to wholes (the solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy, which is part of the universe).

An effective brainstorming technique for developing ideas is a word web (Miller, 2012). Creating a word web can help children identify, expand, and develop ideas for writing. For example, if the topic is Halloween, have children write the topic "Halloween" in the middle of a blank paper. Then have students think about ideas related to Halloween. Children might think of ideas such as trick or treat, eating candy, dress up, costumes, decorations, ringing door bells, candy apples, spider webs, skeletons, witches, bats, ghosts, and so forth. Have students write the ideas down. Have them connect ideas that stem from other ideas. Have students write rapidly and not pause to think about ideas they write. The goal of brainstorming is to uncover as many ideas as possible in a short period of time (Osborn, 1957) and expand the original idea.

When students have finished, have them review the ideas they have written. Some of the ideas on the word web may not be used in writing, but others will. Frequently a web will lead to an entirely new idea that may lead to a new web and more new ideas that can be used for writing (Miller, 2012).

Researching is another way students can develop ideas for writing. The Internet provides writers with resources for locating information on numerous topics. Although the Internet can be helpful for developing ideas for writing, not all information posted on the World Wide Web will be accurate or useful (O'Dochartaigh, 2012). Therefore, writing teachers need to teach their students to research reputable sites, including government agencies, major organizations, and universities.

When searching information on the Internet, writing teachers should teach students to use key terms. Using key terms will direct students to search engines that may be useful. Additionally, having a focused topic will help students narrow their search and help them avoid useless information.

Organizing ideas. Writing teachers need to teach young writers the basic structure for organizing ideas for writing. A basic structure for organizing ideas includes an opening (one or two paragraphs), body (one, two, three, or more paragraphs), and closing (one paragraph) (Thomas, 2005). The opening is used to introduce the topic, problem, or situation of a piece of writing. The body may be one paragraph, several paragraphs, or several pages in length and provides the details of the written piece. The closing includes a brief summary of the main ideas expressed in the body of the written work.

Have students find an example of this basic organization for writing in their reading book, science book, or social studies text. Writing teachers may want to use a nonfiction article for this activity instead of a book. Have young writers identify the opening; the body, including all of the paragraphs that constitute the body; and the closing. Most nonfiction writing follows this structure (Thomas, 2005).

Drafting

During the drafting stage, young writers begin writing with tentative ideas generated during prewriting activities. Writing the draft is the part of the writing process in which children put their ideas into words. Writing a draft is hard work. Professional writers may develop a dozen or more drafts during this stage of the writing process. A draft should be considered as one step toward finishing a piece of writing. Writing becomes easier when children understand the fundamentals of sentences (Fish, 2012), paragraphs (Brandon & Brandon, 2014) and good writing technique (Muschla, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d).

Sentences

To write well, children must have a basic understanding of sentences (Fish, 2012). There are four types of sentences: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory and three sentence structures: simple, compound, and complex. Understanding sentence types and sentence structures will help children write clearly (Muschla, 2011c, 2011d).

Writing teachers should have students study the following sentences (Muschla, 2011a, p. 112):

- Tom walked home. (declarative sentence)
- Did Tom finish his homework? (interrogative sentence)

- Close the door, Tom. (imperative sentence)
- Watch out, Tom! (exclamatory sentence)

A declarative sentence is a statement; it requires a period. An interrogative sentence is a question; it requires a question mark. An imperative sentence is a command; it requires a period. An exclamatory sentence expresses emotion; it requires an exclamation point.

A sentence must contain a subject and a predicate. Have the students find the subject and predicate in each of the four aforementioned sentences. In the declarative sentence, *Tom* is the subject and *walked* is the predicate. In the interrogative sentence, *Tom* is the subject and *did finish* is the predicate. In the imperative sentence, *close* is the predicate and *you* (understood) is the subject. In the exclamatory sentence, *watch* is the predicate, and *You* (understood) is the subject. Now have children write each of the four types of sentences on their own and identify the subject and predicate in each one.

Writing teachers should have students study the following examples of sentence structures (Muschla, 2011c, p. 112):

- Tom plays the trombone in the school band. (simple)
- Dick enjoys sports, but his brother prefers music. (compound)
- When it snows, Tom goes skiing. (complex)

The examples are three common sentence structures. Understanding these structures will help young writers to use different sentence structures in their writing. The first sentence is a simple sentence. It has one subject, *Tom*, and one predicate, *plays*.

The second example is a compound sentence. A compound sentence has two separate sentences connected with the words *and*, *but*, *or*, or *nor*. *Dick* is the subject of the first sentence and *enjoys* is the predicate. *Brother* is the subject of the second sentence and *prefers* is the predicate. The connecting word is *but*.

The third example is a complex sentence. A complex sentence has one independent clause, which can stand alone as a simple sentence, and one dependent clause, which cannot stand alone. In the example, *when it snows* is the dependent clause; *Tom goes skiing* is the independent clause. (Independent clauses are also called main clauses; Dependent clauses are called subordinate clauses.)

By using all three sentence structures, students will be able to vary their writing and present their ideas in a more interesting manner than using simple sentences exclusively. Writing teachers should have their students write some examples of simple, compound, and complex sentences of their own and identify the sentence structure of each one (Muschla, 2011c).

Writing teachers should have their students study the following example: *After school, Tom did his homework. He went shopping with his mother. He went to band practice.* These three sentences are simple sentences. Although they are written correctly, they are flat and boring. Young writers can combine short sentences like these to make writing smoother and their writing smoother and more interesting. See the following example: *After school, Tom did his homework, went shopping with his mother, and went to band practice.* Combining and varying sentences makes writing more interesting for readers (Fish, 2012; Muschla, 2011d).

Paragraphs

A paragraph contains sentences related to one main idea. Every paragraph has a topic sentence that provides the main idea of the paragraph. Other sentences support the main idea with details (Brandon & Brandon, 2014).

The topic sentence is usually the first sentence of the paragraph; however, it may appear in the middle or end of the paragraph. Positioning the topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph makes it easier for writers to organize the paragraph followed by details and examples.

How long should a paragraph be? A paragraph must be long enough to fully develop the main idea. Writing teachers should have students develop their paragraphs one sentence at a time, beginning with the topic sentence, and supported by details and examples.

Writing teachers should have their students study the following undeveloped paragraph: *The movie was great. It was the best movie I ever saw* (Muschla, 2011c, p. 114). It is obvious that the writer liked the movie; however, the writer provides no supporting details. The lack of supporting details weakens the main idea. What details might be included that would strengthen the main idea in the aforementioned paragraph? Possible details might include the following (Muschla, 2014):

- The title of the movie
- The type of movie (action, comedy, drama)
- The actors and how they helped make the movie great
- The plot and how it helped make the movie great
- Why the writer liked the movie

To teach paragraph construction, writing teachers can have students select two or three descriptive paragraphs from their reading, social studies, or science texts. Have students read the paragraphs. For each paragraph, have students identify the main idea. Then have students identify the supporting details. Have students note how details and examples embellish the main idea of the paragraph (Brandon & Brandon, 2014). Or writing teachers can provide students with articles, which can be dissected in a similar fashion.

Good Writing Technique: Powerful Language Constructions

Clarity of writing improves by using several powerful language constructions: (a) showing and not telling, (b) using adjectives and adverbs wisely, (c) order and sequence, (d) using active constructions, (e) using strong verbs, (f) using verb tenses wisely, (g) subject-verb agreement, (h) point of view, (i) comparison and contrast, and (j) figurative language (Elbow, 1998; Muschla, 2011a, pp. 114-141). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Showing not telling. Professional writers know that they must show and not merely tell readers about their ideas in their writing. Showing requires action; therefore, authors who show, and do not merely tell, write with clearer imagery.

Writing teachers should have students examine the following example to observe the power of showing over telling (Muschla, 2011a):

- When the toy broke, the little girl was upset. (telling)
- When the toy broke, the little girl stomped her feet and started to cry. (showing)

In the first sentence, the writer tells that the little girl was upset. In the second sentence, *stomped her feet and started to cry* shows that the little girl was upset. Showing provides action that the reader can visualize in his/her imagination, making the idea clearer. Therefore, the second sentence is an example of stronger writing than the first sentence. Writing teachers should have students write some examples of their own that show rather than tell.

Using adjectives and adverbs wisely. The use of adjectives and adverbs can add detail to writing. However, overuse of these modifiers can weaken writing. Following are some examples of the overuse of adjectives and adverbs (Muschla, 2011a, p. 115):

- completely fooled (One is either fooled or not fooled.)
- totally surprised (Is there such a thing as being partially surprised?)
- happy smile (Most smiles are a sign of happiness; there are a few exceptions.)
- high-speed internet (Is there such a thing being advertised as low-speed internet?)

Adjectives and adverbs have a purpose in sentences, but they should be used judiciously. Writers should choose modifiers that provide sharp details. To gain an understanding of the judicious use of adjectives and adverbs, writing teachers should select sentences from students' reading, social studies, and science texts that help readers paint a clearer imagery of the writer's intent. For example, examine the following sentences (Muschla, 2011a, p. 115, 130, 131):

- The *blazing* sun baked the land with heat. (Note how the adjective "blazing" helped to paint a picture in the reader's imagination.)
- The sunset was beautiful in the *bright red* sky. (Note how the adjectives "bright red" provided a clearer imagery of the writer's intent.)
- The leaves rustled *softly* in the *light* breeze. (Note how the adverb "softly" and the adjective "light" together helped to paint a picture in the reader's mind.)
- Tom studied *hard* for the math test. (Note how the adverb "hard" placed greater emphasis on Tom's degree of preparation for the math test.)

Notice how the judicious use of adjectives and adverbs can strengthen writing. For additional practice, writing teachers should have students write several sentences containing adjectives and adverbs that provide sharp details to their sentences.

Order and sequence. Good writing provides an ordered and sequential development of ideas. Writing teachers should have students locate order and sequence in articles provided and texts they are reading. They should look at how ideas develop logically, how ideas are related, and how ideas are presented in sequence. Writing teachers can model the activity initially.

Using active constructions. Active constructions are direct and help strengthen the writing. Passive constructions are indirect and weaken the writing. Active constructions are

clearer and more forceful than passive constructions. Examine the following example (Muschla, 2011a, p. 116):

- Mary finished her homework. (active)
- The homework was finished by Mary. (passive)

In the first sentence the action is clear. The second sentence says the same thing, but the action is not expressed as clearly. *Mary* is the subject of the sentence and *finished* is the predicate. There is no confusion the *Mary finished her homework*. In the second sentence *homework* is the subject of the sentence and *was finished* is the predicate. *Mary* is the object of the preposition *by* in the second sentence. Most readers understand the first sentence. Some readers may have difficulty understanding the second sentence. Active constructions are usually better than passive constructions, because they are more clear and direct and help readers to visualize action and ideas.

Using strong verbs. Similar to active constructions, strong verbs provide clearer imagery. There are verbs for all kinds of action in the English language. Writing teachers should have their students examine the following pairs of sentences (Muschla, 2011, p. 117):

- Mary spoke softly during the movie.
- Mary *whispered* during the movie.

- Jane cried loudly when her toy broke.
- Jane *screamed* when her toy broke.

- Tom went across the room quietly.
- Tom *tiptoed* across the room.

- The eagle flew gracefully over the valley.
- The eagle *soared* over the valley.

The second sentence of each pair uses a strong verb to show action. Using strong verbs often results in writing that is less wordy.

Verb tenses. Three commonly used tenses are present, past, and future. Following are definitions with examples of each tense (Muschla, 2011a, p. 118):

- Verbs in the present tense show action that is happening in the present. *Mary rides the bus to school each day.*
- Verbs in the past tense show action that has happened in the past. *Mary rode the bus to school yesterday.*
- Verbs in the future tense show action that will happen in the future. *Mary will ride the bus to school tomorrow.*

The tense that authors use will depend on the genre of the writing: story, essay, editorial, and so forth (Devitt, 2008). Authors of stories and articles use the past tense, because the events and ideas they are writing about have happened already. In some essays and editorials, an author may wish to express a feeling that the subject of the piece of writing is happening presently. In such cases, the author uses the present tense.

Students must choose the correct tense for the stories, articles, essays, and editorials they write. For example, a narrative based on a past event requires the past tense. An article or editorial about an incident that is currently happening might be written in the present tense. A proposal of a topic that is presented to a panel for approval that will be completed in the future might be written in the future tense.

Students need to be taught not to shift tenses once a tense is chosen. Switching tenses unnecessarily can be confusing to readers and can weaken a piece of writing. For practice with verb tenses, writing teachers should have students study the following sentences and identify whether each is written in the present, past, or future tense (Muschla, 2011a, p. 136):

- Tom is a good student and a good athlete. (present)
- Mary played volleyball after school. (past)
- Dick will study for his math test after supper. (future)
- Jane watches her little sister each day after school. (present)
- The dog played in the yard. (past)
- Harry's band will be the last to perform in the show. (future)

Writing teachers should have students write three sentences of their own. They should write one in the present tense, another in the past tense, and the last one in the future tense. This exercise can be repeated as often as is needed.

Subject-verb agreement. There must be agreement between the subject and verb of a sentence. Examine the following examples (Muschla, 2011a, pp. 118-119):

- Mary rides the bus to school each day.
- Mary and Jane ride the bus to school each day.
- Mary rode the bus to school yesterday.
- Mary and Jane rode the bus to school yesterday.

Writing teachers need to have the students identify the subjects and verbs in the aforementioned sentences. In the present tense, the singular subject Mary requires the singular form of the verb rides. The plural subjects Mary and Jane require the plural form of the verb rode. When using the past tense, both singular and plural subjects use the same form of the verb, rode. Writing teachers should have students practice subject-verb agreement by writing simple sentences in the present and past tenses.

Point of view. Point of view is the position a writer takes when writing a story narrative. There are two common points of view (POV): the first person point of view and the third person point of view. Most authors use one or the other points of view in their writing.

Using the first person POV, the author is a participant observer of the narrative. The author uses “I” throughout the narrative. The disadvantage of this POV is that the author as participant observer can write only about what the author experiences in the story; that is, the author cannot describe the thoughts and feelings of other characters in the story.

Using the third person POV, the author writes from outside the narrative. Thus, the author can describe the thoughts and feelings of the other characters. The author refers to the characters as “he” or “she.” Most authors use the third person POV (Muschla, 2011b).

Writing teachers must teach students to write with a consistent POV. Switching between the first and third person POV confuses the reader. Switching POV results in loss of focus and loss of clarity. To gain an understanding of POV, writing teachers need to teach students to recognize POV in their reading and practice it in their writing.

Figurative language. Good writing can become great writing by using figurative language (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). The power of figurative language is in the enrichment of ideas. During elementary school, children learn language skills to make their writing more powerful. They learn about synonyms and how to use a thesaurus to choose exactly the right word. For example, children learn more precise words for *said*, such as *mentioned* and more descriptive words for *called* such as *shouted* (Tompkins, 2013). They also learn to use the five types of figurative language (Tompkins, 2010, pp. 94-95):

1. *Alliteration.* Writers use a literary stylistic device, which occurs when a series of words in a row (or close to a row) have the same first consonant, as in **Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.**
2. *Onomatopoeia.* Writers use words that imitate natural sounds to enliven their writing, such as “buzz” or “boom.” The concept of onomatopoeia can be difficult to understand without examples. Both bees and buzzers **buzz**. The bridge collapsed creating a tremendous **boom**.
3. *Personification.* Writers attribute human-like characteristics to inanimate objects, and then use words that normally refer to people to describe the inanimate objects, such as: *The wind whispered through the trees. The flowers begged for water. Lightning danced across the sky.*
4. *Similes.* Writers create comparisons that directly compare two objects through some connective word such as like, as, so, than, or a verb such as resembles. Examples include: *Without my glasses, I am as blind as a bat. That boy in my class is as funny as a clown. When she kissed me, I turned as red as a tomato.*
5. *Metaphors.* Writers describe a subject by asserting that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object. Metaphor is a type of analogy and is closely related to other rhetorical figures of speech that achieve their effects via association, comparison, or resemblance including allegory, hyperbole, and simile. Although similes and metaphors are generally seen as interchangeable, metaphor is stronger and more encompassing than simile. One of the most prominent examples of a metaphor in English literature is the *all the world’s a stage* monologue from William Shakespeare *As You Like It*. The quotation contains a metaphor, because the world is not literally a stage. By figuratively asserting that the world is a stage, Shakespeare uses points of comparison between the world and a stage to

convey an understanding about the mechanics of the world and the lives of the people within it.

In sum, writing the draft is the real work of writing. It can be the most difficult part of the writing process. Often student writers become impatient with drafting, because the draft seems like it is everything they have to say. That is when writing teachers need to challenge them with revising.

Revising

Revising is a difficult skill to teach. Students prefer to “be finished.” However, to improve the quality of their writing, students need to be taught revising skills. Revising is any activity that makes a draft better. Revising involves words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and themes. Revising includes any one or more of the following activities: rereading, changing, deleting, substituting, adding, and reordering.

Formal revision is not recommended from kindergarten through second grade (Tompkins, 2013). In these grades, writing teachers can prompt children to tell their teachers more, to add more, about what they have to say by friendly, gentle, and interested questioning. By third grade, most children who have been receiving writing instruction are probably cognitively ready to revise their work on a wider scale.

Editing of mechanics—spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, for example—also may occur during the revising stage. However, revising should not be confused with proofreading to correct errors in mechanics. Weaver (1996) believes we have to move students through three levels of importance without destroying the earlier levels—from fluency (the willingness to write) to clarity to correctness. Writing instruction and assessment must reflect that the content of student writing is of greatest value, while maintaining for the student an understanding that ultimately surface features impact directly on that meaning (Thomas, 2005).

Students need to be able to recognize what needs to be revised. This requires an understanding of the fundamentals of good writing, which we discussed in the previous section on drafting. Factors that require attention during the revising process often include (Muschla, 2011a, pp. 111-141):

- Basic structure of composition (introduction, body, and conclusion)
- Varying sentence type and structure
- Paragraphs, including main ideas, supporting details, and elaboration
- Order and logical sequencing of ideas
- Showing and not telling, including word choice for clarity, interest, and variation
- Using adjectives and adverbs judiciously
- Using active constructions versus passive constructions
- Using strong verbs
- Using figurative language
- Correctness, including subject-verb agreement
- Using consistent tenses
- Using consistent point of view

Revising is hard work. Not only must students work to improve details—for example, choose the best words to express an idea clearly—but also they must work to improve the piece as a whole. Until students master the skills necessary for revising, they will benefit from a basic plan for revising (Muschla, 2011b).

A Basic Plan for Revising

Students begin by rereading the entire composition concentrating on organization and unity. At this point, writing teachers should provide students with an article that demonstrates organization and unity, that is, all main ideas and supporting details relate to the topic. To achieve unity, material not relevant to the topic should be deleted.

Next, after making sure that the composition shows unity, students should reread through the piece of writing again this time concentrating on general consistency. Students should focus on structure, tense, and point of view. The structure of the writing should be logical. There should be an introduction, logical development through the body, and a strong conclusion. Main ideas should be supported with details. All tenses should be consistent. Point of view must be consistent as well. Inconsistencies should be corrected.

Then, students should focus on paragraphs, sentences, and words. Delete anything that is irrelevant. Students should make certain that paragraphs have a topic sentence and supporting details and examples; sentences are varied and combined as needed; subjects and verbs agree; active constructions are used; and the right words are chosen to express ideas clearly (see Figure 3).

The following questions can help students revise their writing.

-
1. Is my topic focused?
 2. Do my ideas and details relate to the topic?
 3. Does my writing have an introduction, body, and conclusion?
 4. Have I used paragraphs?
 5. Does each paragraph have a main idea?
 6. Have I supported each main idea with details?
 7. Have I used correct order and sequence?
 8. Have I varied sentence type and structure?
 9. Have I used active constructions?
 10. Have I used strong verbs?
 11. Do my subjects and verbs agree?
 12. Did I show and not tell?
 13. Are my verb tenses consistent?
 14. Is my point of view consistent?
 15. Have I deleted all irrelevant material?
 16. Have I expressed my ideas clearly?

Figure 3. Guidelines for revision. Adapted from “*Practice Makes Perfect: Mastering Writing*,” by G.R. Muschla, 2011b, p. 148. Copyright 2011 by McGraw-Hill.

Responding to Students' Writing

In addition to teaching students how to assume responsibility for self-evaluating independently using a revising checklist, there are two other methods writing teachers can use: conferences and peer feedback (Sunflower, 2006). Let's examine each one of these methods.

Conferences. There are three simple tools writing teachers can use to guide students to think critically: specific positive comments, question and listen, and read back (Sunflower, 2006). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Specific Positive Comments. This technique involves praising specific aspects of a composition that are worthy. Specific positive comments differ from general praise, because the specific comments focus on the composition itself or the audience, not on how it makes the student feel. Note the difference between general comments (outstanding! and right on target!) and more specific comments, such as: *You indented all five paragraphs. This will help your readers know when you are shifting to a new idea. Outstanding!*

Question and listen. This technique involves asking students probing or open-ended questions that encourage critical thinking. Such questions focus on a particular aspect of a piece of writing, while keeping the writer in a decision-making role. For example, a traditional question might be: Do you need a new paragraph here? A better question requiring critical thinking might be: How can you alert your readers that you are shifting to a new idea?

Read back. This technique involves reading all or part of a composition out loud so the students can determine whether they have communicated what they want to say. Two variations that are effective with student writers include:

- The teacher, a parent, or a peer reads the composition out loud to the student writer.
- The student reads his/her own written piece out loud to the teacher, a parent, or a peer.

A third variation is that the student reads orally or silently the composition to him/herself. The latter approach is less effective until writers become more experienced at revising (Sunflower, 2006).

Peer feedback. Peer feedback provides an opportunity for student writers to hear reactions from readers about how clearly they have communicated. It is a variation of the conferencing read back technique; however, in this case the composition is distributed by the teacher to a class of peers for feedback usually in small groups of four or five students.

Editing

Editing is the final opportunity during the writing process to “polish” the piece of writing, before sharing it with readers or publishing. Prior to this stage, the focus has been on developing the content of the written piece. Editing is different from revising. During editing the focus changes to mechanics, correcting surface errors such as capitalization, punctuation, spelling,

sentence structure, word usage, and formatting specific to poems, scripts, letters, and other writing genres. Murray (1994) argues, “the writer’s attitude when revising should be: I revise to discover what I have to say; I revise to find out how to say it; I edit to make what I say clear” (p. 6). The goal is to make the writing optimally readable (Smith, 1982).

The editing stage involves three activities (Thompkins, 2010, p. 22). Each one will be discussed in turn.

- Maintaining distance from the written piece
- Proofreading to locate errors
- Correcting errors

Maintaining Distance

Children become more efficient editors when they wait a few days before beginning to edit. After working closely with a piece of writing during the drafting and revising stages, writers become too familiar with the content to locate mechanical errors. After a few days away from the written piece, young writers are able to approach editing with a fresh perspective.

Proofreading

Proofreading is far more complicated than just rereading a composition. Proofreading is a unique form of reading in which writers read word-for-word and search for errors rather than read for content (King, 1985). Modern reading theory (Goodman, 1976; Smith, 1982; Rumelhart, 1977) indicates that when readers have detailed knowledge about what they are reading, they do not read word-for-word to comprehend its meaning. When a writer is reading his/her own writing, the writer has more knowledge about what he/she has written than what is on the paper. That is, when the reader is the writer, the reader needs very little print to construct meaning; therefore, it is unlikely that he/she will notice minor errors such as spelling or a missing punctuation mark. Even when it is not on the paper, he/she knows what was meant and often sees what was meant even though it is not there (Bratcher, 1994).

It is important, therefore, for writing teachers to take the time to explain proofreading and to demonstrate how it differs from regular reading. The suggestions that follow may help (Bratcher, 2012, pp. 63-64):

- *Separate proofreading and editing from revising in the writing process.* One peer group can be formed to give content feedback; a second peer group can be formed to help with proofreading and editing.
- *Teach students how to proofread.* Explain to them that they are doing more than “reading.” In fact, they are not really reading at all; they are looking at each letter and each mark of punctuation. Give them practice finding errors on worksheets before they look for errors in their own work.
- *Have students look at formatting.* This entails looking at the page to make sure paragraphs are fully indented, margins are correct, and there are no gaps in spacing.

- *Have students proofread the piece of writing at least two or three times.* It is likely that each time students will find a few more minor errors. Only when no more errors are found is proofreading finished.
- *If possible, have students proofread a typed copy.* Errors leap off a printed page more than they do off a handwritten page. Word processors make this suggestion workable.
- *Whenever possible, have students proofread for each other.* It is much easier to see errors in someone else's work.
- *Have students read each other's work aloud.* Stumbles and false readings often pinpoint errors.
- *When students must proofread their own work, let significant time pass before they try to proofread.* The more time that passes, the more writers forget what they meant to say, and the more they can look at what they actually put on the paper.
- *When students must do their own proofreading, teach them to disrupt the flow of meaning in their writing and break it down into separate sentences.* The best way to accomplish disruption of meaning is to have students read their writing sentence by sentence, beginning with the last sentence. Reading backwards destroys the logical connections of sentences to each other and makes them stand out as grammatical units.
- *Be tolerant (although not completely permissive).* Keep a sense of humor about proofreading. Done carefully, proofreading is a tedious process. Emphasize how silly most errors are. Demonstrate humorous interpretations the reader might put on mechanical errors. Do not expect children to do things professional writers do.

Writing teachers need to show young writers how proofreading is done. They begin by using a piece of student writing from a previous class and project it on an Elmo. The teacher reads the composition several times, each time with a single focus looking for a particular type of error (for example, first spelling, then punctuation, next capitalization, followed by paragraph indents, and so on). During each reading, the teacher reads the composition slowly, pronouncing each word and touching the word with a pencil to focus attention on it. The teacher marks possible errors as they are located. The goal is to teach student writers how to edit their own work.

Personal proofreading checklists help students take charge of their own self-regulated editing. Teachers can develop these checklists with two to 10 items depending on the children's grade level. For example, a first grade checklist might contain only two items, one about using capital letters at the beginning of a sentence and a second item about using a period at the end of a sentence. A middle-grade checklists might have items on capitalization, punctuation, paragraph indents, using commas in a series, apostrophes, correct use of pronouns, quotation marks, italics, correct word usage (especially homophones such as there and their; and to, too, and two) (Thompkins, 2010). A sample middle-grade proofreading checklist is presented in Figure 2 (Muschla, 2011a; Richards & Lassonde, 2011; Tompkins, 2010). The self-regulated, single-focus editing process is recommended, because it is impossible for young writers and even for experienced writers to notice and remedy all the types of writing errors simultaneously (see Crimi & Tompkins, 2005; Cunningham & Cunningham, 2010; Davis & Hill, 2003; Richards & Lassonde, 2011).

Use the following personal proofreading checklist when proofreading your writing.

1. Sentences begin with a capital letter.
2. Sentences end with correct punctuation
3. Paragraphs are indented.
4. Proper nouns and proper adjectives are capitalized.
5. Commas are used correctly (between the items in a list, to connect compound sentences, and after introductory words, phrases, and clauses)
6. Apostrophes are used correctly (with possessive nouns and contractions)
7. Pronouns are used correctly.
8. Quotation marks are used correctly (for dialogue and for the titles of short stories, articles, poems, and songs).
9. Italics and underlining are used correctly (for titles of books, the names of newspapers and magazines, and the titles of movies).
10. Words are used correctly (especially homophones such as there, their, and they're; your and you're; its and it's; and to, too, and two).

Figure 4. Personal proofreading checklist.

Correcting Errors

Using the personal proofreading checklist helps students take charge of their self-regulated proofreading, locate as many errors as possible, and correct these errors themselves or with another editor's assistance. Some errors are easy to correct, some require the use of a dictionary or thesaurus, and others involve help from the teacher. Editing ends when students and their editors correct as many mechanical errors as possible, or students meet with the teacher in a conference for final editing. When mechanical correctness is demanded, this conference is crucial. The goal of editing is to make the writing optimally readable (Smith, 1982)). Writers who write for readers know that when their writing is not readable, they have written in vain, for their ideas will never be read (Tompkins, 2013).

Publishing

Publishing is the final stage of the writing process. Publishing children's writing has several meanings. In general, publishing refers to sharing student's writing with a larger audience. The format can range from neatly handwritten stories that are read to classmates to computer-generated manuscripts that are sent to book companies for publication. Between the two ends of the continuum, teachers may find many ways to celebrate writing by helping students publish their work (Hughey & Slack, 2001).

Donald Graves and Jane Hansen (1983) suggest that one way to help students develop the concept of author is to have a special chair in the classroom designated as the "author's chair." Whenever children read their own compositions aloud, they sit in that chair. There are many ways writing teachers can share children's writing with an audience including the following (Tompkins, 2010, pp. 27-28):

- Sit in an “author’s chair” and read the writing aloud in class.
- Submit the piece to writing contests.
- Contribute to a class anthology.
- Contribute to the local newspaper.
- Make a shape book, step book, or slit book.
- Record the writing on a CD.
- Submit it to a literary magazine.
- Read it at a school assembly.
- Produce a DVD of it.
- Display poetry on a “poet-tree”.
- Make a hardbound book.
- Display it on a bulletin board.
- Design a poster about the writing.
- Display it at a public event.
- Read it to children in other classes.

Publication Formats

Several teacher activity books include easy directions for student created books (Hughey & Slack, 2001). *Read! Write! Publish!* by Fairfax and Garcia (1992) has instructions and simple diagrams for making 20 different books for students to use for publishing their work. Shape books are especially popular with very young writers. Teacher supply stores sell activity books that include shapes such as robots, cars, or various animals that can be traced and reproduced and cut out. Student-created pop-up books are popular as well. *Pop-O-Mania* by Valenta (1997) and *How to Make Holiday Pop-Ups* (1996) and *How to Make Super Pop-Ups* (1992) by Irvine are examples. Character dolls is a popular book format for third, fourth, and fifth graders, especially for storytelling. Step books are ideal for mini-journals, alphabet books, or other student creations. The slit book is particularly attractive to young writers, because the pages lie flat, and it has a magical way of staying together without staples or other fasteners.

How-To-Publish

Melton’s book (1985) *Written and Illustrated by ...* is an excellent resource for every writing classroom, beginning with grade four. Melton instructs teachers in how to turn every student into a self-published author. Melton explains how to help students organize a publishing company; lay out pages, plan and write a story, assemble and bind the book, and design covers; and host an author signing party. Younger students can benefit from the same procedures but require extensive teacher assistance. The Lintor Children’s Publishing Company in Phoenix, Arizona sells classroom packages of preassembled book covers and accompanying software templates for publishing student writing (see childpub@aol.com; Hughey & Slack, 2001, p. 157).

Henderson’s (1996) *The Market Guide for Young Writers* contains information for students on how to publish their work. She provides a market list for students’ work and emphasizes a professional approach to publication, which increases students’ chances of success.

Henderson suggests that the two main components for becoming a published author are the same for adults as for students: (a) find out who publishes the type of writing the student likes to write, and (b) find out how to submit the material. Her book provides the necessary information for both components of success. Aliko's (1986) *How a Book Is Made* provides a realistic introduction to how an author's ideas are transformed in the publishing process into mass produced books.

Generating Wider Audiences

A number of commercial magazines, written for and by children, provide avenues for publishing. Many school libraries often subscribe to children's magazines. A list of children's magazines is provided in Table 1. Information contained in Table 1 includes: magazine, magazine audience, word-count per article, magazines that pay professional rates, and author's/publisher's rights per submission. All of the children's magazines listed in Table 1 accept student work. Many publications cater to student submissions exclusively. To learn more about how children can submit their writing and art to the children's magazines listed in Table 1, contact each magazine individually to receive submission guidelines.

Table 1

Pro Markets At-A-Glance

Market	Audience	Words	Pay	All Rights
American Girl	Girls 8+	Up to 2.3K	“pro”	N
Aquila	8-13	Up to 1.15K	“pro”	N
Baby Bug	6 mo-2 yr	Up to 6 short sentences	\$25+	N
Boys’ Life	Boys 8+	1K-1.5K	\$750+	N
Boys’ Quest	Boys 6-13	Up to 500	\$.05+/word	N
Breakaway	Boys 12-17	Up to 2K	\$.12-.15/word	N
Brio/Brio & Beyond	Girls 12-15/ Girls 16-20	Up to 2K	\$.8-.15/word	N
Calliope	8-14	Up to 800	\$.20-.25/word	Y
Cicada	14+	Up to 15K	Up to \$.25/word	N
Clubhouse	8-12	500-1.5K	\$75-200	N
Clubhouse Jr.	4-8	500-1.5K	\$75-200	N
Cobblestone	9-14	Up to 800	\$.20-.25/word	Y
Cricket	9-14	200-2K	Up to \$.25/word	N
Dig	9-14	Up to 800	\$.20-.25/word	N
Dramatics	High School	800-4K & Plays	\$25-400	N
Faces	9-14	Up to 800	\$.20-.25/word	Y
Grit	NA	Up to 15K	\$20-400	N
Highlights for Children	3-12	Up to 800	\$150+	Y
Highlights for High Five	2-6	Up to 500	\$150+	Y
Hopscotch	Girls 6-13	Up to 1K	\$.05+/word	N
Humpty Dumpty	4-6	Up to 350	\$.22/word	Y
Iguana	7-12	Up to 800	\$.05/word	N
Jack and Jill	7-10	500-800	Up to \$.17/word	Y
Ladybug	2-6	Up to 800	\$.25/word	N
Listen	Teens	500-1K	\$50-150	N
New Moon	Girls 8-14	900-1.2K	\$.05/word	Y
Odyssey	10-16	Up to 1k	\$.20-.25/word	Y
Our Little Friend	1-5	Up to 500	\$25-50	N
Parabola	NA	Up to 1.5K	\$75-100	N
Pockets	6-12	600-1.4K	\$.14/word	N
Primary	7-9	Up to 1K	\$25-50	N
Treasure				
Shine Brightly	Girls 9-14	400-900	\$.03-.05/word	N
Sparkle	Girls Grade 1-3	100-400	\$20	N
Spider	6-9	300-1K	Up to \$.25/word	N
Turtle	2-5	Up to 350	\$.22/word	Y

Conclusion

To write well, students need to have confidence in their ability to write. Writing teachers can build that confidence by providing students with a safety net, a writing process that guides students in their writing—how to begin, how to proceed along the way, and how to conclude a piece of writing. In this article, we present a five-stage writing process, which includes activities identified through research. The stages are prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Prewriting is the preparing-to-write stage and includes choosing a topic; considering purpose, audience, and genre; and generating and organizing ideas for writing. Drafting is the process of getting ideas on paper. Revising involves refining the writer's ideas. Editing is proofreading the piece of writing by correcting mechanical errors to make the writing optimally readable. Publishing is the culminating stage of the writing process and includes sharing the finished product with an audience.

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