

Teaching Writing to Learners who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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A Model for Teaching Writing: Writer's Workshop

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Mayer, C. (2016). Addressing diversity in teaching deaf learners to write. In M. Marschark, V. Lampropoulou & E. Skordilis (Eds.), *Diversity in deaf education* (pp. 271-296). New York: Oxford University Press.

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Writers Workshop – Some Key Points

Remember there is not a single way to implement Writer's Workshop.

Conferencing is at the core of the Writer's Workshop approach - the teacher provides the feedback and scaffolding that will aid the student in improving their text, and identifies the strategies that a student might use to accomplish this.

- Length of conferences dictated by age/needs of learner, number of children in class
- Begins with a reading of the text so that the teacher can get a sense of the meaning - what the student wants to say in their text.
- Identify areas for revision, modeling strategies and practicing them so that the student can make revisions not only to the current piece, but also to future work.
- Record keeping is central - teacher keeps track of the date and the focus of each conference, helping the teacher (and students themselves) to monitor progress.

The workshop should include some sharing of the written work (e.g., Author's Chair). The student author reads a piece of writing aloud (to the class, teacher, or small group) not only to share their work, but to get feedback (i.e., questions comments, observations to which the student author responds) that will support the revising process.

Mini-lessons are short – typically no more than ten minutes in length, often at the beginning or end of the session. The key point is that the focus of these mini-lessons is on discrete aspects of the writing process that warrant explicit attention and can be modeled or taught (e.g., adding more descriptive vocabulary, writing a strong opening sentence(s), using direct narration, combining sentences with conjunctions etc.). The teacher identifies these targets, choosing them on the basis of what may have arisen in the conferencing process, what would be of general concern to the class, or what is mandated by the curriculum.

Guidelines for Implementation

1. Adequate time must be devoted to writing instruction in the school day.

Even though outcomes have been shown to be relatively poor, not enough time is devoted specifically to the teaching of writing. To effectively implement a process approach such as Writer's Workshop, 90 minutes per week would be seen as a bare minimum. If this is the baseline for hearing writers, it would seem reasonable to suggest that deaf writers would need at least the same amount of time – and arguably more, given that they are a group who have traditionally struggled to develop proficiency in this area.

2. Establish routines for how the writing class is managed so that students know what is expected of them.

This includes strategies such as: 1) a system for checking in at the beginning of the class to indicate where students are in the process (e.g., revising a text, writing a first draft), 2) records of ideas and topics for future writing, 3) sign up sheets for conferencing or taking a turn in the Author's Chair, 4) folders for housing completed work and work in progress, and 5) editing sheets listing the writing and revising strategies that have been discussed during conferencing or mini-lessons.

3. Address all aspects of the writing curriculum within the process writing approach.

Teachers must be mindful of the knowledge and skills that are to be developed at each grade level so that they can be appropriately addressed. This becomes especially relevant for teachers working with deaf children in general education settings where the expectation is that they will be working on the same content as their hearing age-mates.

4. Use written language for authentic purposes.

Students must learn how to use text for a broad range of purposes. An excellent framework for thinking about this is the functions of language. Although Halliday's focus was on the use of language for face-to-face communication, this hierarchical framework applies equally well to communicating in written language. The earliest developing functions are the instrumental (What do I want) and regulatory (Do as I say), with the more complex uses of language - the heuristic (Tell me why) and informative (I've got something to tell you) – developing later. For each of these functions it is possible to identify written language forms (genres) that are used to accomplish the task – to use writing for a real purpose and in a meaningful way. For example, a note in the classroom mailbox can accomplish the instrumental function for a seven-year-old writer. As a writer develops and written language becomes more sophisticated, there are a range of ways in which this same function can be communicated. Consider how we might use text to request compensation from an airline for lost luggage as we attempt to persuade and make a case to get what we want.

5. Ensure a balance between the writing of narrative and expository texts.

This is an important balance to achieve, as the bulk of the writing that students need to do in schooling (and ultimately in life) is expository (e.g., report writing, essays). Yet it is often the case that the focus is predominantly on the narrative form in the early grades, and when students encounter expository text in the middle school years, they are ill prepared. It also the case that expository texts are typically more complex and challenging to write, but students have had much less experience with them. By the time children are asked to write their first narrative, they have already had many stories read to them (or read them themselves), and

have a good idea as to what constitutes a well-written story. Yet children are often asked to write a book report or an essay before they have ever read one or had one read to them. Therefore it is important to develop the writing of expository, non-fiction text from the earliest grades. This can be as simple as having children record observations at a center in the primary classroom. For older students it can be valuable to use the Writer's Workshop as an opportunity to work on the expository texts that are required in other subject areas (e.g., summaries, essays, reports). For all students it is useful to have expository texts read to them to develop the sense of the language and structure that characterize these forms.

6. Be thoughtful about the choice of topic.

To motivate interest in writing, students should be given opportunities to write about the topics that are most meaningful to them. However this does not preclude the teacher also assigning some topics or a genre for a particular purpose. This ensures that all aspects of the writing curriculum are addressed, provides a means for introducing genres that might not otherwise emerge, and helps maintain a balance between narrative and expository text.

7. Integrate writing done in other subject areas into the writing classroom.

Writer's workshop can be the perfect forum for the class to work on developing the writing skills needed in other subject areas (e.g., a compare and contrast essay in social studies, a summary of a chapter, a science report). This can be especially true at the middle and secondary school level where writing is central to completing the assignments on which the evaluation in that subject is based.

8. Create opportunities for sharing and publishing work, and reading aloud.

With younger children the Author's Chair provides an excellent opportunity to share writing with the class, get feedback and develop a sense of audience. But even with older students, reading a text aloud to the class or having students share work in small groups or pairs is useful. Learning to read like a writer – to understand how, and whether, a text can be understood by others – is central to becoming a proficient writer.

9. Provide explicit modeling.

It has been demonstrated that simply being exposed to the writing process is not enough. It is critical that teachers explicitly model both the steps of the writing process and the strategies that are employed in developing a text. One of the best ways to do this is to use a "think aloud" strategy that allows the developing writer to gain insights into how a more skilled writer gets the job done. This explicit modeling has been shown to be a critical pedagogical element for all writers, but especially for those who struggle.

10. Use mini-lessons for explicit teaching.

Mini-lessons provide an excellent forum for the explicit teaching of those aspects of the writing process that can be directly taught (e.g., using capital letters, joining two independent clause with a conjunction), and for the explicit modeling of composing strategies as described above.

RESOURCE LIST

Descriptions of Writer's Workshop

Ontario Ministry of Education - eworkshops & exemplars

<http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/edu/core.cfm>

This website includes modules and eworkshops on literacy with videos of teachers in action including activity sheets, lesson plans and tracking tools.

Reading Rockets

(includes a video presentation of writer's workshop – just use the search term “writing” and the relevant areas of the site will come up)

<http://www.readingrockets.org/>

This website also has a specific section “For Teachers and Others” including Preschool Teachers, Speech Pathologists and Principals where you can find research-based information about the learning and teaching of reading and writing. Included are many resources and materials (e.g., videos, podcasts, downloadable pdfs etc.), and ideas for games and activities that support literacy development. The focus is on learners from babies to the age of 10.

Resource Material

Guide to Effective Instruction in Writing: Kindergarten to Grade 3 plus Appendices

http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/edu/resources/guides/Guide_Writing_%20K_3.pdf

http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/edu/pdf/Appendices_writing.pdf

Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction: Grades 4 to 6, Volume 6 - Writing

http://www.eworkshop.on.ca/edu/resources/guides/Guide_Lit_456_Vol_6_Writing.pdf

For these resource guides, put the links into your browser and then you can download the documents.

Read, Write, Think

(includes many resources for teaching writing organized by grade level)

<http://www.readwritethink.org/>

This website is supported by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in the US. There are a wide range of teacher resources including lesson plans, activities and videos. For example, you can find things such as Games/Tools (e.g., CD/DVD cover creator), Tips and How-To (e.g., how to write a book review), Printouts (e.g., Reading Record Chart), Activities and Projects (e.g., Create a Safe Online Profile, Creating and Cooking in the Kitchen), and Podcasts for Teens. The focus on this website is from kindergarten to the end of high school.

Foundations for Literacy (Canadian Language & Literacy Research Network)

<http://eyeonkids.ca/docs/files/readwritekit08.pdf>

Put this link in your browser and you can download a document that provides information, suggestions, templates, checklists, links to resources etc. for teaching writing to pupils from the early years through high school.

Graphic Organizers

http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/graphic_organizers.htm

<http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/>

At both of these links you can download a wide range of graphic organizers to use for teaching writing from the early years through high school and even at the university level.

Create Teaching Resources

(presents ideas for how to use semantic webs, conceptual maps etc.)

<http://www.inspiration.com/>

The Gallaudet Writer's Handbook (1999) by Marcia B. Bordman and Anne Womeldorf

<http://clerccenter2.gallaudet.edu/products/?id=169>

This newly revised, 167-page grammar and style handbook was designed specifically to improve the writing skills of deaf students. In addition to sections on sentence structure and parts of speech, the handbook features a quick reference and common errors section, plus a symbol system professors may use to help students analyze and correct their writing errors.

Overview of Preschool Language and Literacy Development

The Handbook of Language and Literacy Development: A Roadmap from 0 to 60 Months

<http://www.theroadmap.ualberta.ca/about>

At this website, developed by the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, you can find detailed, evidence based information about many aspects of a child's development in the preschool years including the areas of speech-language, reading, and spelling-writing. In each of these sections you can find a research review, a parent narrative, overview of developmental milestones and strategies, parent tips and references.