COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY GUIDES

GRADES K-6
OVERVIEW

Writing is a fundamental skill. It is important for students to develop an early foundation in writing so they can communicate, represent and express their ideas. Effective instruction and adequate time for students to write are key in helping students gain confidence in their writing abilities.

Writing can serve a number of purposes: communicating a message, playing with language, inciting a response and writing about reading where students can analyze, reflect, demonstrate understanding and show evidence of their thinking. Careful instruction and modelling is necessary to help students master writing conventions, hone craft skills (also known as Writing Traits), consider audience and explore genres:

- **Functional** - communication to get a job done, e.g., notes, graphic organizers, letters, ads
- **Narrative writing** - telling a story, e.g., fiction texts, personal narratives, summaries, readers’ theater script, cartoons, biography
- **Informational writing** - organizes and presents facts, e.g., non-fiction texts, author study, essay, how-to guide, report, “all about” book, photo essay, news article, speech, editorial, review
- **Persuasive writing** - sharing an argument (facts and logic) or seeking to persuade (opinions and emotions)
- **Poetic writing** - arranging words and phrases to convey meaning, evoke feelings and portray sensory details

KEY INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS

One way to structure writing in the classroom is by implementing a Writer’s Workshop model. This framework provides a predictable structure for writing instruction and practice. The components of Writer’s Workshop are:

- Mini Lesson
- Independent Writing
- Guided Writing
- Conferencing
- Sharing/Author’s Chair

Mini Lessons are typically taught to the whole group (e.g., carpet time in front of a whiteboard or chart paper). The instruction focuses on an identified area of student need. These lessons usually involve the teacher doing the following:

- Activating students’ prior knowledge
- Directly instructing a skill
- Modeling the skill (e.g., shared/interactive writing)
- Engaging the students in discussing or practicing the skill
- Connecting the skill to other learned writing skills

Independent Writing takes up most of the Writer’s Workshop time. Students need frequent and predictable periods of time set aside to write.

Guided Writing is an opportunity for the teacher to work intensively with a small group of students who share similar learning needs while the rest of the class is working on independent writing. These small group lessons help scaffold learners at all levels. Guided writing is a strategy that gives students the opportunity to review a recently taught writing skill in a small-group setting and then to apply the skill through independent writing. Guided writing involves many components - planning, writing, revising, editing/conferencing, publishing and sharing. A lesson usually comes about when a teacher determines that a group of students could benefit from further support in a certain area.

Guided writing should foster development of the writing process, writing traits, and conventions in a structured, layered way that includes anchor books and related instruction. Guided Writing should be linked to reading in that writers must think about their readers and through the reading of diverse mentor texts, the craft of writing can be explored. Guided writing groups are typically organized by student developmental levels.

Strategy Groups are similar to guided writing groups, but in this approach, a group of students from across development levels are linked together for instruction on a specific writing skill or strategy.

The teacher

- may focus group work on developing writing skills and strategies (forming paragraphs, etc), on using writing as a tool for inquiry, on learning to write in different genres, on the writing process, or on using technology to publish writing;
- may form small temporary (usually short term) strategy groups of students that meet to discuss aspects of writing and learn more about the writer's craft and conventions;
- selects strategy groups that are flexible and are based on what the teacher learns as he/she reads the student's writing;
- meets with guided writing/strategy groups several times per week as needed;
- plans for students to work individually for most of the period, then has selected students move into the group for 7-12 min of small group instructional time.

The student's role is to work on their own pieces of writing during independent and guided writing times integrating research and key content as directed. Students learn to evaluate their own work and participate in peer feedback processes.

Conferencing occurs while other students are working on their independent writing. It allows the teacher to engage in a conversation with one student writer, to focus on the writer's needs and to help them solve problems related to their particular piece of writing. A writing conference should focus on one aspect of their writing and provide just enough help to keep the student moving forward. It should last approximately 2-10 minutes; it is not the time to edit or revise an entire piece of writing.

Sharing/Author's Chair allows for students to share and celebrate their writing. This component allows students to learn from each other, ask questions and offer feedback to their peers. It is not necessary to have all students share during each writer's workshop but preferable to choose a few volunteers. In the interest of time and attention spans, students may opt to only share a portion of their writing if their texts are quite long. Or you may choose to have all students share with a partner for a few minutes and then select a few to share with the whole class.

Students love taking turns in a fun chair, stool or armchair (better yet, one they had a chance to personalize) holding a class quilt or teddy bear - anything that marks the value of sharing and contributes to the sense of community.
RELEVANCE TO PROGRAM OF STUDIES

General Outcome 1: Explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences.
1.2 Clarify and extend

General Outcome 2: Comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts
2.1 Use Strategies and Cues
2.3 Understand Forms, Elements and Techniques
2.4 Create original texts

General Outcome 3: Manage ideas and information
3.1 Plan and Focus
3.3 Organize, Record and Evaluate
3.4 Share and Review

General Outcome 4: Enhance the clarity and artistry of communication
4.1 Enhance and Improve
4.2 Attend to Conventions
Writing instruction should follow a **gradual release of responsibility model**. It is an instructional framework that has been documented as an effective approach for improving literacy achievement (Fisher & Frey, 2007), reading comprehension (Lloyd, 2004), and literacy outcomes for English language learners (Kong & Pearson, 2003). It emphasizes instruction that mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise (Buehl, 2005).

It is not uncommon for teachers to rush past the stages of ‘we do’ and ‘you do’, but this is a prime opportunity for students to develop and refine their writing and editing skills before they are expected to use them independently.

This model is not linear; teachers may cycle back to focus lessons and guided instruction when students need additional support. There should be continual flow between guided writing instruction (skills taught), coaching, conferring and goal-setting (individualized support) and independent writing (skills practiced).

Nancy Frey in this video briefly describes how to implement the Gradual Release of Responsibility model during writing instruction: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwB1gX9PK-w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZwB1gX9PK-w)

**CONSIDERATIONS – PLANNING TIPS – CLASSROOM DESIGN**

- Writing should be a regular, ongoing component of literacy instruction as opposed to a random event that takes place from time to time in an isolated manner. In order to maximize teaching time, writing instruction should support learning across the curriculum. A scope and sequence that highlights skill development and genres by grade or level may be helpful to differentiate and plan instruction.
- Post or share exemplars of student writing so students can see what is expected of them and compare their writing to the exemplars.
- Consider flexible classroom seating options to honour different writing styles including collaborative writing/peer editing tables and quiet spaces.
- Make available a wide range of writing tools: clipboards, pencils/feathered pens, graphic organizers, different types of paper, staplers, folders, reference books and writers’ notebooks.
- Post support materials on the wall: anchor charts, visuals/pictures, banned words, colourful words, other options for ‘said’, writing strategies, interactive word wall so students can access words, etc.
- Pernille Ripp encourages teachers to reflect on instruction and classroom design to see if it engages learners. Visit her blog for ideas on how to create passionate writers: [https://pernillesripp.com/2015/02/12/creating-passionate-writers-some-ideas-to-start-with/](https://pernillesripp.com/2015/02/12/creating-passionate-writers-some-ideas-to-start-with/)
- Allow room for personal choice and voice. Provide topic ideas, picture of the day, story cubes/dice, etc., so students are not stuck facing a blank page. Whenever possible, allow students to craft texts that are personally meaningful to them.
- Provide fidgets, wiggle seating and kinesthetic supports to illustrate big ideas (e.g. emotional “eggs” or a bouncing ball to emulate sentence structure).

First Steps (chapter on Guided Writing): [http://www.erlc.ca/resources/resources/first_steps_in_literacy/](http://www.erlc.ca/resources/resources/first_steps_in_literacy/)


Hoyt, L. (2012). *Crafting nonfiction intermediate, lessons on writing process, traits, and craft.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. (Grades 3-5)


Empowering Writers - online resources, professional books and workshops: [http://empoweringwriters.com](http://empoweringwriters.com)

Writing Fix K-12 - an extensive website built around writing traits featuring mentor text lessons, daily writing prompts, 6 trait materials, cross-curricular ideas: [http://www.writingfix.com](http://www.writingfix.com)


Ruth Culham - Writing Resources, using mentor text, 6 Traits Writing Program, scoring guides: [www.culhamwriting.com](http://www.culhamwriting.com)

Ralph Fletcher - Tips for Young Writers, Writer's Notebook, PDFs for teachers, Professional books: [www.ralphfletcher.com](http://www.ralphfletcher.com)

Vicki Spandel & Jeff Hicks:

- Six Trait Gurus Blog - assessment tips, lesson ideas, book reviews: [https://sixtraitgurus.wordpress.com/](https://sixtraitgurus.wordpress.com/)
A FEW THOUGHTS FROM EDUCATIONAL EXPERTS IN THIS AREA:

- The quality of writing instruction will rise dramatically not only when teachers study the teaching of writing but also when teachers study their own children's intentions and progress as writers. Strong writing is always tailored for and responsive to the writer. (Lucy Calkins)

- When students write from experience, they can breathe those specifics into their writing—dialect, odd smells, precise names of plants—that can animate even the most tired and tedious text. (Ralph Fletcher, What a Writer Needs)

- Reading is like breathing in. Writing is like breathing out. Reading brings new ideas, perspectives and worldviews. Writing is how we send our own voice, hopes, wonderings and opinions into the world. Captivating books act as mentors for a child’s own writing and provide valuable guidance on how to tell stories and craft strong ideas. This is why writing and reading are most impactful when practiced together. (Pam Allyn 2015, ILA Conference)

- What students have been missing for years is seeing their teacher write...Write yourself...You can’t ask someone to sing a duet with you until you know the tune yourself. (Donald Graves)

CONSULTANT TIPS

- Mini-lessons: could involve whole class or small group; could reinforce a skill or strategy; might demonstrate a new move for students who are ready for additional challenge; could be designed to guide students who have trouble getting started; same skill would typically be practiced during independent writing time or in literacy stations;

- Help students learn to value the entire writing process including revision and editing. However, not all texts need to be fully polished. Writing folders and notebooks should be filled with personally meaningful content, lists, rich ideas, writing attempts with varying levels of success, and ideally learning goals that indicate self-awareness of their strengths and goals. Students should be able to describe how they are honing their craft.

- Make time for quick writes. This is a versatile strategy where students write rapidly and without stopping in response to literature, a prompt or as a formative check-in before or after a lesson. Quick writes provide students with a means of quickly representing their thinking. Rather than being concerned with correct spelling, punctuation, and word usage, the student is able to focus on their message. Typically, quick writes are timed (approx. 2-5 minutes) and students are given a chance to share their writing with peers.

- Writing is not simply an academic exercise. It can also help students reflect, calm down, and express emotions. Invite students to write any time they need to process something that happened or they may benefit from quiet reflective time.

- Build in lessons where students ‘hold’ the pen and help create short texts as a class. Interactive and Shared Writing is an important step towards building independent writers.
Writing Bill Of Rights
- Lucy Calkins

1. Writing needs to be taught like any other basic skills with explicit instruction and ample opportunity for practice.

2. Students deserve to write for real, to write the kinds of texts they see in the world and to write for an audience of readers.

3. Writers write to put meaning on the page. Teach children to choose their own topics most of the time and write about subjects that are important to them.

4. Children deserve to be explicitly taught how to write including instruction in spelling and conventions as well as qualities and strategies of good writing.

5. Students deserve the opportunity and instruction necessary for them to cycle through the writing process as they write.

6. Writers read. To read and hear texts read, and to read as insiders, studying what other authors have done that they, too, could try.

7. Students deserve clear goals and frequent feedback. They need to hear ways their writing is getting better and to know what their next steps might be.
SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE...

- Students who feel like writers. They know what they are ‘working on’ and approach writing confidently. They have a purpose and look forward to sharing with a real audience (not just the teacher).
- Students who look forward to writing time and quickly become absorbed in their writing because it is personally meaningful to them.
- Students who collaborate with peers, seek feedback and are willing to revise and compare to exemplars, refining content, organization, voice, vocabulary, etc. to improve their texts.
- Students are given choice and are willing to take risks because of the supportive environment.
- Teachers who provide short, targeted interventions, directly coaching students in various groupings and providing feedback. Less students getting “stuck”, facing blank pages and becoming frustrated.
- Teacher has a strategic plan. Writing links to outcomes and is tied to reading, mentor texts and content areas. Clear evidence of strategies, tools and anchor charts in use.
- A teacher who also writes. Teacher is passionate about writing; modeling and thinking aloud to share own process.

CHALLENGES/PITFALLS

- Managing the classroom while teaching guided writing groups:
  - Establish routines early on.
  - Foster independence (teach strategies, allow students to collaborate with peers, post anchor charts, “see 3 before me”).
  - Ensure that students have an identified purpose and writing goals.
  - Teach students how to conference together on their own.
- Finding the time to teach guided writing effectively:
  - Consult sample writing workshop schedules to see how others have structured their time.
  - Work strategically with grade partners and aides to create flexible groupings across classrooms.
  - Focus lessons on identified areas of student need (focused on specific strategies and skills). Rather than grouping students by developmental level or following a lock-step program (one size fits all).
- Finding lessons:
  - Assess the learners and identify areas of need. Use data from assessment tools such as SLA/PATs and rubrics found in Inclusive Ed library (see link in assessment section).
  - Refer to student outcomes and a developmental continuum to create a roadmap.
- Lack of student engagement and reluctance to write:
  - Provide choice and meaningful topics
  - Use discussions and pre-writing activities to shape ideas
  - Learn from and emulate mentor texts
  - Build background knowledge
  - Offer feedback in the midst of the work (not after writing is complete)
  - Provide an authentic audience and purpose for writing

Interactive Writing
Students and teacher talk. Students and teacher write.

Shared Writing
Students talk. Teacher writes correctly.
**MODIFICATIONS, SUPPORTS AND TECHNOLOGY TOOLS**

- Use pictures, sentence stems and rich word lists to support writing.
- Differentiate expectations for each student.
- Use online tools such as G Suite for Education where you can connect to student texts at various stages during their writing process and provide feedback, ongoing assessment and support directly within their text (e.g. using comment feature).
- Discover digital tools that can enrich the writing experience such as Pobble365.com for daily picture prompts and discussion questions, Storybird.com for easy to create, beautiful digital books and Seesaw, a digital portfolio, for sharing writing with parents.
- Explore alternative tools so that all students can communicate their ideas: scribing, eye gaze charts, alternative pencils, speech to text tools, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication devices.
- First Author Writing Curriculum: - comprehensive writing curriculum for students with complex needs: [http://donjohnston.com/firstauthorcurriculum/](http://donjohnston.com/firstauthorcurriculum/). This resource was used to support the Literacy For All communities of practice in Alberta in 2015-16. See more about this project, key teachings via workshops and webinars and lessons learned. [http://literacyforallab.ca/teaching-resources/](http://literacyforallab.ca/teaching-resources/)
- Drawing and scribbles are part of the writing journey - see a pictorial progression of beginning writing development: [http://blog.heidisongs.com/Free_Downloads/assets/Stages_Of_Childs_Writing.pdf](http://blog.heidisongs.com/Free_Downloads/assets/Stages_Of_Childs_Writing.pdf)

**MODIFICATIONS, SUPPORTS AND TECHNOLOGY TOOLS Cont.**

- Occupational Therapy Handwriting Recommendations from Center of Development - tips for developing fine and motor skills, correct posture, pencil grasp, etc.: [http://www.developmental-delay.com/page.cfm/178](http://www.developmental-delay.com/page.cfm/178)

**English Language Learners:**

- Learn Alberta - Supporting English Language Learners: Benchmarks, Student Writing Samples, Videos and Promising Practices: [http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/eslapb/index.html](http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/eslapb/index.html)
- eBook - Writing Prompts for ELL and Literacy Students (Gr 4 and up) [http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/_downloads/eBooks/Something-To-Write-About.pdf](http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/_downloads/eBooks/Something-To-Write-About.pdf)
PLANNING AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Develop common language with students around writing. Instruction, exemplars and simple, timely feedback framed around each of the 6 Traits of Writing can help students focus on their strengths and set personal goals for what they want to work on next as writers. Consider focusing on one skill or one aspect of a writing rubric before adding on. Here are some rubrics, checklists, and ideas for providing feedback:

- Alberta Education - Gr 1-9 Writing Rubrics & Samples: http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ieptlibrary/lib03.html
- Sneak peek at Writing Workshop materials based on Lucy Calkin’s work: www.nscsd.org/webpages/lcalkins/index.cfm
- Student to Teacher and Student to Student Conferences:
  - TAG conference (tell one thing you liked, ask a question, give one piece of advice)
  - Tickled pink (highlight strength in pink) + Green to grow on (highlight one to improve in green)
  - Bulletin board: Help wanted and help offered - kids could put up post-its with their writing strengths and requests for help
- 2 stars and a wish

Consider asking students to do an on-demand assessment a few times during the year where students are given a prompt and asked to write as well as they know how in a particular genre for a set period of time. It is their chance to highlight what they have learned and teachers can see how well students have mastered the learning, what has bee transferred to new genres and what still needs to be reinforced. This should be a chance for students to show what they know, not feel intimidating like a summative assessment. While students are writing, teachers could take note of stamina, volume of writing, who is distracted/focused, writing habits, beginning sentences, etc. Make copies for students to put in their writing folders so they can refer to this checkpoint later in the year.