

Common Struggles

When I was a new teacher struggling with writing instruction, I felt like it was my fault because I struggled with writing in school myself. I was embarrassed to admit that I didn't really know how to teach writing. I went to a great teacher preparation program and was passionate about teaching, so why were my students struggling to even write a paragraph?

It took me years to realize that I was not alone in my struggle to teach writing. Now, I receive multiple emails daily from teachers who found my website while searching for solutions. It's important to understand the reasons we have these struggles so that we can create a plan that addresses or works around them.

TIME

Why do we struggle so much to fit writing time in? In many schools, the focus on math and reading has left limited time for other subjects. We continue to extend the math and reading blocks to keep up with expanding standards and state testing. Because students can write in every subject, it's easy to say, "We can incorporate writing into the other subjects, so there's no need for a dedicated time." Even many textbook companies are producing English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum that incorporates reading and writing, but the writing seems like an afterthought.

When I opened up our ELA textbooks my first year, it seemed very straightforward. My students would read and answer questions, and then they would write about what they read. I couldn't understand why my students were struggling to write. It was years later when I realized that our ELA curriculum only included the *application* of writing, with no lessons for me to actually teach the skills they needed to do this writing.

Several years later, I was exposed to my first actual writing curriculum. It made sense to take the time to teach them how to write. But that was the real issue – time. I had hour-long writing lessons in my hands, but a 90-minute ELA block with reading curriculum that took at least that long. The solution, I was told, was to teach writing when I could fit it in and incorporate more writing application into all the other subject areas. That left me again without consistent time for actual writing lessons.

Although integration is a great time-saver and is important for students to apply their writing skills, it doesn't always leave room for the direct instruction they need. When students are only receiving sporadic writing lessons, they don't become confident writers. When you mix this with complex content vocabulary and technical information, it's a recipe for disaster for our struggling students. Studies strongly support having a dedicated writing time where students can receive adequate practice and instruction in writing. Writing skills are sorely lacking in many schools because there is no explicit writing instruction (Graham, 2019).

The systems in this book have been used in many classrooms where time was limited, including my own. Through a lot of trial and error, I learned that I could teach writing with limited time, but I absolutely needed a dedicated writing block where I taught a short whole group lesson and students applied what they learned in their own writing immediately after. Only then were my students able to apply those new skills to reading, math, science, and social studies.

So, how much time do you need? It really depends on the individual situation, but I have some common schedules that I suggest. If you can do 45 minutes a day of writing, that is fantastic. More realistically, a lot of teachers I work with do 30 minutes a day or 45 minutes three times a week. My middle school teachers with only 50 minutes a day to teach ELA often block out time for two full writing units each quarter, and then

they teach reading standards while having students apply their newly acquired writing skills the rest of the time. We'll discuss schedule and the writing block in Part III so that you can create something that works for your unique situation.

VARYING STUDENT ABILITY LEVELS

By far, the most difficult task teachers have is teaching grade-level standards when our students are all at completely different levels. Your classroom is made up of below, at, and above grade-level students. You probably have students with learning disabilities, second language learners, and gifted students.

I have upper-elementary and middle school teachers contact me on a daily basis asking what to do with a handful of students who can't write a sentence or a paragraph, which is a challenge when their on-level writing lessons are focused on multiparagraph pieces. This situation is all too common in our classrooms. This is why I decided to write this book with a focus on simple and efficient differentiation that any teacher can implement.

The word *differentiation* can cause a panic for many teachers. With limited time and resources, it's hard enough to fit in one whole group lesson. Adding different types of lessons and strategies for different learners can seem impossible. Differentiation is not individualized learning in the sense that a different lesson needs to be made for every student. Instead, it offers multiple types of learning when working with students in whole group, small group, and individually during writing conferences. Differentiation, done correctly, means making proactive modifications to your regular units that meet the needs of your students (Tomlinson, 2017).

The strategies built into each part of this book are what will address your students' need for more support. You will still have students at varying ability levels, but you'll have the tools you need to differentiate for all of them. You'll learn how to naturally differentiate your lessons to reach your special education, English Language Learner (ELL), gifted students, and everyone in between.



My biggest challenge teaching students with different writing abilities and goals is preparing and organizing lessons that are at their instructional level. The grade-level curriculum provided did not meet the individual needs of my students. The lower grade levels did not teach the correct content, and the higher grade levels did not include the foundational writing skills my students were missing. I was constantly searching for strategies, mini-lessons, and activities for my students. I also had to have additional activities prepared for my paras who were running small groups and working 1:1 with students.

– Holli Duncan, Special Education Teacher

LACK OF TRAINING AND CURRICULUM

Many new teachers find themselves ill-equipped to effectively teach writing to their students due to a lack of comprehensive instruction during their college years. While teacher education programs may cover the basics of writing instruction, they often fail to provide in-depth training on the intricacies of teaching

writing as a complex and multifaceted skill. As a result, many teachers feel unprepared to address the diverse needs of their students, including different writing genres, individual writing processes, and strategies for providing meaningful feedback.

After teachers graduate from their respective programs, they continue to receive general training sessions from their school district. I think that most of us can agree that writing is not an easy subject to teach, yet most schools don't provide in-depth professional development that supports teachers in this endeavor. This isn't to say that school administrators don't want their teachers or students to succeed in writing. They are limited by time and resources just like teachers are. This often leads to quick trainings on one novel strategy that they can add to what they're already doing. For many teachers, there is no complete system for writing instruction provided, leaving them confused and discouraged about why what they're doing isn't working in the classroom.

We also have a lot of inconsistency when it comes to writing curriculum. Some schools have ELA curriculum with a heavy focus on reading and no explicit writing skill instruction. Other schools implement do-it-yourself (DIY) strategies by collecting lessons from workbooks and the internet. There are some schools that have quality writing curriculum with no training on how to use it. For teachers who do not know how to teach writing, having a poor curriculum, or none at all, can be extremely stressful.



My biggest struggle was coming in as a new ELA teacher with no curriculum. I had to piece-meal several things to create a lesson. Nothing was cohesive, and I had no time for my family – for my own children – because I was always lesson planning or grading. I also had no idea how to teach writing. Writing is something that came naturally to me, but teaching how to write is a completely different ball game.

– Frauline Walker, 6th-Grade Teacher

So, what is a “quality” writing curriculum? Most importantly, it must include structured writing mini-lessons that consider the limited time teachers have to teach writing and the varying ability levels of their writers. While having structured lessons, the flexibility in how and when the lessons are delivered is key to properly differentiate. If you don't have a curriculum like this, don't panic. This book will provide you with the tools to make the modifications you need for success.

If you feel like lack of training or curriculum is a big issue in your school, consider bringing in other teachers and administrators by starting a book study with this book. Chances are, there are many other teachers in your building who struggle with teaching writing.

ADDRESSING THESE STRUGGLES

I've given training on my systems to over 50,000 teachers, which has allowed me the opportunity to see how it works in a lot of different classrooms. I've learned that there is no one system or program that works *exactly* the same way in every classroom. I joke that I “differentiate to help teachers differentiate.” This is why you'll see different options and modifications listed in each chapter. These systems need to be tailored to your constraints and what your current group of students need.

In future chapters, we will lay the foundation for streamlining your lessons while incorporating simple differentiation techniques to help reach students of all ability levels. Putting these basic foundations in place (in a way that works for your class) is key in addressing the struggles we have discussed in this chapter. Once you feel like you have these down, you can move on to more complex strategies like small group and conferring.

Before moving forward, I strongly recommend you either use a notebook or a document on your computer, tablet, or cell phone to take notes on key takeaways and your tasks going forward. Throughout the book, journal boxes are included where I ask you to stop and set an intention or goal. You may also want to go back to reread this journal and the corresponding section of the book as you implement each part and prepare for the next step.