

The Writing Pyramid for K-2:

A Tool in Designing Structured Literacy Lessons



by Sally Bergquist

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"Teaching reading *is* rocket science."

-Louisa Moats*

"The production of written language is the latest developing, most challenging form of language use. Many adults with excellent reading comprehension are much less skilled at writing clearly."

-Louisa Moats*

A note to teachers:

If teaching reading is rocket science... and teaching writing is *harder* than teaching reading... appreciate yourself for every brave attempt to teach students how to write!

Let's find out what some of the rocket science is and how to use it.

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Introduction

Why is teaching reading and writing rocket science?

Unlike speaking and walking, which we are genetically primed to do, reading and writing must be taught.

In order to read and write, each learner's brain must be "rewired". For a small percentage of the population this seems almost effortless. They say that they taught themselves to read, because it came so easily they don't exactly remember how they learned. For others, the rewiring is a long process, and this is where the rocket science comes in.

People who build things that move - like rockets, cars, and bikes - are continually coming up with new ways to make these things faster, lighter, more fuel efficient, etc. In the same way, people who teach reading and writing sometimes look for new technology to teach these skills in a faster and more efficient way. The word "technology" come from the Greek words "techne" (an art or skill) and "ology" (a branch of study). Put together, the meaning is "a systematic task". The Miriam-Webster dictionary defines technology as "a manner of accomplishing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge".

The Apple watch is a technology, and so is a method of teaching. I think it would make sense, in asking someone how they teach literacy skills, to ask, "What technology are you using?". In this case it wouldn't mean how much work children are doing on iPads, but rather what knowledge is behind the teaching. In reading, for example, research shows that the "3-cuing system" is old, ineffective technology. It would be time for an upgrade!

Since we are activating a change in someone's brain in teaching them to read and write, we are essentially working with circuits, connections, memory, speed, strength and stamina... and helping their reading take off!

Sounds like rocket science to me.

Most of us didn't learn any of the actual rocket science behind learning to read while we were in our teacher education classes. That's because the prevailing beliefs are that reading and writing are "natural" (i.e. genetic) and therefore everyone will learn them if they are read aloud to and exposed to a lot of books, print, paper, and ideas.

In the past century, and especially the last 60 years, lots of attention has been directed to the study of how people learn to read and what is the best way to teach reading. So much has been learned, in fact, that the body of evidence is now called "the science of reading". This is how we now understand that it must be taught explicitly for most children.

During this time very little attention has been paid to writing instruction in the early grades, even though reading and writing support each other. The amount of time currently spent on writing in most elementary classrooms is only a fraction of what is needed to learn the skill.

Studies on effective writing instruction go down in number as the grades go down. I have found there are plenty of studies about teaching writing in high school and college, numerous for middle school, some for grades 3-5, and very few for K-2. I believe K-2 writing needs more research because, just like reading, these are the grades where it all begins!

The same level of availability applies to curriculum. Most of the systematic and explicit writing instruction such as Judith Hochman's approach to basic writing skills, and Graham and Harris's work with SRSD (Self-Regulated Strategy Development) are not appropriate for most novice writers. The methods just mentioned start at the sentence level, and that's not where novice writers are. (I use the term novice here to mean "brand new").

Why has early writing been ignored? Here are some possible reasons.

- Reading is generally taught before writing is.
(Fun fact: up until the nineteenth century, many people who could read could not write. Wealthy people would hire a "penman" to teach them how to use a pen to form letters.)
- Some people (or many?) believe that children will just pick up writing naturally as they move up the grades.
- There is a sentiment out there that writing should consist of fun/cute "activities" and not instruction in early grades.
- Writing is the most difficult literacy skill to teach and to learn.

When I taught kindergarten in the 1990's and early 2000's the advice we were given was to have students draw and label their pictures. But even that is beyond the skill level of many kindergartners. Watching students struggle with this seemingly basic task made me realize that the solution had to come from a teacher, because the "experts" simply didn't understand what a real kindergartner is like. Kindergarten teachers do.

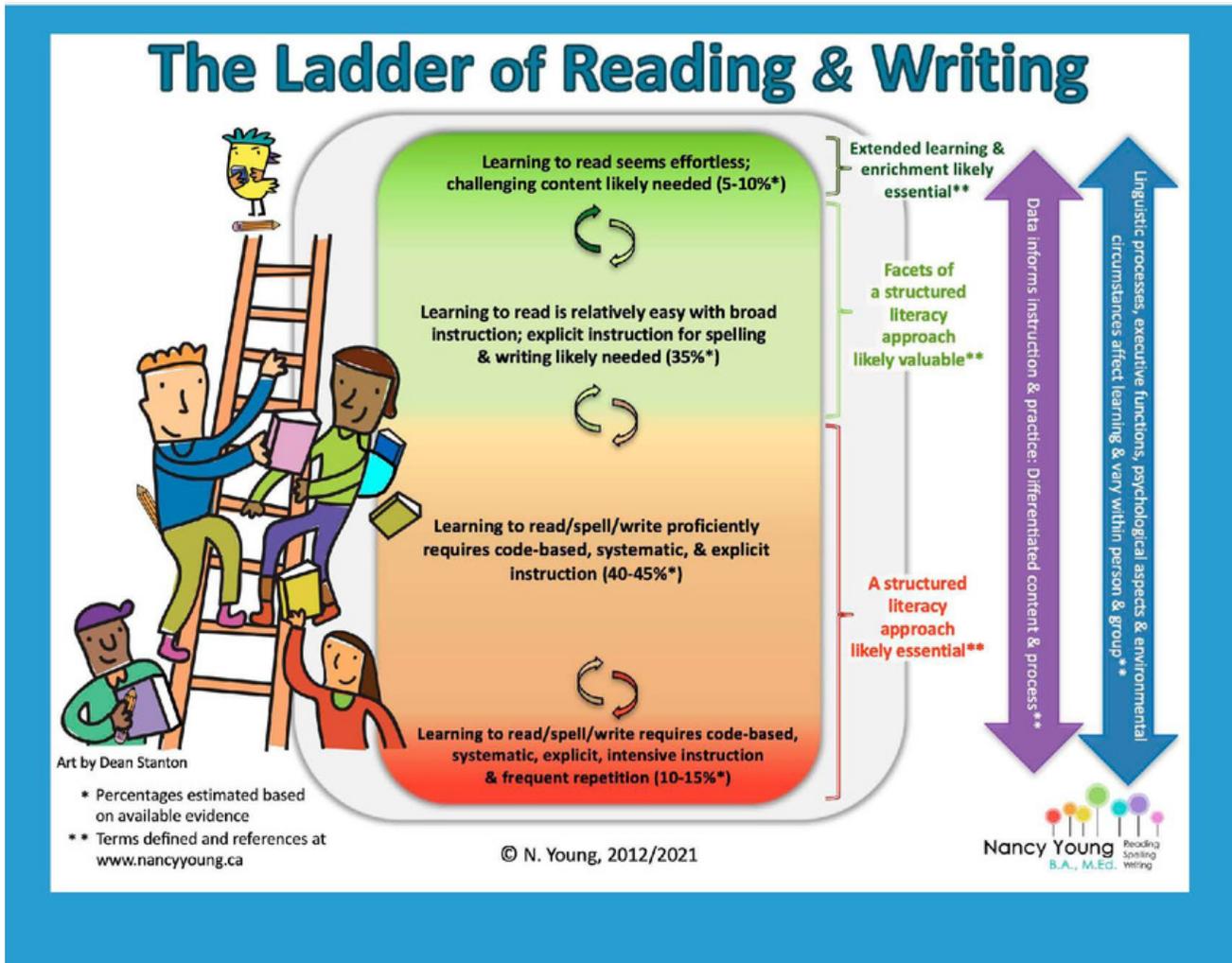
In 1999 I started to develop my own methods of teaching writing, and I continued to develop a "technology" for doing this in the most effective ways possible based on everything I could learn and my direct experiences with children.

For 20 years I field tested my theories and lessons, going back to the drawing board frequently when lessons went sideways, as they frequently did at first. I found that my most common mistake was thinking that children had learned something when they really hadn't, and how much real practice it takes to learn a skill to mastery. The curriculum I developed, called Growing Writers, may appear to move slowly at first glance. That is because we are so used to overwhelming students with too much information.

Those who work with the Growing Writers curriculum find that it is well worth the time to teach to mastery and expect every student to attain it.

Part 1

The need for good writing instruction in K-2



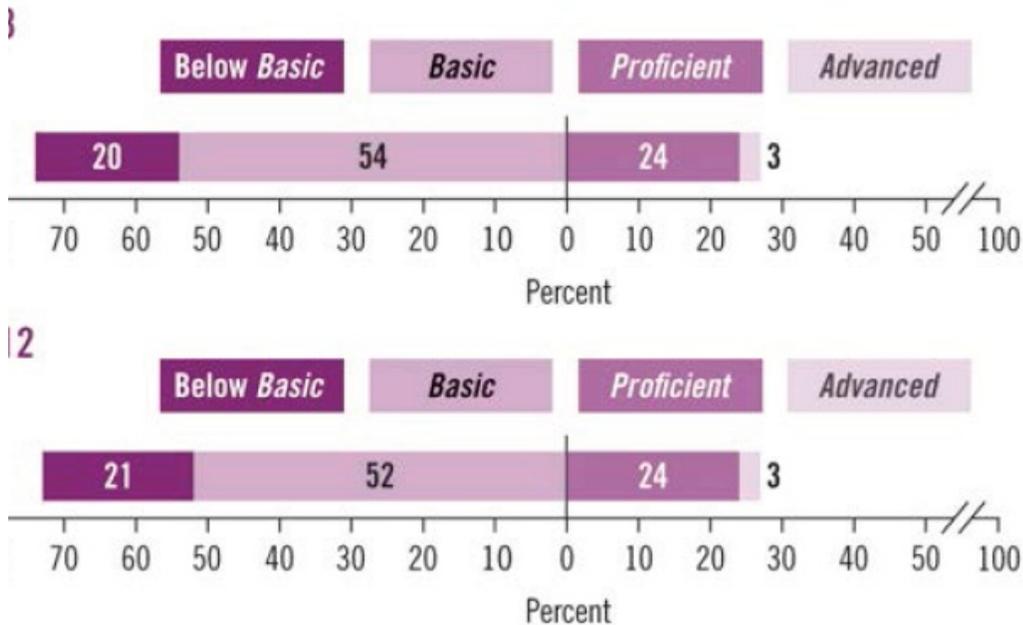
It is striking to see that while 50-60% of students need systematic and explicit instruction in reading, the number is even higher for writing. In the lighter green section, Nancy notes:

"Learning to read is relatively easy with broad instruction; explicit instruction for spelling and writing likely needed (35%)"

A look at scores from the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), sometimes called The Nation's Report Card, shows that students tend to be more proficient at reading than writing.

Most middle and high school students aren't proficient in writing

A. Achievement-level results in eighth- and twelfth-grade NAEP writing: 2011



NOTE: Detail may not sum because of rounding.

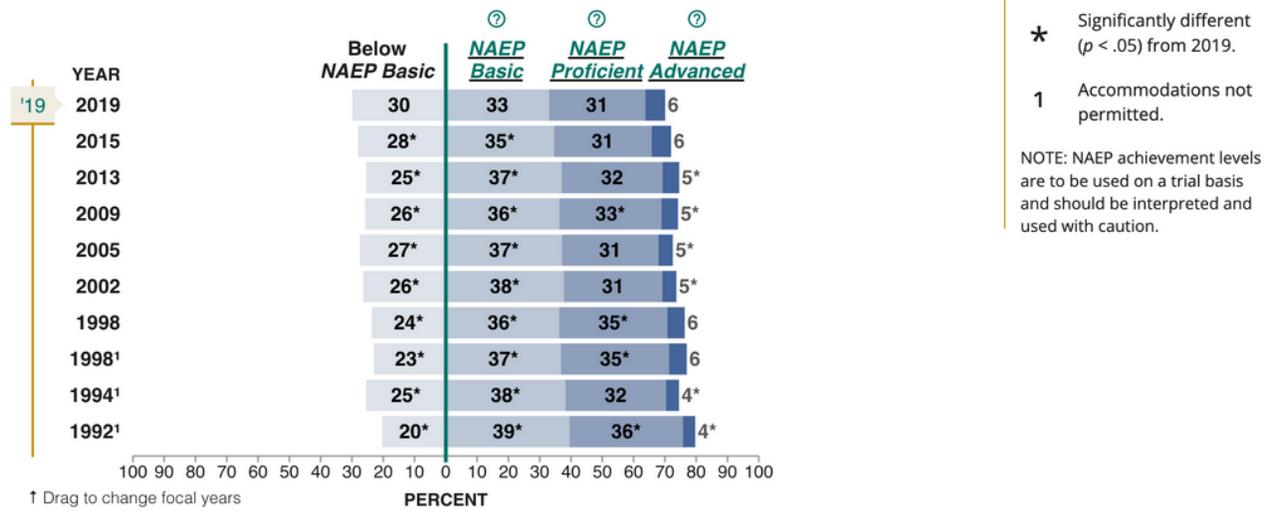
Writing is tested infrequently on a national level because it is difficult to score and to create frameworks for. In this last set of NAEP results, only 27% of students were above the basic level.

What does Basic mean? Students writing at the Basic level in 12th grade have not mastered complex sentences, more interesting word choices, or good organization and development of ideas. Their writing falls short on detail and clarity. (National Center for Educational Statistics, NAEP report, 2011)

There are many reasons for lack of writing ability in 8th through 12th grade. Poor reading and lack of background knowledge certainly contribute. But the lack of good writing instruction, and especially a poor foundation in basic writing skills are also to blame. The blame should not fall on students, their families, or their home lives. Even students who are behind in vocabulary and fine motor skills when they enter school, can - with regular attendance and excellent instruction - gain more than a typical year's growth in K-2.

In the next chart, you will see that "above Basic" reading scores are *better* than the percentages in writing shown in the chart above. Over the years, roughly 37-40% of students nationwide are proficient readers, a 10% increase over the proficient writers.

FIGURE | Trend in twelfth-grade NAEP reading achievement-level results



Besides showing the difference in reading and writing skill, I'm including this chart from the NAEP website to show how little has changed in the last 30 years. Though I couldn't find a similar chart for writing that spanned a number of years, I'm guessing the progress is just as stagnant in that area.

The data is even more dismaying when looking at children of color and those who come from low-income families. If we really want to close the achievement gap for Black, Native, and Hispanic students and students who live in poverty, it can't be the "same old same old" that hasn't worked for decades.

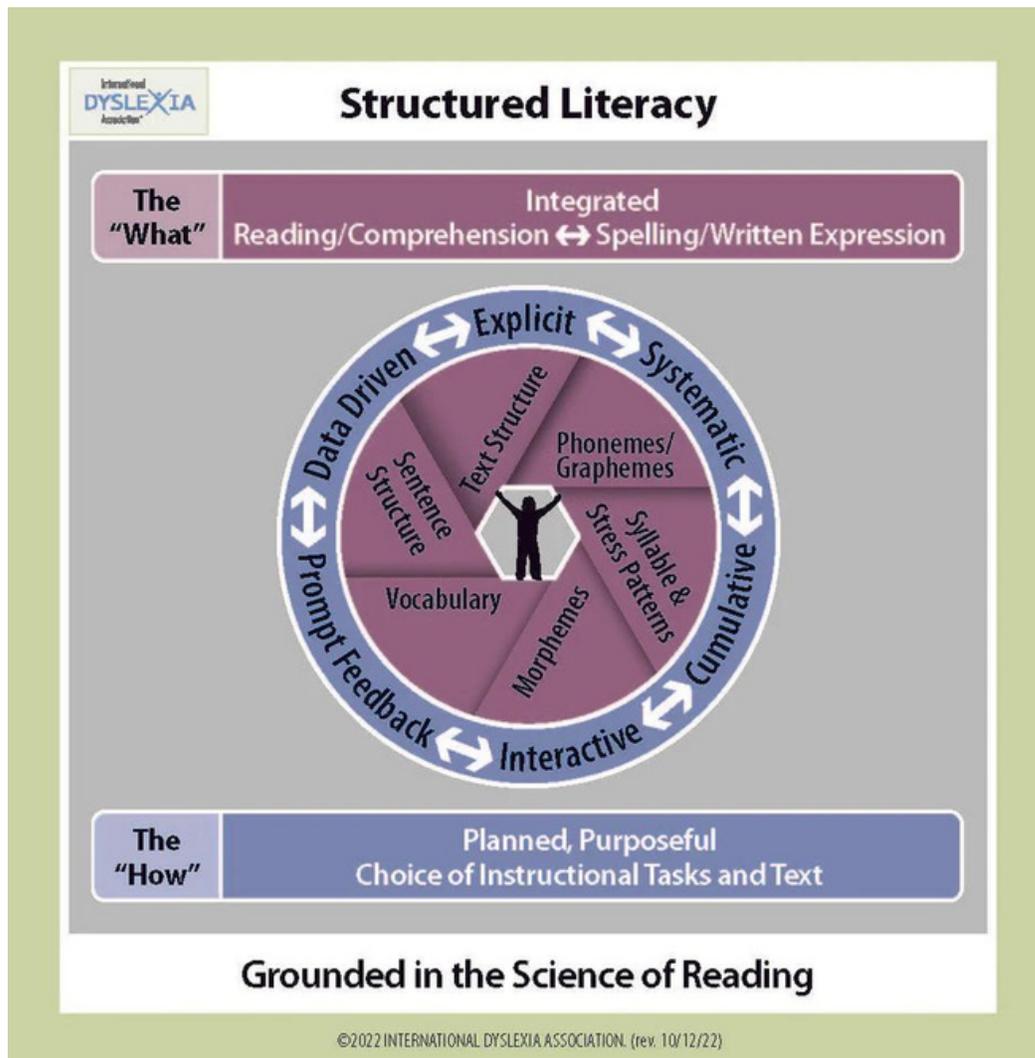
Most students are capable of reading and writing proficiently if they have solid instruction based on good teaching technology - and good attendance.

Part 2

What is Structured Literacy?

One of the approaches to reading, called "structured literacy", is a technology that has a solid evidence base. The term itself is trademarked by the International Dyslexia Association.

Structured literacy as outlined by the IDA includes both **content** (what to teach) and **methods** (how to teach it). Let's look at both of those things.



Structured literacy helps all children learn to read and is crucial for the 40-60% who will not learn to read beyond the basic level without explicit instruction.

The IDA is concerned with good reading instruction for all. Many children are put on IEP's when all they are lacking is proper instruction.

Content: The "What"

The categories below are from the middle of the circle graphic on the previous page. They are the content (the What) of structured literacy.

Phonemes/Graphemes

Reading - matching letters to sounds, blending sounds to sound out words

Writing - using "sound spelling" to begin to write words

Syllable and stress patterns

Reading - these are strategies to help with decoding words at the word level (i.e. the silent -e rule, how two vowels together work, etc.)

Writing - knowing these word patterns also helps with learning to spell

AND

though not directly correlated with decoding, there are also strategies for punctuation that I believe need further research for their effect on writing

Morphemes

Reading - using knowledge of root words to add prefixes, suffixes which "morph" the word into a new one (i.e. "persuade" to "persuasive")

Writing - applying knowledge of morphemes to spell words correctly

Vocabulary (K-2)

Reading - increasing vocabulary through background knowledge and read-alouds

Writing - applying vocabulary to word choices in writing

Sentence structure

Reading - from simple sentences to more complex sentences in text, grammar, how sentences are formed

Writing - learning what a sentence is, gradually learning to build longer and more complex sentences

Text structure

Reading - students become familiar with the structure of different genres (narrative, persuasive, problem/solution, cause and effect, sequential, compare/contrast)

Writing - these structures can be used in writing for different purposes and audiences

Method: The "How"

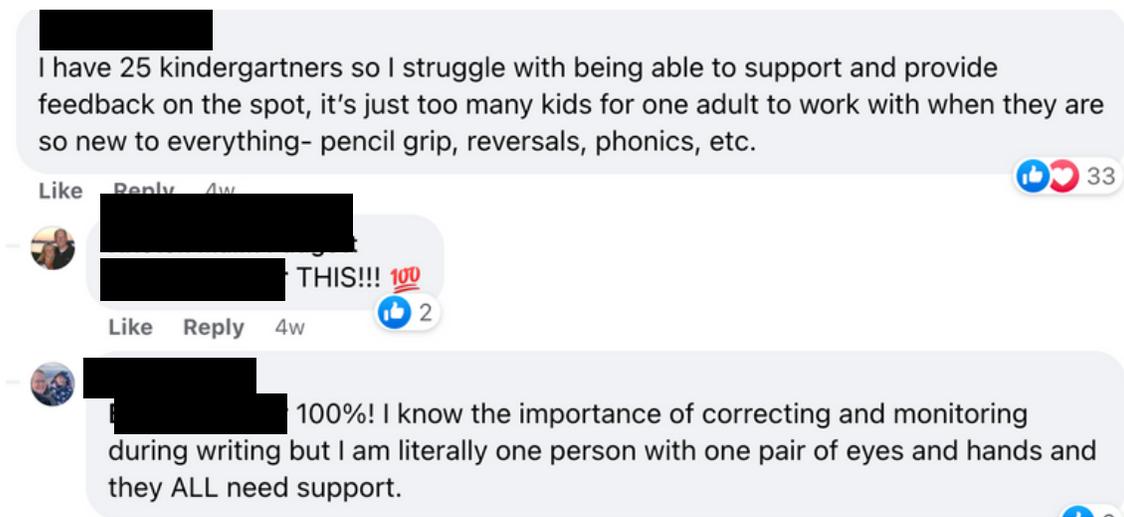
Structured Literacy	Literature-based or Workshop approach*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underlying philosophy is that most students need to be taught reading and writing explicitly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underlying philosophy is that most students will catch on to reading/writing by exposure, positive experiences, and instruction "as needed"
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactive with prompt feedback Usually teacher led with lots of student engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often independent Many independent activities make it difficult to gauge learning or correct mistakes for struggling students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction is systematic (i.e. part of a whole system that the teacher understands) making the goals and objectives clear The end goal is mastery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching is based on a thematic unit of study or a comprehension of literature There is no measurable learning objective in mind when teaching the lesson
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching is cumulative and lessons are organized by skill level, working from easier to harder The goal is skill development and independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessons vary in difficulty; working memory or cognitive load is not a factor in lesson design The goal is for everyone to complete the project or assignment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers use data and frequent assessment to drive instructional decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional decisions come from the directive to "cover the material" or finish a unit, or from teacher or student interest

*Literature based is a term from literacy expert Louisa Moats' book Speech to Print. The descriptions in each column are from my own 24 years of classroom experience as well as the current literature on reading instruction. The structured literacy terms are highlighted.

Part 3

The Writing Pyramid for K-2: A Way to Organize Structured Literacy Content

When I talk with teachers or see comments about writing on various Facebook pages, I often see or hear things like this:



When too many students are in over their heads, we feel like we're rescuing, not teaching.



It's much easier to limit the amount of new information and teach skills one step at a time.

The Writing Pyramid can help with the progression of skills and what to master at each stage so that kids can swim and not sink! The teacher can be in a teaching mode, not a rescuing mode.

The Writing Pyramid is

- a way to organize, structure, and assess *when* to introduce certain writing skills so that students are not overwhelmed.
- a piece of technology that will provide a rudimentary idea of how to get students to mastery in writing.
- part of the theoretical framework for Growing Writers.

The Writing Pyramid is NOT

- a complete "how to" or curriculum

The writing samples that are included are independent work done without teacher help or editing.

Instructional focus of the first (orange) level - Foundations

quiet focus	stay seated	hand/finger strength	pencil grasp	simple drawing	letter formation
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Quiet focus

When I first taught kindergarten, I had the misconception that it was mean and inappropriate to have this age group work in silence. At the same time, I was frustrated by how little work got done and how many times I had to say "Shh" or remind kids to stay on task during writing time.

When I started teaching kids how to work silently for 2 minutes at first and working up to 10 minutes or longer, the room became "mindful" and they could relax into their work. Often I would have to find solitary spaces for students who had a hard time being silent. After the first 6-8 weeks of school, the routine became simple and they could easily work in silence for up to 10 minutes and maintain a quiet focus for another 15-20 minutes.

This is a basic writing skill because, for the most part, the act of putting ideas on paper is not a social activity. We can talk to others beforehand about what we want to write, and we can share afterwards, but actual writing - in real life - is usually solitary.

It's especially important to teach this and provide the right environment for students who already have a hard time focusing.

Stay seated

Another way that kids (and adults!) distract themselves from the hard work of writing is to get up and do other things. For kids in school, that might be to sharpen a pencil, go to the bathroom, go over to ask the teacher a question, go over to a friend to say something, etc. etc.

Writing is hard work, and when we hit a block it's human nature to want to do something else.

So, two things are necessary to get children in the habit of staying seated. One of the things has to do with the task. That is, if we're expecting kids to stay "on task", then the task they're given shouldn't be so difficult that they constantly need help. More children will stay in their seats, and get more on the page, if they know exactly what to do, and are capable of it.

The second thing is to make sure there is no need to get up. Have sharpened pencils on the table, have a bathroom break before writing time, teach kids what to work on while they are waiting for teacher help, and enforce the expectation that they will stay seated (acknowledging exceptions for special needs).

Hand and finger strength

Writing is a physical activity. Little hands can get tired. Small finger muscles may not be developed enough to move without the whole arm or wrist moving, which then tires out those larger muscles.

It's helpful for kindergartners to play with with stuff like playdough and goop and Legos, especially those kids whose main fine motor activity is pushing a button on the remote or the iPad. Using the small finger muscles in any way is part of "writing" for this foundation level.

Pencil grasp

Having a workable pencil grasp will also prevent hand fatigue and help kids stay on task longer. This really becomes even more important in first and second grades when students are writing more.

And as many teachers can attest, once a child latches on to a certain grasp, it's really hard to break the habit. The only reason to try to break a habit is not that a certain grasp is "wrong" (meaning it promotes bad handwriting or is unworkable). It's that some grasps are unsustainable over a period of time without the writer shaking out their hand and saying "My hand hurts!"

Simple drawing

There is an assumption that if a child can't write yet, at least they can draw, and their drawing can substitute for words.

But this assumption that all kids can draw is just not true. Some will feel just as lost about how to draw a picture of something as they feel about writing the words. In school with a group of peers, they may start to feel self-conscious and frustrated.

Learning to draw simple shapes and then simple objects, animals, and people helps a lot in gaining confidence and also makes it more fun for kids.

Letter formation

Even though there is not much research on early writing instruction, the one area that does have a strong research base is handwriting.

Handwriting instruction has been shown to greatly increase writing fluency (how fast someone can get words on a page) which helps maintain a flow of ideas. When kids have to stop to figure out how to make a letter, they can lose track of what they want to say and feel frustrated with trying to do it.

Research using an fMRI is also showing that students who learn to write a letter while learning how to sound it out actually store the information in a new part of the brain - as a symbol rather than a random shape. The physical act of printing (not tracing) helps them remember and learn letter names and sounds more quickly.

This process is slower when kids only look at the printed letter shape on a card or a keyboard.

How long?

For a typical kindergarten class, mastery of the foundations level will take the first 3-4 months of the school year if there is plenty of time to practice (at least 30 minutes several times a week).

This doesn't mean that your students who have mastered the foundations can't move ahead. They can and they will do more. But it means that the focus of your *teaching* is foundations lessons until almost everyone is comfortable with handwriting, drawing, and focus during writing time. I say almost, because no matter how hard we try there may be a few students who would need the whole year to master the foundations. Hopefully those students are getting some other help with writing in addition to your class instruction. The bottom line is: when at least 85% of your class is using neat lower-case writing, able to focus on writing for 20-30 minutes, and comfortable and happy with their drawing ability, it's time to move to Level 2. There will be more letters to master since they need to be introduced slowly, but the students are comfortable using writing tools and may be starting to make some letters or words on their drawings.

Will your capable students be bored with foundation lessons? It depends how you present the lesson. If it is short, fun, and these students finish their practice quickly, they can write and draw on their own while you give support to students who need it more.

What NOT to introduce yet

During the Foundation period, there is no need to introduce concepts like nouns and verbs, sentences, or punctuation. There is no hurry. Spend your time enjoying the foundations and letting children relax into drawing and making letters. You may think handwriting is boring, but for them it's new and exciting. Have high expectations for neat work and challenge students by having them re-do handwriting that is not the best they can do.

And remember that anything to build fine motor skills, including drawing, is "writing" at this stage. Every drawing is writing practice!

"Always place students appropriately for more rapid mastery progress. This fact contradicts the belief that students are placed appropriately if they have to struggle—scratch their head, make false starts, sigh, frown, gut it out. According to one version of this belief, if there are no signs of hard work there is no evidence of learning. This belief does not place emphasis on the program and the teacher to make learning manageable but on the grit of the student to meet the 'challenge.'

...The assumption seems to be that students will be strengthened if they are 'challenged.'

This belief is flatly wrong. If students are placed appropriately, the work is relatively easy. Students tend to learn it without as much 'struggle.' They tend to retain it better and they tend to apply it better, if they learn it with fewer mistakes.

The prevalence of this misconception about 'effort' was illustrated by the field tryouts of the *Spelling Mastery* program...

When [teachers were] asked about whether they had ever used a program that induced more skills in the same amount of time, all responded, 'No.' Nearly all agreed that the lower performers had learned substantially more than similar children had in the past. When asked if students were bored with the program, all responded, 'No.'

What led the teachers to believe that the programs were too easy? All cited the same evidence: students didn't have to struggle. For them, it wasn't appropriate instruction if it wasn't difficult for the lower performers."

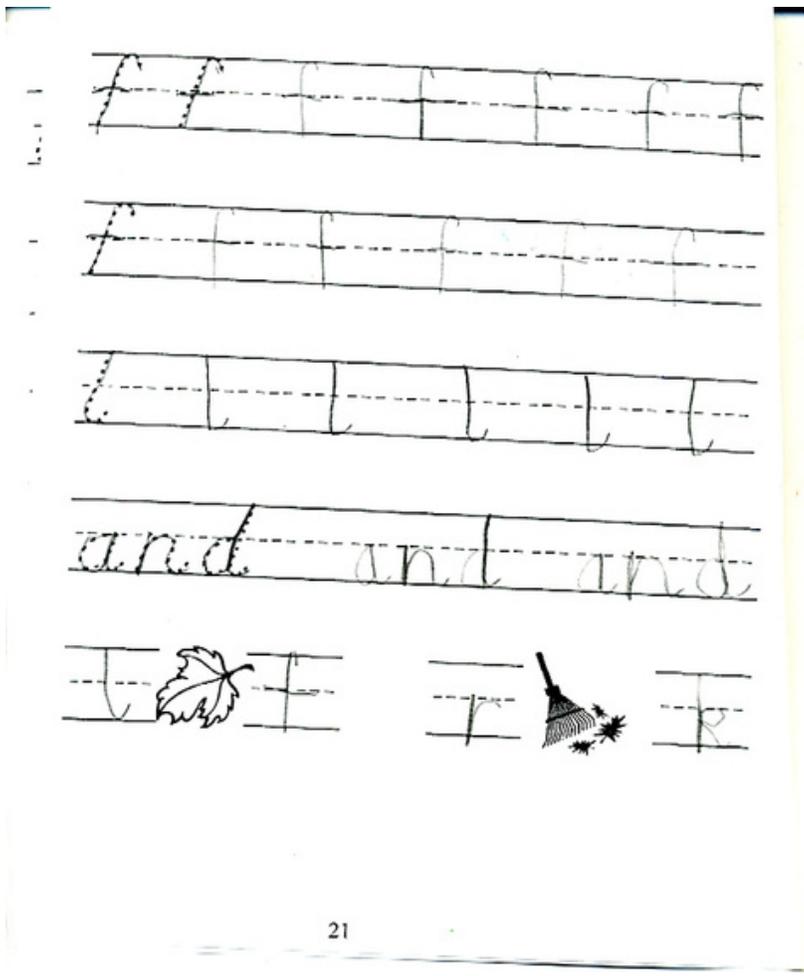
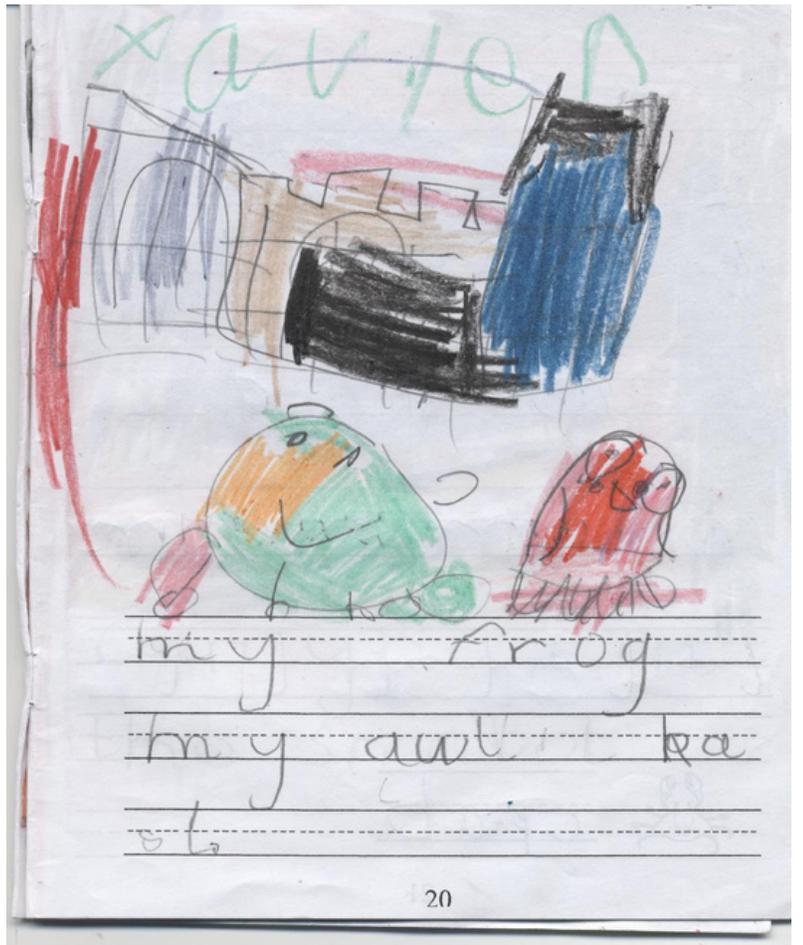
-Zig Engelmann

Zig (Siegfried) Engelmann (1931-2019) was a researcher, an educator of young children, a professor at the University of Oregon in the education department, and the creator of over 100 Direct Instruction programs. He and colleague Doug Carnine are the only people to have ever developed a theory of instruction.

High expectations

When work is appropriate to student skill level and not overwhelming, we can expect everyone to succeed and we can hold each student to a high level of accountability. We expect the work to be completed and well done. This requires having enough time for each student to get feedback and correct mistakes each day or as soon as possible.

If most of your students can produce work like those on the following page, they are ready for the Yellow level.



Instructional focus of the second (Yellow) level - Fluency

writing words independently	spacing	increased spelling accuracy	detailed drawing	4-6 lines of writing	
quiet focus	stay seated	hand/finger strength	pencil grasp	simple drawing	letter formation

Writing words independently

In order to become faster at writing and get more ideas on paper, students have to go through a period where they "guess and go" ("sound spelling"). For some, this will be a stretch. They want to know how to spell everything right. An adult can supply correct spellings when they have a chance, but the student will need a temporary spelling - a placeholder - until an adult can get around to helping. The idea is to get kids to be as independent as possible and not to wait around for help, which is a waste of valuable writing time.

This does not mean you shouldn't provide the correct spellings if possible. It means that if students wait around for every correct spelling, their fluency will suffer.

Many students are just learning letter sounds at the beginning of kindergarten and don't know enough sounds to be successful yet during the first few months of school. If the school has a strong reading program that is in line with research, students will be learning letter sounds and practicing phonemic awareness.

This will make sound spelling easier to learn during this Fluency period.

Sound spelling goes through several stages, starting with representing a word with its beginning and ending sounds ("cr" for car) and progressing to adding vowel sounds ("apl" for apple) and being able to write long words that represent all the sounds even if the letters aren't exact ("elafent").

Learning and practicing sound spelling is a boost to reading instruction. Kids who get a lot of time to practice this phonics-based skill in writing are also practicing their ability to sound out words in reading. It's teaching reading and writing at the same time.

Spacing

Spacing is a writing skill too, even though it's learning where not to write. Spacing also shows that students understand what a "word" is and where a word begins and ends.

This is a skill that seems easy to an adult, but can take some students a surprisingly long time to get used to. This includes breaking the habit of huge spaces between words.

Increased spelling accuracy

Spelling is another skill that is crucial to students' confidence and success in the long term. Like handwriting, it is often overlooked in the busy schedule which seems to include more every year.

There are two kinds of accuracy that should increase at the Fluency level.

- Increased correct spellings of simple common words such as "they", "there", "like", "play", "my"; words with simple spelling patterns such as silent e, consonant blends, and words that end with -nk, and -ing.
- Increased number of sounds represented in sound spelling, and more words the reader can easily decipher

Detailed drawing

Writers use words to paint a picture, tell a story, or convince us of something. Without visuals, the words have to supply the details.

You can look at a beautiful sunset with someone and say "Wow, the sky is so beautiful", and they know what you mean. A writer has to convey the sunset without the reader seeing it.

We're not teaching detailed writing yet at this level, but we can introduce the concept and how detail makes something more interesting. On the Fluency level, this concept can be taught by requiring students to add a certain number of details to a picture. It can be assessed by how well the student can point out the details in their picture or someone else's.

This is important preparation for when they will be required to supply a who, what, why, where, when, or how in words.

Writing 4-6 lines

Fluency brings more writing stamina. At this stage we just want to see the ability to concentrate and get words on the page.

We want kids to get in the habit of writing a certain amount without stopping a lot or saying "I can't". It should start to feel easy for them to sit down and fill up some lines with writing.

How long?

The fluency period lasts a long time - from mid-kindergarten to (typically) 3-4 months into first grade. The beginning of first grade should also begin with a review of foundations for incoming students who didn't receive that instruction in kindergarten. It won't take as long for most 6 year olds to learn the foundations, and it's a good review for all.

Some students will be writing sentences or using punctuation in their writing, but that doesn't mean it's time for everyone to move on. Fluency lessons and practice continue until at least 85% of the class can generate 4-6 lines of writing with mostly decipherable spelling and add detail to their pictures.

Will capable students be bored with fluency lessons? If there is a little writing challenge added to the lesson or if they can free write when they finish the lesson, it won't be a problem. It is much easier to give some students a little freedom or challenge than it is to jump to activities that are too hard for 30-50% of your class and have to give extra support to that many kids. That's where teachers can end up as rescuers instead of teachers.

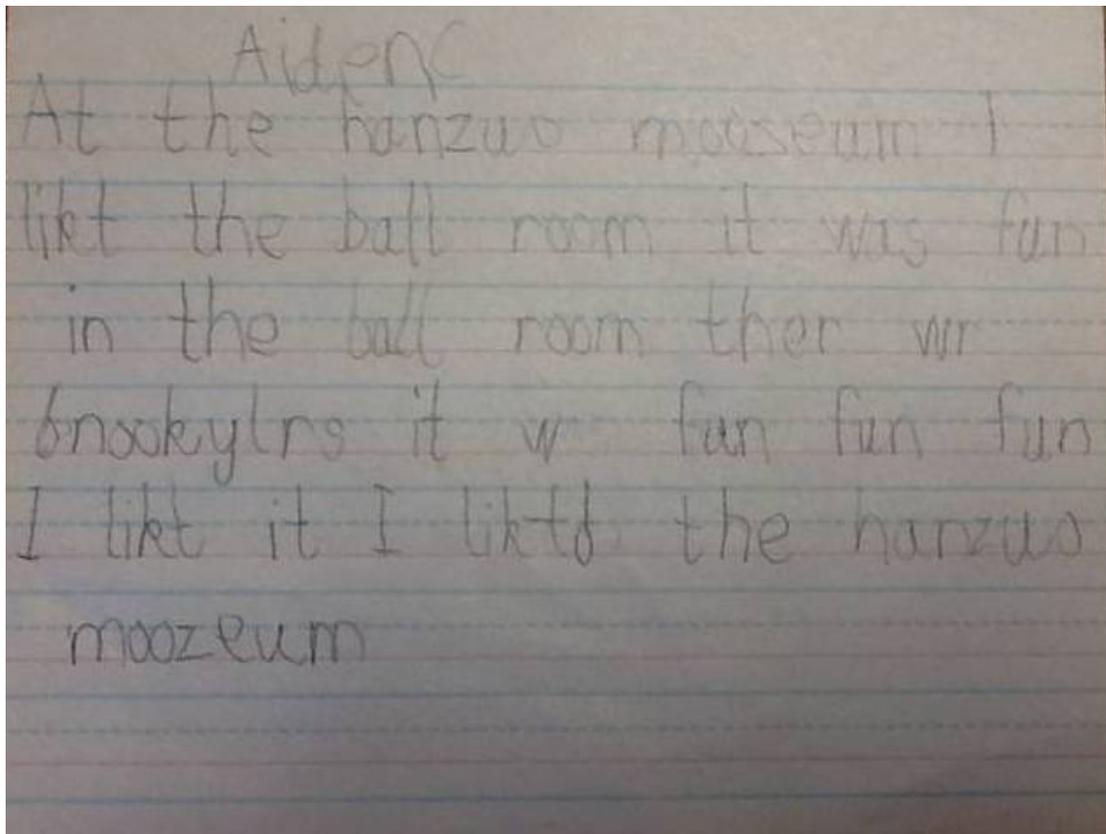
The time a teacher spends to help almost all the children in their class become fluent writers will pay off in sanity when more writing skills are introduced.

What NOT to introduce yet

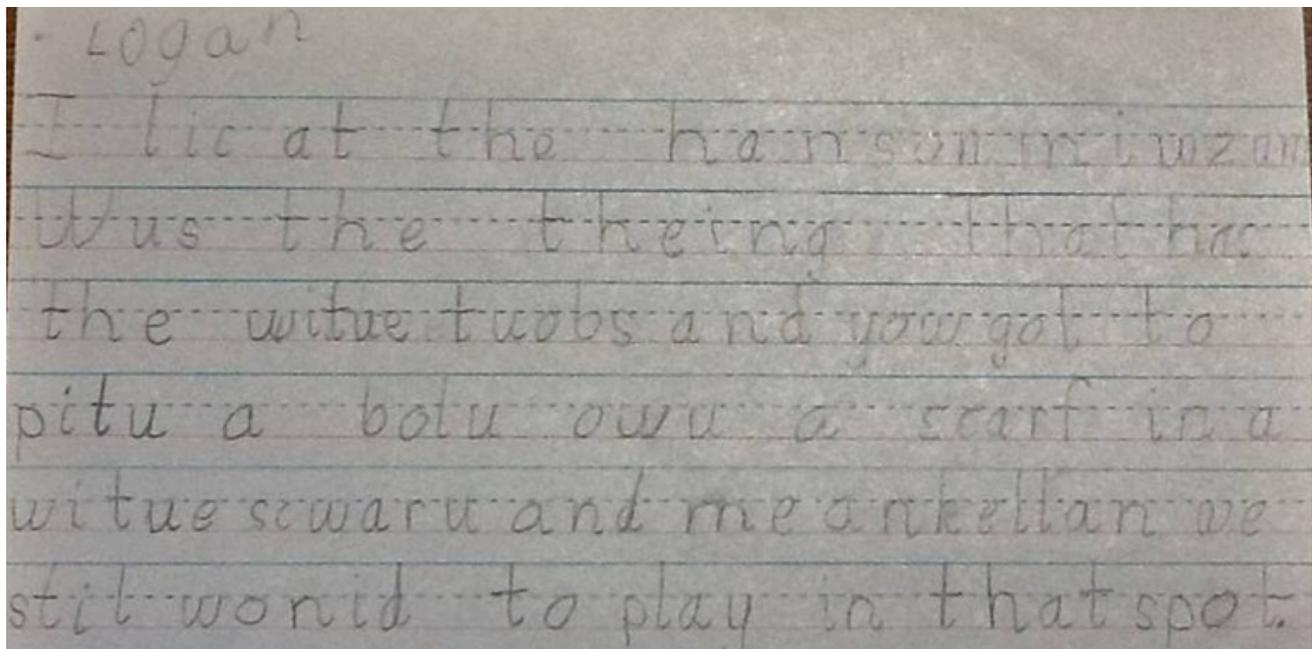
During the Fluency period, there is no need to teach grammar terms or punctuation. These are complicated concepts and students will need all their working memory on board when you begin to teach them. If they are still trying to get words on the page, adding the expectation of punctuation will only add unnecessary stress for both students and teachers.

If you have extra time, spend it on spelling, not grammar.

Fluency mastery examples - independent work



At the hanzon mooseum I likt the ball room it was fun in the ball room there were bnookylrs (binoculars) it was fun fun fun I likt it I liktd the hans on moosuem



I lic at the hanson miwzueum was the theing That has the witue (white) tuobs (tubes) and you got to pitu (put) a bolu (balloon) owu (or?) a scarf in a witue (white) swaru (square) and me an kellan we stil wonid to play in that spot.

Instructional focus of the Green level - Sentences

increased conventional spelling		beginning grammar		building simple sentences		sentences with conjunctions					
writing words independently		spacing		increased spelling accuracy		detailed drawing		4-6 lines of writing			
quiet focus		stay seated		hand/finger strength		pencil grasp		simple drawing		letter formation	

"Ultimately the sentence is like the kernel of anything we want to write. If we have flexibility... if we elaborate our sentences and use compound sentences and complex sentences we're going to be better at getting our ideas across.

The more time we can put into building that ability with sentence skills, it really pays off later. For many older students who struggle with their writing it goes right back to this beginning sentence level."

-Joan Sedita (from a 2020 webinar "Keys to Early Writing")

Keys to Literacy

Author of [The Writing Rope](#) and [Keys to Early Writing](#)

Increased conventional spelling

At the Sentence level of instruction, it's important to keep the spelling instruction strong. Students who can spell are generally more confident writers and will attempt more interesting word choices.

Beginning grammar

We use grammar every time we speak. If we didn't, we would just be uttering random strings of words. Every language and dialect has grammar rules that have to be learned along with the word pronunciations.

We learn the spoken grammar of our culture as we grow up. So the question of "Do we need to teach grammar?" is both yes and no. Most people pick up spoken grammar without even realizing it. As a toddler I may have said "More!", as a five year old "Can I have some more ice cream?" and as an adult, "I love chocolate ice cream, but I'm getting the blackberry because it reminds me of summer."

I remember the first time my daughter used the word "actually" in a spoken sentence when she was about 3 years old. I almost fell over because it sounded so grown up. She did it without any instruction on adverbs.

So grammar begins with speech, and the very beginnings of grammar are the words and dialects we hear from the adults around us. In our speech, we've learned how to create longer and more interesting sentences, especially if we're hearing them spoken around us. Being able to speak and read those longer sentences helps us become writers, and at the same time learning to write those kinds of sentences helps us become better readers and thinkers.

Black children who come to school speaking African American English will often have to work harder to learn reading, writing, and spelling because their experience will be similar to children who are learning English as a second language. It doesn't mean they have a learning disability.

No child should be shamed for speaking a language or dialect that is different from the dominant culture, and yet we do owe it to them to teach the language and grammar of the dominant culture in order to have power within it.

Writing in sentences will come naturally to some kids and not easily to others, just like reading. But grammar terms are necessary to understand how to write sentences.

Many of us learned grammar terms without any application to our writing. I learned the terminology in middle school, but without any practical application. That's too bad, because the application is where it gets really fun and interesting.

Simply learning grammar terms without application is like learning the names of the colors without being given a box of colored markers to draw with!

But just like knowing the names of the colors help to teach art, the names of grammar terms helps in teaching how to write great sentences. For simple sentences, those terms would be "noun", "verb", "pronoun", and "conjunction". These are the terms that will help to teach beginning punctuation.

Building simple sentences

Here's where the application comes in. Grammar is fun when it's made into a game of creativity and used to build sentences.

Grammar is also the key to understanding punctuation. At the early stage of writing sentences, the important grammar terms are "noun", "verb", "pronoun", and "conjunction". First graders can learn that a pronoun starts a new sentence unless there is a conjunction, which makes the sentence keep going. This strategy alone will make them successful at much of the punctuation needed for simple sentences.

In order to play with grammar and build sentences, start with games and fun exercises that don't involve any student writing. Play with making silly sentences from nouns and verbs. Have children write silly sentences from words or phrases you provide. What happens when you move the words or phrases around? How about when you add a conjunction?

Sentences with conjunctions

These are perfect words for learning beginning grammar and extending sentences. "Because", "and", and "but" (which always brings giggles) are easy ways to make longer sentences.

Here are some writing samples of students who have mastered the Sentence level. They have good punctuation and some sentences with conjunctions. This is all independent work with no corrections or any other teacher help. If students have had good writing instruction in the first two years of school, most of them can master the sentence level by the end of first grade.

Student 1 - fall and spring of first grade

Fall Write A Person I Really Like

ant. is. my. friend.
he. was. nts. to. me.
ol. get. her. last. year.
in Kib r. Gath.

What continent would you like to visit?

I would like to visit Asia because
I would like to ride a elephant. I saw
the elephant could spray me. I could make
Origamis and make toys with them! I could
make flower. Oners. I could also see kites.
You can make your kite and cut others
down. In india on a holiday you
can draw pretty pictures with colored
Or colored dust.

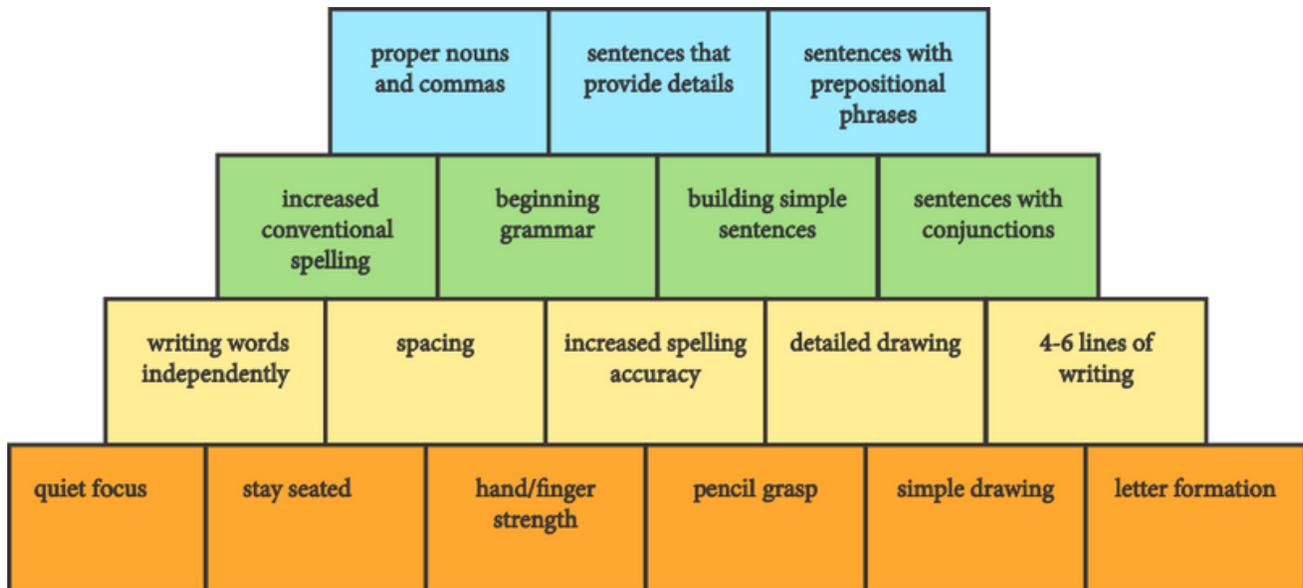
Student 2 ELL- fall and spring of first grade

Fall Write A Person I Really Like
I - Family Math

What continent would you like to visit?

I would like to visit Mexico, because I am hot. Then I can go swimming. When I go to the beach I see ^{turtles} birds and fish with ^{colors} cars. I want to see the school because it doesn't have no classroom and windows. I want to see butterfly because some have cars. When I go to the beach I see parrots. Also I see crabs and starfish. Even when I go with my dad I get good food, and I like the fish that my dad gave me. Then I get good food like coke and I

Instructional focus of the fourth (Blue) level - Detail



Proper nouns and commas

Now that students have mastered the basics of sentences, they will be more ready to take in new information. That new information is more likely to "stick" because they will have more working memory for it.

Sentences that provide details

If your students have experienced adding detail to their drawings, and discussing what those details are, the concept won't be new here. I find that the key words Who, What, Where, When, Why and How are very useful when getting students to add detail.

Young writers may not realize how important these seemingly minor details are until they compare two passages - one with details and one without any.

For example, a student may write "I like to play soccer." A beginning writer may wonder what anyone else would want to know. But when they add details such as "I play in the schoolyard with my friend Lily." and when they see other students add details to their writing, they experience how details make the writing more interesting, just as details make a picture more interesting.

Sentences with prepositional phrases

For simplicity's sake, in the early grades prepositional phrases can be defined as a when ("in the afternoon") or where ("on the sidewalk"). It's not necessary to introduce the term "prepositional phrase", just the concept. A "when" and a "where" are another way to add detail.

Children can learn the skill of including these in a sentence. So instead of writing "I like to play soccer. I play with my friend Lily in the schoolyard.", the sentence becomes "I play soccer with my friend Lily in the schoolyard."

It's fun for students to see that they can actually build a sentence and have a long sentence that includes a When, a Where, and a conjunction. Here again, it's helpful to spend time playing with sentences and sentence structures that are separate from their own work. Then when you go to give feedback, you can say, "Remember when we made those sentences with a 'when' and a 'where'? I wonder if you can do that here in your writing."

Fall and spring of second grade

In second grade, students had 5 minutes to brainstorm and 10 minutes to write.

I like playing baseball

because I play

3rd bas.

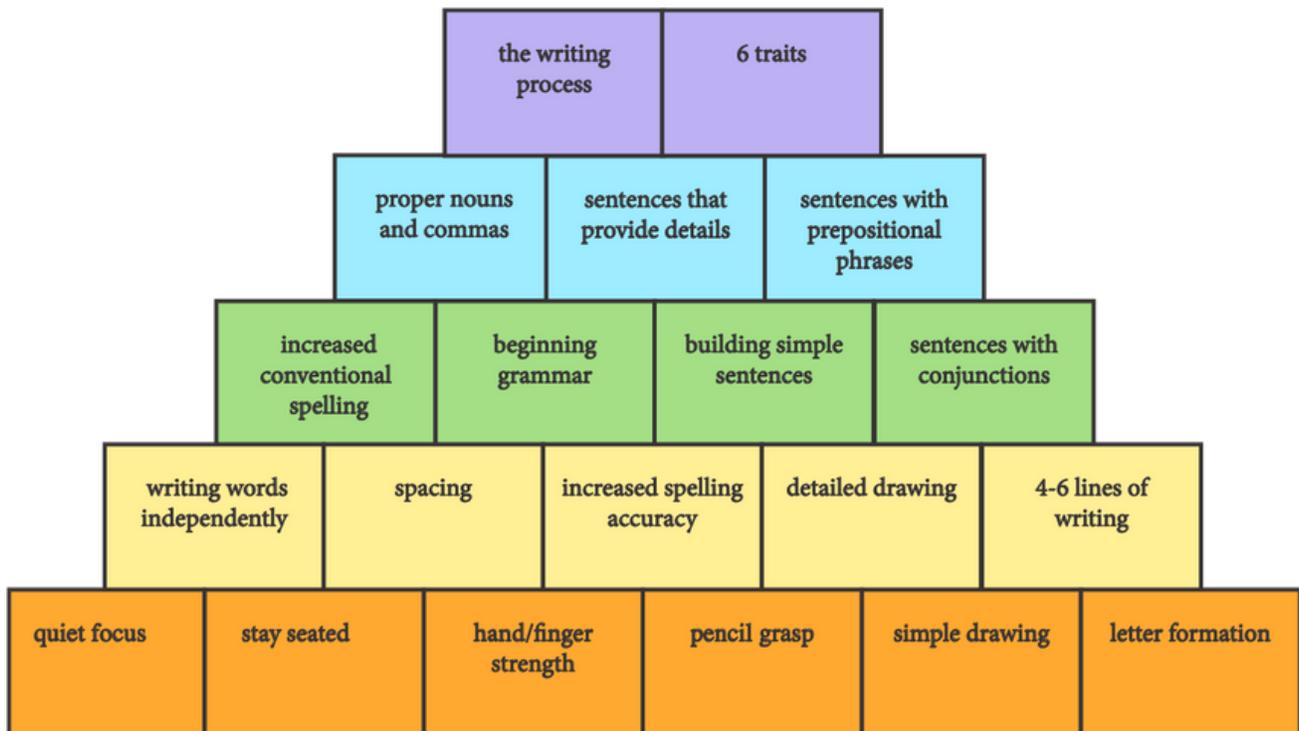
Name Jacob

10
MINUTE
WRITE

Month June

On Father's day I'm going to a Mariners game with my family. I hope I get a new Seagers hat because my old one fell in the dirt. I also hope the Mariners win against the Red Sox. I want Edwin Diaz to pitch in the bottom of the ninth and I want him to throw a 103 mph. I want to catch a ball when they hit it over the fence. Me and my family are sitting behind the fence.

Instructional focus of the fifth (Purple) level - Editing and Revising



At this stage of learning to write, students can begin to look more critically at their own work and that of their peers. They will be more successful with "process" oriented programs such as SRSD. Word choice, ideas, voice, and writing for an audience becomes more important.

They can begin to use several paragraphs to flesh out a topic or an idea. Published programs like Step Up to Writing can begin to be helpful.

It is so important to have a strong foundation to build on with an important skill like writing. As in math and reading, students can get along in writing for awhile on a shaky foundation, but everything falls apart when more is expected or higher concepts are introduced.

Now that you've had an introduction to the Writing Pyramid, let's look again at the "what" of structured literacy to see where the skills that make up a structured literacy approach fit in with the "when" of the Writing Pyramid.

Phonemes/Graphemes

Reading - matching letters to sounds, blending sounds to sound out words

Writing - using "sound spelling" to begin to write words

Orange and **Yellow** levels of the Writing Pyramid.

Syllable and stress patterns

Reading - these are strategies to help with decoding words at the word level (i.e. as silent -e rule, how two vowels together work, etc.,

Writing - knowing these word patterns also helps with learning to spell
AND though not directly correlated with decoding, there are also strategies for punctuation that need further research for their effect on writing
(*strategies, in all subject areas, are a huge boost to learning*)

Spelling and punctuation patterns/strategies begin at the **Green** and **Blue** levels of the Writing Pyramid.

Morphemes

Reading - using knowledge of root words to add prefixes, suffixes which "morph" the word into a new one (i.e. "tangle" to "entanglement")

Writing - applying knowledge of morphemes to spell words correctly

Blue and **Purple** Levels of the Writing Pyramid.

Vocabulary (K-2 level)

Reading - increasing vocabulary through background knowledge and read-alouds

Writing - applying vocabulary to word choices in writing

Descriptive language and better word choices begin at the **Blue** and **Purple** Levels.

Sentence structure

Reading - from simple sentences to more complex sentences in text, grammar, how sentences are formed

Writing - learning what a sentence is, gradually learning to build longer and more complex sentences

Begins at the **Green** Level of the Writing Pyramid and should continue on through high school.

Text structure

Reading - students become familiar with the structure of different genres (narrative, persuasive, problem/solution, cause and effect, sequential, compare/contrast)

Writing - these structures can be used in writing for different purposes and audiences

Begins at the end of the **Blue** Level and continues through high school.

Teaching reading and writing are difficult, and finding the right tools for the job can be part of the challenge. Hospitals provide the right tools for surgery. NASA provides the right tools to work on rockets. But many - if not most - schools still lack the tools and teaching technologies for helping students learn to read and write, although schools are filled with technological gadgets of all kinds. Now that more educators are becoming aware of the science behind literacy instruction, many are asking "Where is the curriculum I need to teach this?" "How exactly do I carry this out?"

I hope the K-2 Writing Pyramid is helpful in explaining how to allow children to master one set of skills before adding another. The full Growing Writers program has writing lessons that do the pacing for you, are differentiated, and have been classroom tested over many years.

You can learn more on the Growing Writers website.



growingwriters.org

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