

Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2007.

This report identifies 11 elements of current writing instruction found to be effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. It is important to note that all of the elements are supported by rigorous research, but that even when used together, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum.

- 1. Writing Strategies**, which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions
- 2. Summarization**, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts
- 3. Collaborative Writing**, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions
- 4. Specific Product Goals**, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete
- 5. Word Processing**, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
- 6. Sentence Combining**, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
- 7. Prewriting**, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition
- 8. Inquiry Activities**, which engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
- 9. Process Writing Approach**, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
- 10. Study of Models**, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
- 11. Writing for Content Learning**, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material.

How do we lead students to own the qualities of strong argument writing?

- **Study forms** that will lead to success for all students (letter, list essay, editorial, blog, podcast, digital commentary, documentary)
- **Students who choose** their passions write better
- **Define the audience** who will read their work
- **“Several laps around the track”** allow students to practice their skills, then repeat what they’ve learned and improve, then begin to move beyond form to larger understandings of the qualities of argument (repetition = retention.) During one unit of study in argument, students might create 3-4 texts that represent different forms, but the similar understandings about the qualities of argument
- **Frequently study texts** and notice qualities, list, & evaluate during the unit, adding to class understandings & the practice of analytical reading
- **Create anchor charts** of understandings for your classroom that remain in place throughout the unit—anyone should be able to walk into your classroom and know what you’re studying and how today connects to yesterday & tomorrow
- **Frame the year of study** for students, showing how qualities of writing and skills and forms are related to each other & how students will gather skills and larger understandings

Quick Writes:

- Use poetry that presents a position or argues a point—short texts, big messages—because poetry reinforces the idea that there are many forms of writing that argue = a bigger picture of the genre and the way all writing is connected
- Use charts, tables, and graphs to practice writing from information that supports ideas with evidence, not just emotion
- Use controversial, local issues to help students connect to the thinking they are already doing & focus on how to support their thinking with reason
- Quickly write in imitation of a mentor text form (like “6 Things You Should Know About” from *ESPN* magazine); day two take one element of the quick write and expand it
- Quick writing is effective for partners; collaborative writing is a powerful teaching tool
- Revise quick writing “make it better” as daily practice in rereading & attention to craft

Revision focus:

- Reread your writing and find: your best phrases, lines; the line that is the heart of what you’re trying to say; a place where you can make it better writing; a place where you can add information to strengthen the idea; a place where you have more to say; then write just from that place...
- Practice introducing support for your idea through another source you quote. Pay attention to the duet of voices: source and writer

Sentence Study (can be chosen from mentor texts in unit):

- This work is ideal for partners—collaborative writing is one of 11 best strategies for teaching adolescents writing skills (*Writing Next*)
- Practice skills like quotations of sources
- Mentor students to samples from texts you study together during this unit: zoom in on one sentence & practice together
 - Example: sentences that group information
 - “**Dash and description**” (zooms in on details that *show* (a narrative skill that is often used in argument); the dash creates emphasis)
 - I stared at my father’s photograph—his thin face stern, lips latched tight, his eyes peering permanently to the right. ~Paul Fleischman, *Seedfolks*.
 - I walked to the run-down market—dirty white walls, roof sinking in, the door constantly swinging against the wall, and wondered why this was the only place to buy milk within a mile of the school.
- Strong opening and closing lines—collect, practice, share
- Study frames for essays (images, ideas, questions)
- Transition phrases and sentences

Mentor Texts:

- It makes a difference when a student (or the entire class) chooses a text as a *mentor*—makes the deliberate decision to mentor their writing to the model
- Choose anchor texts for whole class to *read closely together* that are good models of the argument you want students to write
- Mix published author texts with grade level strong student texts
- Your process in writing an argument including your rough draft (even unfinished) can be an anchor text for the class to study, best if created recently
- Consider the study one author’s work through several texts = Mentor Author
- Teach students how to annotate what they see in a text by showing them how you annotate the craft of a mentor text
- Read, analyze (study), write and share together—your model is critical at every stage of the process

Goals for collaborative writing or independent practice:

- When in the unit will students be ready for independent/collaborative work time?
- How many days per week/minutes per day for this writing time?
- What are your exit tickets or other expectations for productivity?
- Structure and manage individual & small group conferences so you can teach into the intentions of individual students—your most powerful teaching opportunity
- Define your expectations for peer work, lead students in this work

Assessment opportunities:

- Quick writes/notebook grades = good faith effort to write & revise
 - Evidence of revision, sentence imitations, write the entire time to build stamina
- Annotations on a mentor text can highlight particular understandings
- Collaborative work on sentence imitation, revision, or annotation of texts
- Exit slips at the end of class to clarify learning: one sentence to show...