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# Teaching Beginning Writers

**David L. Coker Jr. and Kristen D. Ritchey**

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**Kristen D. Ritchey**

*Series Editors' Note by*  
*Sharon Walpole and Michael C. McKenna*



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For Sara B. McCraw, PhD: former student, colleague,  
and good friend. We benefited greatly from her dissertation  
on teaching first graders to write book reviews.

She has always been and will continue to be  
a passionate advocate for students.

A portion of the authors' royalties will be donated  
to the Sara B. McCraw Literacy Fund.  
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We would like to thank the teachers and students  
who have been our collaborators.  
Your insights and suggestions have been instrumental  
in shaping our ideas about writing instruction.

# About the Authors

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**Kristen D. Ritchey, PhD**, is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. Her research focuses on assessment and intervention for elementary-age students with reading and writing disabilities. Dr. Ritchey's recent work includes the development of screening and multi-tiered interventions for fourth- and fifth-grade students with reading disabilities, and the development of early-writing curriculum-based measures. She has published articles in several leading journals.

## Series Editors' Note

In recent years, writing has taken a new (and long overdue) place alongside reading. Though these are mutually reinforcing areas, teachers are often uncertain about how to take advantage of their synergy. David L. Coker Jr. and Kristen D. Ritchey point the way in this book. They explain how teachers must give writing a prominent focus from the beginning of preschool and throughout the primary grades in order to realize the potential links between writing and reading. They examine the foundational skills of writing and how they relate to reading, moving from letters to words to sentences to paragraphs. Teachers will learn how to integrate their planning to promote spelling as they teach decoding, and build an awareness that genre and text structure apply to both reading and writing. Comprehension and composition, they argue, are different sides of the same coin. To put it differently, this is a “both/and” book—in it, the authors treat writing as an indispensable partner to reading, not as a distinct area to be taught separately.

At the same time, the authors dispel any doubts that primary-age children are old enough to begin acquiring writing skills. They carefully outline how such skills, when properly sequenced and taught, are not only reasonable but developmentally essential components of the English language arts in early primary classrooms.

And, like every author in this series, Coker and Ritchey stay within the available evidence. We anticipate that much of that evidence will be new to teachers, mainly because we have seen no other books on early writing grounded so carefully in research. The authors present evidence from a variety of research areas: handwriting and spelling development, language and composition development, and regular and special education interventions. They bring evidence from these diverse literatures together in recommendations that are both fresh and sensible.

Coker and Ritchey embrace diversity of all kinds in their treatment. Part of the diversity comes in the naturally occurring differences in early achievement in this crucial area. Part comes from their attention to children at risk because of disability status or English proficiency. This stance will be refreshing to teachers who deal with diversity every day.

The Common Core State Standards for Foundational Skills and for Writing are addressed directly in this book. We are relieved but also wish to point out that even those states that have adhered to their own standards have arrived at similar positions concerning what children must be able to do. In particular, teachers will learn important approaches for helping children write for a range of purposes: to express opinions, narrate events, and describe. All the while, the connections between reading and writing are underscored.

We cannot be more pleased with this book, and we believe it to be an ideal complement to the other volumes in this series. Whenever the authors of professional books anticipate the real-life demands of a typical classroom, teachers get the support they need to meet the challenges. That is exactly what happens here. We are glad for a trustworthy and versatile professional development tool as we work with teachers concerned about the achievement of our youngest writers. We're certain you'll agree.

SHARON WALPOLE, PhD  
MICHAEL C. MCKENNA, PhD

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

In the 21st century, people write all the time. We use e-mails and text messages to communicate; we write business proposals and grant applications to persuade. We write quarterly reports and scientific papers to inform. We write lists to remember, and we write stories to entertain. Without the power and flexibility of writing, civilization would grind to a halt.

### Framework for Writing Instruction

Because of its importance, writing is a central goal for schooling. From the primary grades through high school, students in the United States are expected to learn about the complexity of writing. They need to learn how the alphabet works, how to combine letters into words, how to construct sentences and paragraphs, and how to write complex texts to achieve specific goals. Considering its complexity, writing may be one of the most challenging academic tasks for students to learn.

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) has raised the writing expectations in most states. As early as kindergarten, students are expected to produce a range of texts using both print and drawing. They will need to understand the differences between stories, descriptions, and opinions. We hope students begin to see how writers use these different texts in the world. To help students achieve these standards, writing instruction in many schools will need to change.

As teachers and school administrators evaluate the instructional practices they use to teach writing, many will consult educational research for guidance. Given the prevalence and importance of writing, one would hope that writing research

could offer powerful answers to all the instructional questions that a teacher might ask. Sadly this is not the case, as there are many instructional questions that remain unanswered. Despite its limitations, writing research has much to offer teachers and can provide a useful road map to guide instructional decisions.

We wrote this book to provide teachers with instructional guidance. As we have worked with teachers, many indicated that they feel unprepared to teach writing. This may be because writing was not emphasized during their training. Some have noted that they have few curricular materials to guide instruction or opportunities to engage in high-quality professional development. In short, teachers understand the need for strong writing instruction, but many are unclear about how to help students.

Our goal in this book is to provide the best possible information about how to teach writing in the primary grades. Throughout the book, we include evidence-based practices in writing instruction and use the CCSS as a framework.

## **Writing Theory and Research**

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As we planned this book, our goal was to read and condense high-quality research on writing and translate it for teachers. We looked to both theoretical models of early writing and empirical studies of classroom instruction. In the last decade, the amount and quality of writing research has grown considerably. There have been a number of influential publications summarizing what is known about best practices in writing instruction (e.g., Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2013; Graham & Perrin, 2007; Reed, 2012). One of the most useful reports for primary-grade teachers is a recent Institute of Education Sciences Practice Guide (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012). The authors of this report (who are experts in writing instruction) analyzed the empirical evidence for a range of instructional practices. Based on the strength of the research and their expertise, they made four broad instructional recommendations:

1. Provide daily time for students to write.
2. Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes.
3. Teach students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling, sentence construction, typing, and word processing.
4. Create an engaged community of writers (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012, p. 1).

The recommendations are illustrated with specific classroom strategies and practices. For each recommendation the authors describe the strength of the supporting research. When there are well-designed experimental and quasi-experimental studies supporting a recommendation, the evidence is strongest.

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES) was created in 2002 with a “mission to provide rigorous and relevant evidence on which to ground education practice and policy and share this information broadly” (n.d.). IES oversees the research program of the U.S. Department of Education. More information may be found at <http://ies.ed.gov>. The IES Practice Guide *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers* can be downloaded from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED533112.pdf>.

However, the authors note that the recommendations were not based solely on studies with experimental designs.

Writing researchers have made progress identifying the important contributors to writing success. In this book, we hoped to provide a clear and practical description of how to integrate these best writing practices into classrooms. However, there are still many unanswered questions that are crucial for early writing instruction. Some of these questions include the following:

- When should teachers begin composing instruction?
- When and how should students use invented spelling?
- How much practice do students need to learn the central features of an opinion essay?
- How much support should students get when writing?
- How can teachers help students become independent writers?

When faced with questions that the research could not answer, we followed the example of the authors of the IES Practice Guide and drew on our experience as teachers and researchers. We also crafted lessons, such as those in the genre-based writing chapters, that leverage many supported instructional methods.

Even though the lessons as a whole have not been extensively tested, they contain many supported practices. As a result, we have confidence in their efficacy and believe that teachers (and their students) can benefit from them. We encourage teachers to use evidence-based instructional practices in ways that match the needs of the students of a variety of grades and writing abilities.

## **The CCSS**

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The CCSS represent a significant milestone for the U.S. educational system. For the first time, nearly every state has adopted a common set of academic standards. These standards are rigorous and challenging, and they have the potential to drive significant changes in the way that writing and other academic areas are taught. One reason that we are excited about the implementation of the standards

is that many schools will need to reconsider and intensify their approach to writing instruction. Writing has been called the “neglected R” (National Commission on Writing, 2003), and more attention to writing instruction is needed.

However, we should point out an inherent limitation of the CCSS. They are designed to set goals for student achievement. Any set of curriculum standards cannot make any instructional changes or influence student learning. Without considerable effort by teachers, the CCSS will be a failure. While the CCSS offer a target for instruction, they offer no insight into how to hit the target. It is teachers who must do the hard work of teaching students the skills and processes necessary to meet the CCSS.

In this book, we describe how instruction in various writing components can help students meet the CCSS. We use the CCSS as a framework rather than a road map. That framework provides a goal for instruction. For direction about the most effective instructional practices we consulted relevant theory and research.

## **Curriculum**

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When talking with primary-grade teachers about writing, two questions nearly always come up. What writing curriculum should our school purchase? What curriculum would you recommend? These are always difficult questions because we have not located a single curriculum that would successfully meet all the students’ instructional needs. As a result, we refrain from making specific recommendations about commercial curricula. It is our belief that teachers need to know how to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of any curriculum and then add and subtract components as necessary. Effective writing instruction requires a combination of teacher knowledge and appropriate curricular materials.

This book is not meant to be a complete writing curriculum either. Instead, we have provided resources designed to help teachers evaluate the breadth and depth of their existing curricula. Furthermore, we have offered a range of materials and methods that could be used to supplement an existing writing program or to create one. This book was written to provide insight and materials required for high-quality writing instruction. It is our hope that after teachers read this book, they will be both better informed and more effective writing teachers.

## **Common Instructional Elements**

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Readers are sure to notice common elements across the instructional chapters. This was done intentionally because we include instructional approaches that have been effective across domains. These involve explicit instruction (including modeling) and scaffolding for students (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The first

step in teaching all skills includes the process of explicit instruction. Teachers are clear and direct about what students are learning to do, when they should do it, and how to do it. Next, teachers show students how to do the target process by modeling. When modeling, teachers engage in a think-aloud where they describe their thought processes for students. This allows students to see how experts (the teachers) think as they work. A teacher think-aloud gives students access to the “behind-the-scenes” work that happens. After teachers provide explicit instruction and modeling, they then slowly give students opportunities to engage in the tasks. This could begin by having students participate in small groups or pairs so that they can receive support from the teacher and peers. Eventually, students work individually. This scaffolding is designed to offer students guidance and support as they learn new skills and processes.

Another common instructional element in this book is differentiation. We use the content–process–product framework developed by Tomlinson (1999) to provide examples of differentiation. Most of the suggestions for differentiation address ways to modify the content or the process of writing. Because the standards focus on specific writing products, such as sentence types and texts, less information on product differentiation is included. These suggestions are designed to help teachers modify the lessons both within a grade and across grades.

Similarly, we offer suggestions about assessment. With the implementation of the CCSS and the work by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and SmarterBalanced consortia, there is considerable conversation about student assessment. Much of the popular discussion focuses on summative assessment, which is designed to see how well students meet the specific standards. In this book, nearly all of our suggestions are for formative assessment. Formative assessment is designed to provide feedback about student learning in order to guide instruction.

In the instructional chapters, we provide formative assessments that teachers can use to make instructional decisions. For example, in the chapters on composing instruction, we have provided informal assessments at the end of each instructional phase. Based on students’ performance, teachers can decide to move to the next instructional phase or to review by providing additional instruction and opportunities for practice.

## **Content and Organization of This Book**

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With our stated goals of describing best writing practices and providing instructional materials aligned with CCSS, we have organized the book in a way to accomplish both. In Chapter 2, we review the research on early writing development. Young children engage in a very complex process when learning to write. In this chapter, we describe how the development of skills and knowledge contributes

to students' compositional success. When teachers understand the factors that impact writing development, we believe their work in the classroom can be more sensitive and effective.

Chapter 3 provides a discussion of a central writing skill: handwriting. We review important components of handwriting instruction and provide guidance on instructional strategies for handwriting.

Spelling instruction is the Chapter 4 topic. There is a summary of the research on spelling development and instruction. Then we discuss approaches to spelling instruction, and provide resources that can be used to evaluate an existing spelling program. In addition, we describe how spelling and reading instruction are complementary and can be integrated.

The Chapter 5 topic is teaching the foundational skills for sentence writing. We describe instructional strategies for teaching students to generate sentences. We offer suggestions on how teachers can help students write better sentences using revising and editing strategies.

In Chapter 6, we provide an overview of genre-specific writing instruction. This chapter describes the lesson structure that it used in the subsequent chapters on teaching narrative, opinion, and descriptive writing. In addition, there is a discussion of the instructional approaches used for the genre-specific chapters, including the methods for assessment and differentiation.

Chapter 7 describes the opinion lesson sequence, Chapter 8 describes the narrative lessons, and Chapter 9 describes the descriptive lessons. In each chapter, we provide detailed instructions on how to teach the lessons, including examples of instructional procedures, teacher language, student work, scoring rubrics, graphic organizers, templates, and ways to adapt the lessons for specific grade levels.

In Chapter 10, we explain methods that teachers can use to accommodate students with writing difficulties, including students with disabilities and English language learners. We discuss common difficulties, including problems with handwriting, spelling, and composing, and supports for students. Many of the strategies described in this chapter were developed for students with special needs, but the approaches are effective with a wide range of students. Last, we describe how tiered instruction may be implemented to support students who are experiencing difficulty.

Finally, in Chapter 11 we consider common challenges to successful writing instruction and offer suggestions for overcoming them. Then we provide a suggested schedule for writing instruction and consider how teachers can make time for writing by integrating it into other academic areas.



## CHAPTER 2

# How Writing Develops

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How does handwriting develop over time?
- How does spelling develop over time?
- How do children master different types of composition?
- How do children learn to use writing processes?

Many teachers learn extensively about reading development in teacher education coursework, but what about writing? Teachers we know are quick to say that students struggle with writing in the primary grades, but what do they actually mean? How do they know? In this chapter, we share insights from research that will help teachers gain an understanding of how writing develops in young children.

Without understanding how writing develops, it is difficult to frame expectations about what children might be able to write or understand why they make the kinds of errors they do. Understanding writing development is not a simple task. Nearly all would agree with Berninger and Chanquoy's (2012) assertion that the development of writing is a complex process and that it requires years of practice and schooling for students to become proficient. Writing development depends on multiple factors: cognitive, social, linguistic, cultural, and instructional. Writing also depends on students' oral language, but it requires more than just strong language skills. For example, when we look at an example of students' oral and written summaries, stark differences emerge.

Lena is a curious prekindergartener who loves to hear stories. One day after reading *I'm Dirty* by Kate and Jim McMullan, her teacher asks Lena to tell what