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Writing Is a Thinking Activity

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January 2012

Topic **TEACHING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TO BE EFFECTIVE WRITERS**

Highlights

- » Writing is a powerful and flexible tool for students.
- » There are four recommended practices: provide daily time for writing, teach the writing process, teach the foundational writing skills, and build an engaged community.
- » It is important to have a balance in what we teach to be sure kids learn how to think as writers.
- » Students need to learn more complex writing strategies as they move throughout the elementary grades.
- » Teachers need to be prepared to teach writing and be involved in writing with students.

About the Interviewee

Dr. Steve Graham is the Warner Professor in the Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation in the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. His research focuses on identifying the factors that contribute to writing development and writing difficulties, developing and validating effective instructional procedures for teaching writing, and the use of technology to enhance writing performance. He is the past editor for the journals *Exceptional Children* and *Contemporary Educational Psychology* and is a consulting editor for *Focus on Exceptional Children*. He is the author of the

Handbook of Writing Research, Handbook of Learning Disabilities (volume 2 in progress), *Writing Better, Making the Writing Process Work, Best Practices in Writing Instruction, and Powerful Writing Strategies for All Students*. Dr. Graham also authored *Writing Next, Writing to Read, and Informing Writing* for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. He served as co-editor of the three-volume series *American Psychological Association Educational Psychology Handbook* and is a senior editor of the *What Works for Special Needs Learners* series published by Guilford Press. Finally, Dr. Graham is a member of the Adolescent and Adult Literacy Panel formed by the National Research Council, he was the panel chair for the Practice Guide on writing instruction for elementary grade students developed by the What Works Clearinghouse, and is a member of the research advisory panel and early history panel for the National Writing Project.

Full Transcript



 **00:05** Hi, I'm Steve Graham. I was the chair of the Practice Guide *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*.

 **00:16** Writing is really essential today for students. It's a flexible and powerful tool. We use writing to communicate, we use writing to inform, we use writing to learn, we use writing to persuade, we use writing to entertain, we use writing to also self-reflect. It's essential in terms of a skill that you need to be successful in college. And, increasingly, to have white collar or blue collar jobs today, you have to write well.

 **00:41** There are four recommended practices in the writing guide. The first is that students need to write and write frequently, and we need to provide writing instruction to them. This is critical, because if you don't write and you don't receive instruction, you're not going to become a better writer. The second is, is that we need to teach the processes involved in writing and help kids write to learn for different purposes. You know, writing is a thinking activity. We need to help students be good at that thinking part.

 **01:09** Also, a third recommendation is that we need to teach the foundational or basic skills that make writing go smoothly, and these are handwriting, typing, spelling, sentence construction, and the use of technology as a tool for generating writing. And finally, we want writers who work.... And our fourth recommendation is, we want writers who are in an engaged community and engaged writers. So it's collaborative, and students are motivated to write.

 **01:39** A couple of things that teachers need to know to implement these practices is that, one, you've got to make time available for writing and writing instruction. And this could be a time set aside specifically for writing, but it can also be to use writing as a tool for learning in other classrooms like social studies.

 **01:56** A second thing that's really important is that we have to have balance in terms of what we teach. So we really want to make sure that kids learn how to think as writers. And to do that, what we want to do is we want to model and give students assistance to do that process. So, for example, if I'm getting kids or helping kids write something about a persuasive text, I want to model where I get my ideas from, how I organize those ideas, the types of goals that I set. And then I want to work with them as they do the same thing, and then I want to have them work with peers to do that, and I'll give assistance as needed.

 **02:33** On the more fundamental skills like handwriting and spelling, we want to teach those skills directly but we don't want to spend too much time on those. So we want to show how to do it, give kids practice doing it, and then we want them to apply it in their writing.

 **02:47** When teachers implement these four recommendations into their classroom, what we typically see in kindergarten and first grade is we see a lot of writing done by kids, but a lot of it is interactive with teacher help. We see very simple strategies taught, like brainstorming, or we might focus in on revising on one or two things like, does it make sense and can I add more? We also see handwriting taught in both of

those grades. We see a lot of invented spelling so kids can get ideas down on paper, and we see the start of teaching very basic sentence skills like declarative, interrogative, and imperative sentences.

 **03:24** When we move to second and third grade, we still see a lot of different kinds of writing going on, but writing now is more complex. So instead of having a story with a single episode as in kindergarten, first grade, now it's likely to have multiple episodes. The strategies get more complex at this point as well. We might see something like outlining and combined together with something like brainstorming to get ideas. And also when we take a look at revising, now we have five or six criteria going on, which might include sentence structure, vocabulary, voice, those kind of things. In terms of skill instruction, we still have instruction at least in second grade, maybe into third grade on handwriting, and spelling's really kicking up, and we also see a good bit in terms of compound and complex sentences.

 **04:06** As we move to grades 4 and 5, then we're doing a lot of writing again, but now the shift is writing to learn, for the most part. And we're also encouraging kids to take those strategies that they've been learning and combine them in productive ways. In terms of the basic kind of skills that are still being taught, we're having more emphasis on sentence construction, but now it's taking the sentence and making it fit your intentions and meanings that you're looking at, and there's probably still a little bit of spelling instruction going on as well.

 **04:35** The challenges that teachers typically face in implementing these practices revolve around three distinct things. One is time. It's hard to find enough time in the day to have kids write a lot and to also teach writing. So one very important solution to this is not to have writing occur just at one time; have writing occur throughout the day, including at home as well.

 **04:58** A second issue is feedback. When kids write more, then there's more that teachers could give feedback on. But I think in terms of thinking about this, it's important to keep a couple of things in

mind. One of those things is, you don't have to give feedback on every single piece of writing that kids do. If they're using writing as a tool for learning, you don't need to give feedback on the quality of that. When you give feedback, you don't need to give tons of it. You need to pick a couple of things that they did really well and let them know that, and you need to pick a couple of things that they could do better on and help them over time with those. Giving a letter grade is not going to be very helpful here. Also in terms of feedback, you've got natural resources in the classroom, and that's other kids.

 **05:41** The other thing that's very important to think about in terms of this is preparation. The better prepared you are to teach writing and the more involved you are in writing with kids, you're going to be a great teacher, a better teacher, and it's important to make sure that you develop those skills.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-PEP-11-C-0068. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.