

Teaching High School Students How to Write:  
The Importance of Direct Explicit Instruction and Teacher Training

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### Abstract

Learning how to teach writing is a skill just as learning how to write is a skill. Without a dedicated composition course in Education faculties pre-service teachers are not getting the training they require to be effective teachers of writing. In this report, a case is made for why teachers have to be more aware of how students learn to write and provide them with the strategies necessary to make them more effective writers. Learning how to write is a life skill that manifests itself in everyday occurrences like writing emails to perspective employers, putting together a report, or writing essays in higher education. If someone does not have the facility to write well then others do not take them seriously. Since this is a skill that is a necessity in today's world it makes sense that more attention should be paid to how students learn to write, and how teachers learn to teach writing. Drawing on extensive research, the author argues that learning how to write well is too important to leave to chance. And, that learning how to teach writing can also not be left to chance.

## Introduction

Writing assignments in high schools are often characterized by *one-off* or *stand-alone* assignments. What this means is that each year students write one of every kind of genre that their English Language Arts teachers can think of to assign to the class. While it may be interesting to provide students with the opportunity to learn about writing different assignments, it is not conducive to students actually learning *how to write* effectively in any one of them. The problem is that students do not get a chance to revise their assignments once they receive teacher feedback. The result is that students do not get to develop their writing ability by being given the opportunity to adjust their mistakes. When students write one assignment, get feedback, but never get to incorporate that feedback they cannot hope to progress in their writing ability. A further issue for students, is that the next year their new English Language Arts teacher assigns the same genres but the students cannot put to use anything they learned the previous year because their new teacher has different expectations.

Soiferman (2012) in her study of high school students' experiences with writing assignments found that it was the students' perceptions that they completed a variety of writing assignments during their high school years but did not learn any of them to the point of mastery. In order to improve their writing students have to feel comfortable that they understand what it is they are expected to do in each assignment. On the survey, administered by Soiferman, asking students to list all of the writing assignments they had been asked to do in their high school English classes, the students reported that they had to, for example, write essays, research papers, short answer questions, poems, short stories, newspaper articles, and journals in high school. Though the sheer number of writing assignments increased the volume of the writing the students were required to produce, it also led to a number of the participants expressing

dissatisfaction or confusion surrounding their writing efforts. They reported frustration at having to write so many different kinds of assignments. They were particularly unhappy with the lack of clear direction given for the assignments. The students talked of getting high marks on their English Language Arts coursework but they also reported that the marks were not meaningful. They felt that they could turn in work of any quality and still get a good mark. They also reported that they did not bother to read the teacher comments they received on their papers because the comments were often not helpful. In addition, the students did not always see ways in which they could incorporate the teacher comments into their next paper because they perceived each assignment to be a stand-alone assignment. The findings from Applebee's (1984) interviews with high school students were very similar with the kinds of comments made in Soiferman's (2012) study. In Applebee's (1984) research, the students reported that teachers' comments were specific to the paper under consideration but did not specify how the improvements could be incorporated into their next papers. In his examination of writing in high school, Applebee (1984) characterized high school writing assignments as:

being typically first-and-final draft, completed in class and requiring a page or less of writing. Topics for these assignments are usually constructed to test previous learning of information or skills, hence the students' task is to get the answer 'right' rather than to convince, inform, or entertain a naïve audience. (p. 184)

For example, in Soiferman's (2012) study, students said that if they wrote a poem, they wrote a single poem and did not write another until the next year when the annual poetry unit came around. Similarly, if they were asked to write a journal, it was not handed in until the unit was completed with no opportunity to incorporate the feedback. Thus, the comments they received after the fact were not helpful for improving their journal writing. It was the students'

perceptions that this was the case with the majority of the assignments they had to do in high school. Because the assignments were so varied, and because the students did not have to do another assignment of the same type, the students did not see how they could utilize teachers' comments to improve their writing. For the students who participated in Soiferman's (2012) study, they reported that these kinds of assignments made writing haphazard and disjointed. The lack of clear direction in high school English Language Arts classes caused students to become frustrated when completing assignments.

It is difficult to understand the purpose for having high school students write stand-alone assignments without the opportunity to rewrite based on teacher feedback. In my discussions, with pre-service teachers, they told me that they did not want to let their students re-write assignments because that would mean more marking for them. They did not see the point of having to mark assignments twice which would lead to a heavier workload. When I pointed out that they could have their students complete less assignments, but let them re-write, they expressed disbelief that it would actually accomplish anything. This disconnect between getting students to write, and teaching them to write, is one of the reasons that high school students do not feel prepared when they enter university and have to write essays in their various courses.

### **English Language Arts Curriculum**

The other issue, in high schools, is that writing is not considered a subject but is seen only as one part of the English Language Arts curriculum. This leads to teachers spending time discussing literature and no time discussing how to write. In their study, Soiferman and Straw (2016) were surprised to discover that none of the high school teachers, that were interviewed, explicitly taught their students how to write, and yet they expected their students to write and write often. It is difficult to understand how teachers can expect students to improve their

writing ability without direct explicit instruction or without being taught any writing strategies to help them complete the assignments. If you think about it, what other subject in the school curriculum expects their students to do something without first being taught how to do it? A case in point would be having students do complex math problems without any instruction, or having students conduct science experiments without being taught how to do the experiment. It is inconceivable that students are expected to learn to write by simply writing. Similarly, it would be wonderful if students could learn to write just by reading good literature. The sad fact is that they can't and the teachers who persist in thinking that they can are doing a disservice to their students by not providing direct explicit instruction in how to write.

In their assessment of the Manitoba Senior Years English Language Arts curriculum, Soiferman and O'Brien Moran (2016) ascertained that the curriculum works from the assumption that reading instruction will lead to improvement in student writing performance. This has led to a curriculum that does not distinguish between reading instruction and writing instruction. Educators seem to operate with the assumption that reading activities will lead to writing proficiency. While it is true that reading and writing share some of the same linguistic features (visual acuity, phonological understanding, short and long-term memory) and that both require the use of prior knowledge, an understanding of audience and purpose, word recognition skills (vocabulary), content or domain knowledge, and procedural knowledge they are still different enough that they require separate methods of instruction (Soiferman & O'Brien Moran, 2016).

Soiferman and O'Brien Moran (2016) further stated that "English Language Arts classes in high school are usually designed to introduce students to literary analysis rather than written composition. While writing is certainly a part of the English Language Arts curriculum, it is generally treated as the medium for explorations of the literature that has been read and

discussed than as a subject in and of itself” (p. 1). Davies (2010) hypothesized that one of the problems in teaching high school students to write is the lack of dedicated composition classes. She contends that “as long as literature and writing are combined, some teachers will focus primarily on literature and not on writing. What writing is done is in response to literature” (p. 127). Similarly, Sullivan (2010) observed that the “high school English curriculum needs to be less exclusively focused on literature” (p. 251). Though high school teachers often assume that students have learned to write effectively by the time they get to high school, that is often not the case.

The connection between reading and writing is not as strong as people think it is based on the research of Shanahan (2006). Shanahan (2006) found that “reading and writing instruction can be usefully combined, but instruction in one or the other is unlikely to be an adequate replacement for the other if the goal is to develop students who can read *and* write well” (p. 177). Shanahan suggested that “[i]t is possible to teach reading so that it improves writing, and to teach writing so that it improves reading, but we do not know how to do this consistently” (p. 177). In addition, Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) in their examination of the correlations between reading and writing reported that “the amount of shared variance between reading and writing was never found to be more than about .50” (p. 42) thus indicating that the connection is far lower than educators might believe. Shanahan (2006) further discussed that reading and writing tend to be influenced by direct explicit instruction within each dimension rather than across them. In other words, reading instruction improves reading, and writing instruction improves writing more than cross-language efforts.

## **Teacher Training**

Many teachers are reluctant to teach writing because they often lack the confidence to know exactly how they are supposed to teach their students to write. This is due to the fact that most teachers do not receive any training in how to teach writing in their Education classes. This is a real problem. If pre-service teachers are not receiving any guidance in how to teach writing, and are not being made aware of best practices in how to guide their students in the writing process than they do not know what to do when they get into their own classrooms. It is therefore not surprising that most teachers do not make writing instruction a part of their classrooms. Teaching writing is not something that everyone knows how to do just because they can write themselves.

When it comes to teaching writing in secondary schools many teachers rely on using templates that they provide for their students to follow. These templates are examples of what experienced writing looks like and students are required to follow the template when writing assignments such as a poem, an essay, a reflection etc. Unfortunately, this does not help teach students how to write. What it does is teach them how to follow an ideal standard that few students will be able to emulate. We can't all be poets like e.e. cummings or satirists like Mark Twain. Students do not have the knowledge, or the talent, to become published authors and therefore should not be expected to try to write like authors. Contrary to popular opinion, students cannot learn to write when provided with nothing more than examples of good writing. Reading good writing does not necessarily translate into better writing as has been shown by Shanahan (2006). Writing needs to be widely and systematically taught in teacher preparation courses if students are to reap the benefits of becoming more effective writers.



Graham and Perin (2007) state that “writing well is not just an option for young people – it is a necessity” (p.3), that developing the writing skills necessary for academic success and for participation in the global economy is fast becoming too important to leave to chance. Research in the field of composition instruction suggests that particular strategies can help improve the writing quality of students in the school system (Graham & Perin, 2007, Hillocks, 1986, MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006). Systematic instruction and assessment of these strategies has a direct impact on the quality of student writing. Although the issue of quantity of instruction (rather than type of instruction) is not broadly addressed in the research literature, what is indicated is that strategy instruction needs to provide students with multiple opportunities to learn, practice, and use the strategies in their own writing. So, while quantity in itself may not be an indicator of success there does seem to be an implied indication in the literature that frequency of instruction is an important criterion. Bromley (2007) says that “classroom practices that give students plenty of opportunities for writing and self-assessment at every grade level, both individually and together, are critical in developing strong writers” (p. 260).

### **Five Paragraph Essay**

Many high schools students learn to write using, what is known as, the five-paragraph essay which includes an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. This essay is known for being very formulaic and appears to be a generic form of writing (Applebee, 1984; McCormick, 2006). In her study, Soiferman (2014) found that 76% of the university students, that she surveyed, indicated that they had learned to write in high school using the five-paragraph model. The students reported that the five-paragraph model was beneficial to them when learning how to write an essay because it provided a structure that they could use when developing their essays. Applebee (1984) indicated that structured models, like the five-

paragraph essay, instruct students in the shape of the product providing them with a sense of what they are required to produce. He cautioned, however, that this type of instruction does not provide explicit instruction in procedure and rarely leads to the students' understanding of the purpose of writing. Like Applebee, Dean (2000) found that students and teachers like the five-paragraph model because it was predictable and easy to follow. It is also a structure that teachers are familiar with since many of them learned how to write following the same five-paragraph essay format. When students are learning how to write they need some form of structure so they can learn how to organize their writing. A model like the five-paragraph essay provides that structure and provides the necessary scaffolding that students need especially those who are having difficulty learning how to write. There is nothing inherently wrong with teaching the five-paragraph essay but teachers should instruct their students that this is a good place to start and that they will have to adapt the basic model depending on what it is they are writing. Unfortunately, the reason that many teachers teach their students how to write using the five-paragraph essay is because that is how they were taught and in the absence of any other instruction that is what they use. They often do not pause to ask themselves questions such as why do they teach the five-paragraph format, what are the benefits of teaching writing using a model, and how can they impress upon their students that no model can be used without some modifications.

In Education, there is a common misconception that there are only two sides to any learning strategy like the five-paragraph essay. Either teachers like using it or they don't like using it. And, those who don't like using it look down on the teachers who do use it in their classrooms. Similarly, the teachers who like it dismiss those teachers who don't use it. This false dilemma does not leave any room for debate. It is a fact that some students need a structure

to organize their thoughts. The five-paragraph essay provides that. Some students are good writers and will succeed without formal instruction but those students are few and far between. Most of us, when learning something new, require some scaffolding. We need to know how it works before we can get creative. It is the same with writing instruction. If students have no idea how to write in different genres they need that support in order to be successful. Just writing, without feedback, does not help students become better writers no matter how much teachers wish it were so. In addition, many teachers do not know how to mark writing efforts and so do not assign writing in the mistaken belief that their students will somehow learn to write on their own. Those of us, who have a background in Education, are guilty of looking for the perfect solution. If any method of teaching has even one flaw than let's not use it at all. This is not a good approach.

In order for pre-service teachers to gain confidence in how to teach writing they must be given direct explicit instruction in how to use research based writing strategies in their classrooms. Graham and Perin (2007), in their meta-analysis, provide evidence of eleven elements of effective writing instruction. They caution their readers that the elements do not “constitute a full writing curriculum” (p. 4). However, teachers need a place to begin learning about the different tools they can use to improve their students’ writing ability and the discussion by Graham and Perin can provide that scaffolding. As the authors’ state “writing well is not an option for young people – it is a necessity . . . writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy” (p. 3). As such teachers cannot leave writing instruction to chance, or resort to doing what they did when they were in school. One of the criticisms of Graham and Perin’s (2007) analysis is that while they identify the elements of good writing, they do not provide instruction in how teachers can make

use of those strategies in their classrooms. It is difficult for teachers to understand how to translate the research into effective teaching. This is one of the problems with teachers not receiving instruction in how to teach. When they get into their classrooms they are at a loss as to how to go about providing procedural knowledge to their students.

The issue is that in pre-service Education courses there are no dedicated composition courses offered. Teachers need guidance in helping them learn what the best practices for teaching students how to write are and then when those students get into the classroom they can teach their students. Without a dedicated writing course in their training, pre-service teachers are left to *assign writing not teach it*. They cannot determine the difference between what is taught and how it is taught. Without this knowledge classroom writing experiences will continue to be hit and miss.

The number of students who graduate from post-secondary schools who have never written an essay, of any kind, is rising based on anecdotal comments made to me by my first-year students. There is also a continuing trend of teaching grammar and thinking that will make students better writers. It doesn't. When students ask me if learning grammar will help them become better writers I tell them no. Our oral speech, is for the most part, grammatically correct and yet we do not teach children to talk by giving them rules to follow. They learn to talk by talking and hearing their parents and others people around them talking. They learn through instruction when those around them correct their speech patterns. We have to apply the same reasoning to writing. Students will not learn to write just by writing. Making the same mistakes over and over again will not help them improve but having knowledgeable instructors guide them in how to avoid making the same errors will help them improve their ability to write coherently.

**What does direct explicit instruction mean?**

In order to provide direct explicit instruction in learning *how* to write, teachers must become knowledgeable about how to teach writing. This is not as easy as it sounds. Not every teacher can become a teacher of writing without first getting some instruction in how people learn to write. It is a myth that every teacher can teach every subject equally well.

Administrators would not allow English teachers to teach math or science classes unless they had a background in those subjects. And yet, the prevailing theory is that anyone can teach reading and writing because everyone who teaches can read and write. It is not true that everyone can teach writing just because they can write. So, in order to become a teacher of writing, teachers must learn about writing and how to teach it. And, I don't mean reading some lesson plan on the internet about an assignment that they could give students. I mean really understanding how students can learn how to put down their thoughts on paper in a coherent fashion based on sound writing principles. One of the ways to help students improve their writing assignments is to teach them how to revise.

**Revision**

In their discussion of how, and if, teachers teach writing in their classrooms, Soiferman, Boyd, and Straw (2010) examined the benefits of teaching students how to revise. They argue that revising a paper gives the students the opportunity to improve their paper by revisiting their ideas and organization. Graham, MacArthur, and Fitzgerald (2007) state that revising is a process of comparing the actual text to the intended text; thus, revision depends on the goals of the writing task. Soiferman, Boyd, and Straw (2010) discovered that in the grades 4-12 classrooms, they studied, that only 24% of the teachers regularly taught their students explicit strategies on how to revise their papers while 31% of the teachers never taught their students how to revise

their papers. Only 27% of the teachers reported that they frequently allowed students to rework their paper after they had been given teacher feedback, and 36% never gave their students an opportunity to re-work their papers after getting teacher feedback. This, of course, begs the question of what the feedback is for if students are not allowed to re-write their papers after learning how to improve their work. Also of interest is the fact that only 23% of teachers regularly asked students to revise papers after receiving comments from other students while nearly half of the teachers (48%) never gave students this opportunity.

As well, teaching editing strategies allows students to learn how to polish their papers so that readers can better understand what the authors are trying to say. Of the teachers, in the grade 4-12 classrooms, that were interviewed, Soiferman, Boyd, and Straw (2010) discovered that, only 24% of them said that they frequently teach explicit editing strategies. And 23% of the teachers say that they never teach their students how to edit their papers. Graham et al. (2007) observe that much of the skilled writer's time is spent planning, revising, monitoring, evaluating, and regulating the writing process. The authors go on to say that it was found that college students spend 50% of their writing time planning and reviewing what they write and that business executives spend almost two-thirds of their writing time planning. The frequency of teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing and the frequency of allowing them time to practice these strategies can lead to improved writing skill (Graham et al., 2007). Self-editing, peer editing, and teacher editing all contribute to the revision of students' writing. These strategies allow students to self-monitor their learning so that they can see what they have learned as a result of writing and editing their paper and receiving teacher feedback. The more often they have the opportunity to practice these skills the easier it will be to become skilled writers (Soiferman, Boyd, & Straw, 2010)

### **Importance of Learning about Audience and Purpose**

Two of the most important considerations before beginning to teach any genre are getting students to think of the audience that they will write for and their purpose for writing. Therefore, it is important that teachers first decide on the purpose for any assignment that they will be assigning in their classroom. They cannot possibly teach any genre if they do not have a purpose for teaching that genre. Teachers should ask themselves what it is they hope their students will learn from doing the assignment. What will they be grading their students' papers on, in other words what are the things they will be looking for? Once they have their purpose, they can determine how they are going to get that purpose across to their students because everyone works better when they have a purpose for doing an assignment. Without a clear purpose the student is left to guess what it is teachers want them to do? It is difficult to do a good job on an assignment when students do not understand what they are supposed to do. This is in keeping with Applebee (1984) and Soiferman (2012) who both found that students wanted more direction in their writing assignments. Students in Soiferman's (2012) study expressed concern that they were being asked to write assignments without understanding why they were writing and what the teacher wanted them to write.

### **Providing Templates to Replicate**

Teachers have to guard against providing templates for students to copy in an attempt to get them to improve their writing. A writing template is a document that students try to follow by replicating what is already on the page. This practice does not directly translate into more effective writing strategies. A template differs from a model such as the five-paragraph essay model and an outline. The five-paragraph essay and an outline provide the structure for the essay but do not provide a full document for students to copy. In the five-paragraph model and

an outline the students still have to do their own writing by following the pattern of organization. A template is a model of what the finished product should look like. This is not teaching students how to write. This is teaching them to try to imitate what experienced writers do which is very difficult when they are novice writers. I often have first-year students come to see me, in my office, and ask me if I have an essay that they can look at and follow. They tell me this is how they wrote in high school. They get frustrated when I tell them that I do not want them to simply take someone else's essay and replicate it. This is one of the problems with providing templates for the students to follow. They do not learn how to write on their own without the crutch of the template and cannot write if they do not have something to copy. Writing becomes a process of filling in the blanks. Teachers give templates because they mistakenly believe that looking at a template will help improve students' writing. It doesn't. What it does do is make the students reliant on an unattainable standard of writing that they can never hope to reach without some instruction in how to get there. Just as teachers of math must understand the concepts they are teaching their students so too must teachers of writing understand the concepts of writing before they can begin teaching.

### **Benefits of Providing Outlines**

Instead of providing templates for students to follow, teachers would be better off providing outlines for students. The benefit of an outline, unlike a template, is that the outline provides the structure for the assignment but encourages students to populate the outline by making their own writing decisions about the assignment. When students understand that they are the ones in charge of their own writing, it makes them aware of what they need to do and how to do it. This process will help students learn how to write their own papers without the need to try to reproduce a piece of writing that someone else did.



Students also benefit from outlines because they provide the structure of the assignment and take away some of the decisions that students have to make when writing. Writing is difficult without some sort of structure in place. Each of us write with a structure in place. As we gain confidence in our writing, the outline does not have to be written down because we have that structure in our heads but until students develop an understanding of structure they need something specific to follow. An outline helps students keep track of what they are going to be writing about and the order they will be writing.

The other benefit of using an outline is that once a student gets comfortable using an outline they can go on to write other assignments without depending on the teacher telling them exactly what they need to do at each step of the process. They begin to make their own writing decisions and become independent writers.

### **Types of Assignments**

The types of assignments that are assigned in English Language Arts classes have to be carefully thought out. Teachers appear to operate under the assumption that in order for students to be able to understand something they have to write about it. This is wrong on so many fronts but I will begin with an example. A poetry unit is taught every year in every English Language Arts class that focuses on literary development. This is commendable because students should be exposed to good poetry and taught to develop an understanding and appreciation of poetry. The problem arises when teachers assign students to write poems. This assignment is incredibly difficult because students do not know enough about how to write a poem to be able to write poetry. What this type of assignment does it make students dislike poetry, and they never want to read poetry outside of a classroom again once they leave high school. If the purpose of an assignment is to make students read less, or enjoy literature less, than I would say getting them to

write a poem fulfills this purpose. However, I don't think that is the intent of teacher assignments. At least, I would hope it isn't. Instead teachers should allow students to read a variety of poems and perhaps write about one poem that meant something to them. This writing could take many forms such as explaining why they liked that particular poem, perhaps they could compare and contrast two or more poems by the same or different authors. They might want to illustrate a poem, or set it to music. But, I can almost guarantee that the one thing they will not be interested in doing is writing a poem that has no meaning for them and no purpose.

The same case could be made for student reflections which dominate English Language Arts classrooms. What is the purpose of reflections? Is it to get students to engage with the material they are reading? If that is the purpose then it would be better to get students to formulate comments about what they read without resorting to saying how they feel about what they read. Perhaps they could write questions that were raised when they were reading the assignment. A reflection means to take stock, to seriously think about something. The problem, with asking students to reflect on what they are reading, is that without some direct explicit instruction on *how to reflect* they are left to give superficial comments that do not mean anything to them, or do not help them understand what it is they are reading. Not every reading lends itself to students forming an opinion about what they read or to want to comment on it. If teachers want students to learn how to have an opinion then let them give their opinion and back it up with evidence from their reading. This serves the purpose of getting students to read the book or play, allows the teacher to monitor for comprehension, and allows students to develop their critical thinking skills. When teachers allow students to interact with the readings in their own way the students become more interested and they will become more interactive in class.

Another teaching technique in classrooms, across the grades, is to teach around a theme (Soiferman & Straw, 2016). The benefit of teaching to a theme is that all of the material is on the same topic and students can become immersed in the topic. The only problem that Soiferman and Straw (2016) discovered about teaching to a theme is that the students have no input into the theme they want to study. The teachers, and sometimes the whole school, come up with a theme that everyone must follow. This leads to some students not being interested in that particular theme. When students have to write about something they know nothing about, are not interested in, and have no desire to learn more about than their writing will be superficial at best. If teachers are interested in improving their students' writing then they have to take into consideration their students' interests and background.

### **One Day Workshops**

Many teachers learn how to teach writing by attending one-day workshops sponsored by their educational institutions as part of their professional development. The problem with these *one-off* workshops is that they do not provide guidance in how to teach writing. What they do is provide programs that teachers can use in the classroom. Teachers should be careful about attending one-day or one-session workshops sponsored by people who are trying to sell their products. These speakers are often dynamic and share best practices that work for students who are already good writers. What they do not do is discuss issues involving students who will never learn to write without direct explicit instruction. These workshops are often centred on what worked for that person or persons in a controlled environment. Their recommendations are personal anecdotes that worked for them and are not founded on sound research based strategies. It is easy for teachers to leave these workshops armed with a book, or consumables, and feel like they now know how to teach writing. Remember when I discussed using templates. This is the

same thing as using a template. Teachers attempt to make the students fit the program rather than the program fit the students. And, trust me when I say that there is no magic formula for teaching students to write well. If there were, there would be no students who leave secondary school not being able to write, and unfortunately that is not the case.

One cannot learn to teach writing by attending a one-day workshop. Learning how to teach writing requires a commitment on the part of the teacher to actually learn what works and what doesn't work in terms of learning and understanding different writing strategies. Then, teachers have to take those strategies and determine what works with their students. Not every strategy will work with every student. The more strategies teachers have in their teaching repertoire the better because this will enable them to adapt to individual students. These strategies cannot be learned and understood from being exposed to them one time anymore than students can learn to write by completing one kind of each genre, every year, without being allowed to learn by re-writing.

### **Internet Lesson Plans**

As mentioned above, the problem with attending workshops is that teachers then attempt to duplicate the lessons in their classrooms without any thought. The same can be said for teachers who get lesson plans off the internet. Again, the problem is that these plans are generic and not specific. There is nothing wrong with getting ideas about how to teach something and then modifying them for individual classrooms but that has not proven to be the case with the majority of the teachers. Teachers, who are unsure of how to teach writing, do what most people do in the same situation. They look to the internet for lessons because they do not know what to do and it would take too long for them to come up with their own ideas. The main problem with this approach is that without some type of guidance the teachers may not get the lesson correct or

may not use the whole lesson because they do not understand exactly why they are doing what they are doing. This trickles down to the students who will also not understand what they are being asked to do and why they are being asked to do it.

Another issue with looking to the internet for ideas is that teachers have no idea if the lesson plan will work with their students. This is the same as someone, without any background on a topic, attempting to pass themselves off as an expert because they read several different internet articles and cobbled together ideas. Teaching writing does not involve taking shortcuts anymore than writing involves taking shortcuts.

### **So What Should Students Know Before Beginning to Write?**

I am only going to mention three things that I think every student, who is learning how to write, needs to know. There are other things they need to know and they will learn those as they complete assignments but these three are basic. Without a knowledge of introductions, conclusions, and how to organize their writing, students will not be able to improve their writing skills.

#### **(1) Talk about Introductions**

One of the strategies that all teachers should take into consideration, when teaching their students how to write, is to teach them how to write proper introductions that are not designed to only grab the reader's attention. Readers do not need some gimmick to make them want to read someone's writing. A good introduction will orient the reader to what is going to be discussed in the assignment. If it is written properly the main message will come through for the reader and will encourage the reader to continue reading. The problem with attention grabbing introductions is what happens after the reader gets interested in the topic. There is nothing that can sustain that first sentence. For example if I started this article by saying that High School

English Language Arts assignments were designed to make students fail at writing. It's attention-grabbing. If you are interested in writing instruction it might have made you stop and think. But, where do I go from there? I would have to spend the rest of the article saying why I think schools are failing their students. This would not be the purpose of the paper.

### **(2) Talk about Conclusions**

How many of you learned that the conclusion simply restates the introduction? I learned this a hundred years ago when I was in secondary school and based on my students' comments this is still being perpetuated. The conclusion does draw attention to what the writer promised the reader they were going to discuss in the paper but it should not be a verbatim rehash of the introduction. What the writer wants to say in the introduction is what the paper is going to be about and the conclusion is what the paper was about. Teachers should teach their students to connect the ideas for their reader and not leave it for them to make their own connections. And, the conclusion should not be an after-thought that students suddenly remember that they need just before they hand it in. A hurried conclusion is worse than no conclusion.

### **(3) Talk about Organization**

It is amazing, to me, that my first-year university students have no idea how to organize their writing assignments. They simply start writing and continue writing until they finish. The problem with this approach is that it does not leave room for any writing decisions. They don't ask themselves questions as they proceed, such as why am I putting this here, does it belong here, what else goes with this point and so on. This type of writing supports Applebee's (1984) findings that high school students see their assignments as being first and final drafts. In order for students to improve, they have to understand the importance of making a plan before they

begin writing. This is why teaching them how to outline their essays will be invaluable to them as they proceed in their studies.

### **Final Thoughts**

Teaching students how to write is a life skill. Many good ideas have been discounted because the writing was not coherent or the author lacked basic writing skills. If you have ever received an email that was so filled with grammatical and spelling errors that it made it difficult to read, and even more difficult to respond to, then you know what I am talking about. A high school English Language Arts teacher's job is to teach. Not just teach things they are comfortable teaching but to teach their students skills they will need for the rest of their lives. It is not enough to just get them to write, although they should write and write often. But, they will not learn how to become more effective writers without some form of direct explicit instruction. They need guidance and each student will need different guidance. Having students write multiple assignments without the chance to improve will not help them. They will be destined to continue making the same errors over and over again. It is my hope that teachers will understand that having students write *one-off* assignments, without direct explicit instruction, is not conducive to good writing instruction, and, that all teachers also need direct explicit instruction in learning how to teach writing based on research not on anecdotal stories.

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