DOINGWHATW⚫RKS

Understanding the Purpose of What You're Writing

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Topic	**TEACHING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TO BE EFFECTIVE WRITERS**
Practice	**WRITING PROCESS**

Highlights

» Students need to learn to write for multiple purposes: to inform, to persuade, and to convey experience.

» Students are more likely to be engaged and motivated to write if the task is meaningful and they understand the purpose of what they are writing.

» It is important for teachers to look for opportunities for students to write for different purposes across the curriculum.

» Teachers can use collaborative modeling to help students generate content.

About the Interviewee

Charles A. MacArthur is a professor of special education and literacy in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. A former special education teacher, he teaches courses on literacy problems, writing instruction, and educational research. His major research interests include writing development and instruction for struggling writers, development of self-regulated strategies, adult literacy, and applications of technology to support reading and writing. He is currently principal investigator of a research project developing a

writing curriculum for developmental writing courses in community colleges, and co-principal investigator of a study of writing instruction in first grade. Major funded research projects have focused on decoding instruction in adult education, development of a writing curriculum for students with learning disabilities, writing strategy instruction, development of multimedia tools to support reading and writing, speech recognition as a writing accommodation, and project-based learning in social studies in inclusive classrooms. Dr. MacArthur served as co-editor of *The Journal of Special Education* for five years and serves on the editorial boards of several other journals. He has published over 100 articles and book chapters and edited several books, including the *Handbook of Writing Research and Best Practices in Writing Instruction.*

Full Transcript

🔊 **00:04** Hello, this is Charles MacArthur. I'm a professor at the University of Delaware, and I was a member of the panel that developed the Practice Guide *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers.*

🔊 **00:16** Students need to learn to write for a variety of different purposes. It's part of the Common Core State Standards, which talk about writing to inform, writing to persuade, and writing to convey experience. And in school and in real life, people write for many, many different purposes. It's important, first of all, that students understand the purpose of what they're writing. So if students see the purpose of what they're writing, they're much more likely to be motivated and engaged in doing it. So what sorts of purposes do we want students to write for? Well, there's many. Students naturally like to write about their own experiences, and so personal narrative is usually a good way to get the year started—have students write about exciting experiences they had or write memoirs about times in their past. What about writing to inform? Well, the school day is full of things that students are learning—in science, in social studies, things about their daily life—all of those are opportunities to write to inform.

And then you also have to look for opportunities for persuasive writing. So it's important for teachers to try to arrange opportunities for students to write across the curriculum for a wide range of different purposes.

🔊 **01:34** It's important to teach students strategies to help them plan what they have to say and how to organize it. And this will look different depending on the grade level and the type of writing that they're doing. For example, suppose you were a fourth- or fifth-grade teacher and you had decided that it was time for your students to have some practice and some experience to learn something about persuasive writing. So how would you go about teaching that? Well, the first thing is you want students to have some understanding about what persuasion is. So they connect what they're going to be doing in their writing to what they already know.

🔊 **02:11** Most planning strategies connect the organizational elements of a type of writing to planning. So what are the elements of persuasive writing? Well, one is your opinion, your belief, what it is you're trying to persuade people about. Another key one is reasons; what are your reasons for your argument? And a third one is what's the supports, what's the details and the examples that support those reasons? And then of course you want to have a conclusion. So there's different ways to organize that. You might use a graphic organizer, or you might use a mnemonic, like sometimes we use the mnemonic TREE for *Topic*, which is the belief, *Reasons*, *Examples* to support those reasons, and *Ending*.

🔊 **02:55** So how do we use that to teach planning? Well, we model it for students. So we say, "First we have to think who we're writing to and why we're writing to them. So, for example, perhaps we're writing to our parents to convince them to let us go to the mall with our friends. Okay, so we have our purpose for writing now. Now, we need to think about our elements; let's write TREE on the board here and think, 'Okay, well we have what we're trying to convince them: let us go to the mall. Now what would our reasons be?' So let's brainstorm some reasons." And so this is the teacher modeling, the teacher is

thinking out loud through this process. And then go back through your brainstorm and choose the reasons that you think will work for this purpose. Then write them down, then do your draft, include all your reasons. Use your plan while you're writing. After you've been through that once and the teachers model it, we usually recommend collaborative modeling. And in collaborative modeling, the teachers and students work together. The teacher controls the strategy, but the students generate the content so they have the experience that they can do it.

🔊 **04:02** I'm going to give an example of a writing activity that might take place, perhaps in the second half of first grade or in second grade, that would introduce young students to persuasive writing. So what kind of persuasive writing might very young students do? One example would be writing book reviews. And so if you were a teacher and you were planning to ask students to write a book review, how would you go about doing that? Well, first of all, you have to provide a meaningful context for it, and a good way to do that is to, during your read-aloud times, read some short book reviews to students and let them choose which book they want you to read based on the book review. And when students have that model, then you help them to plan their own. The book: what is their opinion, what did they think about it? And then a reason or two about why they liked it or why they didn't like it.

🔊 **04:56** So it begins with giving them an opportunity to read some examples. We sometimes call them *mentor texts*; they're good examples of writing of the type you want students to do that are written at the level that you expect students to be able to do. It's important for students to write things that are meaningful to them. They should have a purpose and a goal for the writing tasks that they engage in. Students are much more likely to be engaged in the task if they understand why they're doing it, who's going to read it, what they're going to learn from doing it. In addition, the purpose of writing is very much connected to the form and content of that writing and to the strategies that students will use in planning and revising it.

🔊 **05:45** By giving students meaningful purposes and goals for their tasks, it helps them to understand why different pieces of writing are organized in different ways, how to go about planning different kinds of writing, and what to look for when you're evaluating and revising those writing pieces.