Zaner-Bloser

WHY WRITING WORKSHOPS WORK

Instilling a Sense of Community and Confidence in Young Writers

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Why Do Writing Workshops Work?

The writing workshop approach allows students autonomy and choice while also providing a structure for meeting specific writing goals. It places students' voices at the center of writing instruction. In a writing workshop classroom, students are *writing*, not passively listening to a teacher talk about writing. Instruction centers on the students and their writing; teachers serve as guides and coaches. Students become successful writers because they write daily for extended periods of time on topics of their choice (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019, 40–41). The daily practice of writing gives students the grounding idea that they *are* writers—there is no mysterious talent or gift they must have to begin (Elbow, 1973). They simply have to write.

Writing workshops offer a way to provide evidence-based writing instruction to students. An early study by Donald Graves (1983) demonstrated that students' writing improved significantly over three years of a workshop approach through what he called an "apprenticeship" model. Recently, the What Works Clearinghouse and Institute for Education Science reviewed the extensive research base for writing instruction and developed four overarching recommendations for educators who want to improve student writing in their classrooms: daily writing, a focus on the writing process, skills instruction within a process approach, and creating a community of writers (Fig. 1; Graham et al., 2012). Writing workshops fulfill each of these evidence-based recommendations and allow teachers to incorporate them into an effective, replicable classroom practice.

Figure 1. Writing workshops incorporate all aspects of evidence-based writing instruction (*from* Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers *practice guide*).

Institute of Education Sciences Recommendation	How Writing Workshops Deliver
1. Provide daily time for students to write.	Most students do not receive daily writing time, according to a recent review of studies of writing classrooms (Graham, 2019). Writing workshops structure a daily, one-hour literacy block, with skills-based minilessons, mentor texts, independent writing, and daily sharing (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). In a workshop-based classroom, students are writing daily on subjects of their choice, with help and support from peers and teachers as they need it.
2. Teach students to use the writing process for a variety of purposes.	Writing workshops focus on student-centered choice and discovery for their topics within a process-based approach to writing (Flowers & Hays, 1981). Research shows that even very young students can learn the writing process through a workshop approach because they attend to and notice their own processes: what works for them when they write (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Students become independent and confident writers in the workshop approach as they each find their unique voice.
3. Teach students to become fluent with associated skills.	Minilessons in writing workshops provide both direct instruction in writing-related skills as well as a predictable opening to the daily workshop structure. They focus on one aspect of writing, such as revision strategies, sentence construction, and other skills, in a brief lesson (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007; Wagner, Nott, & Agnew, 2001). During independent writing, teachers also offer minilessons at the point an individual student needs them. In addition, mentor texts provide both ideas for writing as well as a model for voice and technique.
4. Create an engaged community of writers.	Fostering a community of writers is paramount in writing workshop-based instruction (Rosaen & Hazelwood, 1993; Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). Unfortunately, typical writing experiences in the classroom involve little collaboration between students (De Smedt, Van Keer, & Merchie, 2016; Graham et al., 2012). Writing workshops help students become better writers not only by having them write daily but also by fostering in them the identity of "writer" within a community of writers.

Writing Workshops Create an Engaged Community of Writers

Teachers consistently report that writing workshops help students become better writers not only by having them write daily but also by placing them within a community of writers (Kaminski et al., 2010, 41). Shubitz and Dorfman (2019) emphasize that they want students "to understand writing is not accomplished in isolation; there is a writing team made up of the entire classroom of writers" (92). A writing community is created because of the structured approach of the writing workshop (minilesson, independent writing and conferencing, sharing) and the establishment of ground rules to guide students' discussions about writing. Writing workshop researchers emphasize that building a community of writers is an important first step in teaching students to exchange ideas respectfully so that they understand that fairness and equity are important classroom values (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019, 108).

Within a writing community, students begin seeing themselves as writers. Workshops motivate and engage students by allowing them choice, independence, and agency. In doing so, they help develop students' confidence in themselves as writers and shape their identities as writers (Baker, 2005) who can use written language effectively to achieve different purposes. Evidence exists that children's perception of themselves as "literate" affects their ongoing commitment in school to language and literacy acquisition (Laursen & Fabrin, 2013). By supporting students' ownership of their own writing, writing workshops bolster students' confidence in themselves as literate members of the school and community (Seban & Tavsanli, 2015).

Giving students time and space to discuss their own and their peers' writing helps create a community of engaged writers. Tropp Laman (2011) found that students' writing progressed in fourth-grade writing workshops "not only because they wrote every day or because of the series of minilessons within a unit of study, but because student talk and deliberate teacher work helped students continually reflect on, discuss, and explain their own writing processes and their products" (140). She concluded that participating in writing workshops helped students become more strategic writers and also helped the teacher better understand each child's composing processes (141). In an afterschool program focused on boys, Loeper (2014) observed that their successful engagement in writing was due to frequent discussions about form or content with peers and adults, sharing work with their afterschool community throughout their writing process, and sharing work beyond their program's writing community.

Writing Workshops Increase Young Writers' Confidence

In a study of first-grade students, Jasmine and Weiner (2007) discovered how writing workshops enable children to become "confident, independent writers."

By the end of the study, students had become more confident in their writing because they were able to start writing more quickly, with more topic ideas and approaches.

Analyzing students' writing portfolios and observing classroom practices, they found that before writing workshop, the students did not find writing "easy," but after participating in workshops, students felt more comfortable writing and enjoyed it more. Students especially liked sharing their writing with each other in the "author's chair" and felt a sense of pride and ownership when their stories were published in the school newspaper. Interestingly, by the end of the study, students had become more confident in their writing because they were able to start writing more quickly, with more topic ideas and approaches. They also requested more writing workshops and were observed writing in their journals when they had free time or were visiting a literacy center in the classroom. "As students became more confident in their writing abilities, enthusiasm for Writing Workshop increased" (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007, 138).

Writing workshops, by bolstering students' confidence as writers, can have a direct and measurable effect on their writing achievement because they

enjoy writing. A study of young writers by Carroll and Feng demonstrates that "when students are given the freedom to write what they choose, they have a more positive attitude toward writing" (2010, 1). Dividing students in first grade into two groups—one given writing prompts and traditional instruction, the other provided structured writing workshops—they found that the workshop group enjoyed writing more than the prompted group. "Students are often writing works that matter to them, and that in turn *makes them feel like writers*" (Magalas & Ryan, 2016, 14, emphasis added). As another researcher puts it, "Taking a stance as writer help[s] children to think like writers" (Leigh, 2015).

In another study, Hachem, Nabhani, and Bahous (2008) found that the writing workshop structure "enhanced [second graders'] self-esteem and confidence in seeing themselves as writers" (331). They make the point that the writing workshop lets students demonstrate their improved skills, increasing their confidence in their abilities, and helps teachers individualize instruction by meeting students "where they are." In a separate study, teachers and literacy coaches who received professional development on how to allow elementary students to have their own voices in writing workshops witnessed improved engagement: "over the course of the year, there were more diverse genres of writing posted and 'celebrated' in classrooms as well as increased student engagement during mini-lessons and writing time" (Kaiser, 2013, 219). Remarkably, students in the study produced 75% more writing than prior to the intervention. Writing workshops rely on deeply individualized attention and intervention, which nurtures students' confidence at the same time as it allows their unique voices to flourish.

Writing Workshops Help Teachers Differentiate

Shea notes that "Writers in any classroom reflect a wide range of writing experience, competence, interests, genre preference, content and word knowledge, and immersion in exemplary models of literature. Such a range demands coming to know writers individually and setting lesson objectives based on that knowledge" (2015, 101). Research demonstrates that the writing workshop approach is valuable for teachers because they can directly view children's writing processes and struggles and create interventions to assist them. In fact, writing workshops may be the ideal context for differentiation. The structure of writing workshops allows teachers to easily target and individualize instruction in a predictable, structured way. Shubitz and Dorfman explain, "Both small-group instruction and conferring are based on the principles of differentiation…Small-group instruction makes it possible to differentiate while still providing highly individualized instruction in ways that will meet all students' needs" (2019, 125).

Writing workshops may be the ideal context for differentiation.

Writing workshops by definition "encourage flexibility and differentiation in product, processes, content, and environment. Studying mentor texts together, playing and practicing with language, sharing and discussing, and revising are all elements of coaching, and are opportunities for the teacher" (Sharpe, 2010). The structure of writing workshops allows teachers to work with individual students or small groups on targeted skills based on the teacher's ongoing assessment of their learning. "Differentiated instruction is effective when it's based on ongoing and broad assessment of learners, when tasks are authentic, learners are engaged, there's time to practice, and the classroom tone is supportive" (Shea, 2015). When students are writing, teachers are assessing their interests, motivation, performance, and processes—and intervening when necessary.

Strong research and anecdotal evidence shows that writing workshops can engage all students, of all abilities and skills, to give them more confidence in their writing. In one classroom study, writing workshops were used in K–6 English for Speakers of Other Languages classrooms (Peyton, Jones, Vincent, & Greenblatt, 1994). Teachers reported challenges with instituting the workshop model (mostly related to time, because they did not have a full day with students) but said that learning the writing workshop structure helped them to understand what their students needed and to provide support.

> *All of the teachers had positive changes to report in their students and in themselves. The most notable positive change in students is in attitude. Students are no longer afraid of writing or blocked by a blank sheet of paper. They feel more confident about themselves and their writing, and they enter aggressively into their own and others' writing. Changed attitudes are accompanied by changed behaviors. Some students have overcome the need to write a perfect piece the first time and are ready to revise. Some are learning to interact with other students more successfully.* (Peyton et al., 1994, 482)

These ESOL teachers felt strongly that writing workshop is a valuable tool for developing literacy and a centerpiece for a language and literacy curriculum, the researchers concluded.

In a more recent study of third-grade classrooms, researchers documented that teachers strengthened their writing curriculum particularly for English language learners by adopting the workshop approach (Flint & Fisher-Ari, 2014). Making the observation that curriculum standards do not embrace the linguistic and cultural diversity students bring to the classroom, researchers provided professional development in the workshop approach to teachers.

Researchers documented that teachers strengthened their writing curriculum particularly for English language learners by adopting the workshop approach.

Moving from a prescriptive, prompt-based task to a writing workshop pedagogy allowed the teachers to affirm students' diverse experiences and perspectives, strengthening their curriculum. "The commitment of the teachers to embrace the writer's workshop structure and increase writing skills was realized as the students, particularly the English language learners, learned how to move from a 'small idea' in the writer's notebook to sharing a final composition with classmates and parents" (Flint & Fisher-Ari, 2014, 645). Importantly, students' enthusiasm for writing and sharing their writing grew as well.

Similarly, writing workshop approaches have been used successfully with students having a range of intellectual skills: one study conducted an experimental writing workshop in a mixed classroom of students and found that the low-achieving group of students had greater gains in their writing achievement compared to typically developing students, measured by the six traits of writing rubric after nine weeks of workshop (James, Abbott, & Greenwood, 2001). By the end of the intervention, both groups of students had similar scores. Cultural, linguistic, and intellectual diversity is not only accommodated but is used as a foundational activity in writing workshops, which allows teachers to see their students as possessing a diverse array of resources and experiences reflected in their writing.

Writing Workshops Reflect and Support Diverse Voices with Mentor Texts

Within the writing workshop, teachers use mentor texts—authentic literature that students read as writers—as touchstones for helping individual students remember and mimic the constructions they found affecting (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). Using what Graham and Perin (2007) call "the study of models"—identified in the *Writing Next* study as a key driver of writing achievement—helps the writing workshop become a dialogue between students and these literary texts. In an important early study, Corden (2007) posited that children could develop their knowledge of how texts are crafted by accomplished authors and then use this knowledge during writing workshops to improve their writing quality (5). The results of the study were remarkable:

> *We found that with support from teachers providing models, demonstrating and drawing attention to the features of mentor texts, and through focused group discussion, children began to develop their awareness of how texts are constructed. One of the most striking features to emerge from our work was the way children gradually developed a metalanguage and were able to use it effectively when discussing their own texts. The use of specific literary terms helped children to clarify their thoughts, identify issues, and engage in lucid, informed discussion. They were able to*

integrate the stylistic and organizational features of mentor texts into their personal repertoires and use them successfully in their own writing.

In addition, teachers can use mentor texts to provide a diversity of voices in the classroom and bring in the voices of writers that may share students' backgrounds. "All students deserve to read mirror books, in which they see themselves, and window books, in which they learn about others" (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019, quoting Sims Bishop, 1990). For example, in one study, Muhammad (2015) explored the research question *How do African American adolescent girls use literary mentors of Black women writers in their writings about themselves?* Drawing on historical research of Black women writers, she chose mentor texts in different genres that served to build writing skills as well as her students' understanding of themselves, their knowledge, and their understanding of power. She found that these mentor texts helped the girls to develop and generate ideas for their own writing and to understand the form and features of the mentor texts (word choice, structure, and so on). Based on her research, Muhammad concluded that to have the greatest impact on students, mentor text selection should "go beyond modeling the structure of [a text] to merely build grammar skills" (13) and instead focus on identity and history. Because of this complex, multilevel focus, the girls used the text in more expansive ways, which helped them develop their writing and see themselves as authors in a larger tradition.

Similarly, evidence exists that choosing mentor texts to appeal to boys, who consistently lag behind girls in literacy (Disenhaus, 2015), bolsters their writing. Gericke and Salmon found that male students "fall into a pattern of writing about the same topics": family, sports, and pets (2014, 1). By using mentor texts identified through their research as interesting to boys, the researchers found that their male students were subsequently more able to write about personal stories by modeling these mentor texts. Their writing showed improvement in topic selection, word choice, and sentence variety, and the experience helped build their confidence as writers.

Mentor texts in writing workshops can have another effect. Writing and reading reinforce each other, according to robust academic literature on the reading–writing connection (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). In the report *Writing to Read,* Graham and Herbert conclude that "having students spend more time writing has a positive impact on reading, increasing how well students comprehend texts written by others" (2010, 6).

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As Graham also notes, writing about something read can facilitate comprehension because writing "provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text" (Graham & Herbert, 2011, 712). Reading and writing are connected, and writing workshops bolster that connection as students move between reading authentic literature and composing their own writing.

Writing Workshops Work Best with a Structured, Strategic Approach

Writing workshops are structured, predictable parts of a student's day in the classroom. The predictable routines that take place during writing workshops help both students and teachers. Establishing routines helps teachers minimize distractions, manage their classrooms, and provide students with clear expectations. In elementary classrooms, writing workshops form a foundation for the literacy block. Shubitz & Dorfman describe the structure of a writing workshop:

> *Writing workshop is a block of time in the school day in which students are actively involved in writing. It begins with a short minilesson, which provides time for the teacher to teach one strategy that will help the students become better writers not just for the piece of writing they're doing on that day, but for the rest of their lives. Next, students have independent writing time, which typically lasts twenty-five to forty-five minutes. The workshop time ends with a five-to-ten-minute share session.* (2019, 45)

The minilessons can incorporate all types of strategies (such as using an organizer to plan a story), and teachers often read a mentor text aloud to talk about subjects and techniques. Elementary students use daily writing time for journaling, drafting a new piece, revising an existing story, and conferring with their peers. Teachers circulate around the room to conference with students who want help or feedback. Most workshops end with sharing, often with the whole class when a student reads from the "author's chair" or sometimes in small groups.

Along with structuring the classroom writing workshop, minilessons help both typically developing students and learning-disabled students learn writing skills. In one study, grade 6 students with learning disabilities participated in minilessons about adverbs and possessives; the researchers found a measurable, positive effect of whole-group minilessons on the struggling students (Dowis & Schloss, 1992). Minilessons can bring grammar, usage, and vocabulary assessment standards into the writing workshop in a way that makes sense: at the point a student needs to learn them.

Evidence exists that the structured writing workshop can be successful even with the youngest learners.

Researchers found a measurable, positive effect of whole-group minilessons on the struggling students.

In a prekindergarten classroom, King (2012) found that with some modifications to account for students' attention spans and their rudimentary skills in forming letters, students eagerly participate in writing workshop.

> *As students began to understand journal time as a predictable classroom routine where all forms of and attempts at writing were accepted, they began to experiment and play at writing. And through this experimentation, student understanding of writing became increasingly sophisticated.* (King, 2012, 395)

Starting with daily journal time as a structured activity, King then added sharing time and conferencing as a predictable part of the daily writing activities. She concluded that "writing workshop in the preschool classroom can provide a bridge between writing as play and writing as a formal, conventionalized task" (401). Another study of kindergartners showed they could follow the predictable format of writing workshops and even pick up their prior day's writing to continue (Brown, 2010). At any level, predictable routines like those of writing workshops help students move from one activity to the next and feel comfortable within blocks of instruction.

Writing Workshops Help Students Prepare for Assessment

Research on writing workshops supports their use to help students prepare for and succeed at high-stakes assessment. Kramer-Vida, Levitt, and Kelly (2012) argue that writing workshops have true value in the context of high-stakes tests. As a process-based approach, writing workshops help students learn and practice techniques such as planning and revising that serve them in formal assessment contexts. Miller and Higgins (2008) write that "process-oriented instruction, such as Writing Workshop, has as key elements 'the human act of composing' and 'the human gesture of response,' which allow students to meet requirements for any writing purposes they may encounter, including writing tests" (126).

As a process-based approach, writing workshops help students learn and practice techniques such as planning and revising that serve them in formal assessment contexts.

As Shubitz and Dorfman point out, "How can we expect students to produce high-quality writing in the classroom and on standardized test writing prompts without establishing extensive, automatized writing routines that give students the models to imitate, time to create and revise, tools to use, and opportunities to choose writing topics they care about?" (2019, 36)

Conclusion

Evidence from a variety of academic specialties shows that structured writing workshops work as a robust practice that helps students increase their writing achievement as well as their comfort and confidence in writing. Writing workshops focus on the student's development of an identity as a writer within a writing community, encouraging trust and independence while also allowing unique voices and experiences. They offer students the opportunity to study authentic writing models in the form of mentor texts, and they allow teachers to manage their classrooms effectively, find opportunities for differentiated instruction, and prepare students for high-stakes writing assessment.

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