



found to improve student writing ability. That does not mean that implementing these features will be sufficient. Rather, they must be enacted thoughtfully, sensitively, and with the same care that was evident in the implementations examined in the studies. These recommendations point out both what needs to be taught and how to deliver that instruction effectively.

**1. Provide opportunities to write and to learn how to write well.**

organization supports (e.g., story starters and story maps). Some teachers like to include vocabulary sources, too—age-appropriate thesauruses or vocabulary folders that suggest alternative word choices (e.g., \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_).

Research shows that technological resources are an especially powerful support. Students write more and better, gain greater benefits from instruction, and revise more willingly when computers are available (Graham & Alves, 2021; Graham, McKeown, Kiuvara, & Harris, 2012; MacArthur, Schwartz, & Graham, 1991). Computers make transcribing less laborious and do away with the tedium of recopying. They also may facilitate cooperative writing projects among pairs or groups of students.

### 3. Engage students in the writing process.

The term “writing process” refers to the steps that writers use to produce a finished piece of writing. To accomplish a final draft, writers engage in prewriting and planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

\_\_\_\_\_ includes planning and what a writer does to get ideas and organize them—including brainstorming, drawing, researching, or conducting interviews. \_\_\_\_\_ refers to implementing the prewriting plan—getting one’s ideas on paper. \_\_\_\_\_ means re-seeing the writing—adding to it, subtracting, and refining or reorganizing the ideas—make it coherent, complete, effective, and powerful. Finally, there is \_\_\_\_\_, which means preparing a clean copy for sharing with others, including fixing spelling problems, getting punctuation and formatting right, and the like. Research shows that engaging students in—and guiding them through—the writing process leads to higher



are not focused on purpose, the formulation and organization of ideas, or audience considerations. Those who have confidence in and proficiency with basic writing skills have greater cognitive resources available for composing well.

Spelling instruction can easily and profitably be combined with phonemic awareness and phonics teaching. Integrating decoding and encoding instruction has been found to be a powerful combination, enhancing learning on both sides of the page—for the reader and the writer. Likewise, there are multiple ways to get words on paper, including by hand using manuscript or cursive and keyboarding, and students benefit from instruction in each of those at the proper time. Formal grammar instruction has not been found to improve writing achievement, but instruction in sentence combining and sentence reduction has. Teaching students how to compose well-formed sentences has been found to enhance writing quality and reading comprehension. Writers can be taught both to simplify and to complicate how they express their ideas, and such instruction pays off in higher-quality writing and more confident writers.

## **6. Provide high-quality instruction.**

The two previous guidelines focused on curriculum—what about writing we need to teach. This guideline is different in that it focuses on teaching—how to teach those things effectively. Research shows that how we teach writing has a powerful impact on student learning.

Effective writing instruction is explicit. Some students may be able to discover how to write on their own, but learning is more certain and equitable with explicit teaching. That means lessons and assignments should have clearly articulated purposes. Students do better when they know what they are supposed to learn.

Research shows that composition instruction is best delivered using a “gradual release of responsibility” approach. In this approach, teachers start by explaining a strategy (what it is, why we use it, how it is implemented) and demonstrating how it works. Then students try to implement the strategy, usually as a group, with teacher guidance. Students must learn the steps in the process and how to implement them, but also the purposes of the steps. Over time, the teacher gradually withdraws support, with students assuming more responsibility and doing more of the work individually without guidance.

With foundational writing skills, closer guidance and repetition matter more. For instance, to teach students to write letters, students might start out tracing letters, then copying them, and finally trying to write them without any guidance. For each of these steps, the students would make many attempts to form the letters.

Both with composition and foundational skills, purposeful practice is essential. Students benefit from opportunities to write for authentic purposes. Practicing a strategy for composing letters to the editor is worthwhile but is more likely to become part of a student’s writing repertoire if they can write real letters to a real editor. Likewise, practicing one’s printing or handwriting skills will be more engaging if the outcome is greater legibility of the pieces that students are writing to share with classmates. An important dimension of authenticity in writing is the opportunity to communicate with a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes. Expanding the audience for student writing—beyond the teacher but also sometimes beyond the classroom—leads to better writing (Sperling, 1996).

Quality instruction includes quality assessment. Ongoing evaluation of student progress and timely feedback in response to that evaluation can make a big difference in student progress (Graham & Alves, 2021; Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2015; Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012). Assessments should be focused on the goals of writing instruction. Such assessment allows instructional differentiation, and it can be the basis for students’ own self-evaluation.

### **7. Create a community of writers.**

Another recommendation of the What Works Clearinghouse Writing panel (Graham & Bollinger, et al., 2012) is that teachers should try to “create an engaged community of writers” in their classrooms. Unfortunately, most studies have not isolated this feature of instruction. Nevertheless, it has often been a part of successful instructional approaches with typical and struggling students. Given the

## 8. Boost students' writing motivation.

Writing is challenging. It can be hard to maintain one's commitment to effective communication and self-improvement. Effective instruction is encouraging and intentional in its efforts to get students to appreciate the value of writing and to view themselves as capable writers (Graham & Alves, 2021; Graham, et al., 2019; Troia, Shankland, & Wolbers, 2012). Many of the points already made can contribute positively to student motivation. The use of technology, collaborative writing activities, clear goals, and self-assessment possibilities all may contribute to students' sense of self-efficacy and social belonging as writers and to their appreciation of the value of writing.

Other instructional moves that can serve to motivate students include allowing students to write about topics of their own choice or to modify the teacher's prompt to something more personally interesting. It makes sense to sometimes provide those kinds of options. However, remember students sometimes balk at writing because they "don't know what to write about." In that circumstance, assigning a topic or genre can be the more motivational way to go, and even better is instruction aimed at developing strategies for identifying topics of interest. Similarly, some writing approaches may seem pointless or unnecessarily onerous for students. For example, despite the importance of revision, too much emphasis or inappropriate emphasis on revision can be problematic. Not every writing piece needs to be revised, and providing some time delay between drafting and revision can be supportive.

## 9. Connect reading and writing.

Reading and writing have been shown to be closely related—they rely on a similar base of skills and knowledge, they are two sides of a communications process, and they can be usefully combined to accomplish both instructional and functional goals. Teaching reading and writing together can improve both reading and writing abilities (Graham, Aitken, Hebert, Camping, Santangelo, Harris, Eustice, Sweet, & Ng, 2020; Graham & Hebert, 2011; Graham, Liu, Ng, Bartlett, Harris, & Holapfel, 2017; Shanahan, 2006; Shanahan, 2016; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

Decoding instruction and spelling instruction can be combined both for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The same point can be made about any of the skills shared by reading and writing, including text organization, vocabulary, genre features, sentence construction, cohesion, and so on. It is important, for example, to know both the meanings of words and how to use those words.

Furthermore, readers need to develop a sensitivity to an author's point of view, choices, persona, and so on. Writers, on the other hand, must develop the ability to anticipate an audience's needs, knowing when to provide background information, definitions, or further explanation. This kind

of communicative competence develops from writing for real audiences and reading with an eye to an author, and these kinds of activities exert positive influences on both reading and writing outcomes.

Finally, reading ability is integral to the writing process: writers often read as part of prewriting, and revision depends on their ability to read their own writing thoughtfully and critically. Often, writers depend upon texts as models of what they are trying to write. Again, these benefits have been found to be reciprocal. For example, having students write about the texts that they read—summarizing, analyzing, critiquing, synthesizing—improves their reading comprehension.

### **10. Use writing to increase knowledge.**

The previous recommendations focused on what students need to be taught about writing and how best to nurture that learning. This final point focuses, instead, on encouraging students to use their writing. If students only compose during writing instruction time, they are not likely to get good at it or to value it. Writing has been found to be an especially effective learning tool. Writing about subject matter increases student knowledge of that subject.

Writing about the content they are learning in social studies, science, math, and the arts improves student mastery of those subjects (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Graham, Kiuvara, & MacKay, 2020; Shanahan, 2004). In many subject areas, it is thought that students do not truly understand a concept until they can cogently and accurately explain it in writing. Writing for the purposes of other subject areas should be a daily occurrence in classrooms. Even young students have been found to benefit from using writing to explore and learn content.

Over time, research on writing instruction can be expected to increase our understanding of how best to nurture young writers. Until then, these 10 research-based recommendations should provide the best guidance for providing high-quality and effective elementary school writing instruction.



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