

Reluctant Writers

Promising Practices 22

Program Puzzler

In your Aspire program, you and other instructors find that students have low confidence in their writing ability and often avoid writing until the General Educational Development (GED) Practice Test is on the horizon. While discussing this topic at a recent staff meeting, one instructor commented that the only way to build confidence in any skill is to practice it—often. That comment launched further discussion about ways to incorporate more writing instruction into the classroom routine—not only to encourage students to write more often but also to help them improve their writing skills.

Peer Perspective

- Students sometimes get writers’ block because they fear making mistakes in spelling, grammar, and mechanics. Teach students that writing is a process—that getting ideas down on paper comes first; spelling, grammar, and mechanics can be addressed later in the process.
- Have a daily writing prompt on the board when students arrive. They can respond to it first thing or later in the day. If you are ever at a loss for a topic, just do a Google search for writing prompts to find a wealth of websites. At <http://www.writingfix.com>, you will find daily creative prompts such as “When did you realize you couldn’t still do it? List ten things you could do when you were younger but can’t do anymore. Put one, some or all of them together in one piece of writing.”
- As with any instructional activity, explain why you expect students to write every day. Some reasons: writing is like any activity—the more you practice, the more you will improve; writing deepens our thinking—after all, writing is “thinking on paper;” being able to respond to a prompt is an important skill for the GED and college tests.
- Students are sometimes motivated to write when they know someone will read their work and respond to it. A dialogue journal is a written conversation in which a student and you communicate regularly over a period of time. Students may write as much as they choose on any topic. You write back regularly, responding to the student’s topics, introducing new topics, making comments, offering observations and opinions, requesting and giving clarification, asking questions, and answering student questions.
- When students have become more comfortable with putting their thoughts on paper, you can start assessing and addressing their strengths and weaknesses. Focus on improving one or two writing skills at a time; once the student has mastered those, as evidenced in his or her own writing, target the next area for improvement.

Timely Tips

The Ohio Literacy Resource Center’s annual Beginnings Writers’ Conference provides an opportunity for Aspire students to have their writing published. Get involved in this event and help your students explore the power of writing. For more information, go to <http://literacy.kent.edu/beginnings/>

Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab is an award-winning website with over 200 free resources, including style guides for writing and teaching writing, grammar and mechanics, and ESL (English as a Second Language). Go to <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/> and have a browse.

Added Insights

A Note About Grammar Instruction

Research shows that traditional grammar instruction (teaching parts of speech and grammar rules without a direct connection to students' own writing) is unlikely to improve the quality of students' writing. Yet instructors often rely on the workbook approach to grammar. One effective alternative is *sentence combining*, which has been shown to improve students' writing quality while at the same time enhancing syntactic skills.

Sentence Combining: One Approach to Grammar Instruction

Sentence-combining instruction involves teaching students to construct more complex and sophisticated sentences through exercises in which two or more basic sentences are combined into a single sentence. In one approach to sentence combining, students at higher and lower writing levels are paired to receive lessons that teach three techniques:

- Combining smaller related sentences into a compound sentence using the connectors and, but, and because
- Embedding an adjective or adverb from one sentence into another
- Creating complex sentences by embedding an adverbial and adjectival clause from one sentence into another

The instructor provides support and modeling, and the student pairs work collaboratively to apply the skills taught.

Graham, Steven, & Perin, Dolores. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high school schools. A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. <https://all4ed.org/webinar-event/writing-next-effective-strategies-to-improve-writing-of-adolescents-in-middle-and-high-school/>

Sentence Combining Websites

About.com: Grammar and Composition

<http://grammar.about.com/od/tests/a/introsc.htm>

About.Com: Grammar and Composition provides explanations, examples, and learning activities for sentence combining as well as links to other grammar and composition websites.

Bright Hub.com

<https://www.brighthubeducation.com/author/trent/>

Bright Hub.com offers insights and lessons from real teachers in real classrooms. Writing teacher Trent Lorcher's series of ten lessons, Better Grammar Equals Better Writing, includes a *Lesson Plan: How to Combine Sentences*.