Teach.
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the education blog

How to support writing
in the classroom:
A guide for educators

nwea

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Writing is a critical skill that can shape a student's success in school. It can also influence their prospects after graduation. In fact, 2019 findings by the Pew Research Center show that writing skills are helping women in particular secure higher-paying jobs and begin to reduce the gender pay gap.

In this best of *Teach. Learn. Grow.* eBook, you'll hear from several experts who will help you better understand how writing is learned and how best to support your students with research-based practices in writing instruction.

Ask a teacher: How to create a classroom community of empowered writers

Lauren Bardwell

On the National Day on Writing every year, the National Council of Teachers of English encourages "everyone to share their knowledge about writing, organize participating groups in our schools and/or communities, and transform the public's understanding of writing and the role it plays in society."

In support of celebrating writing all year long, NWEA® released the white paper "Writing for all: NWEA stances on writing" to help teachers in the challenging work of writing instruction. Our stances lay out a clear vision for the future of writing instruction through five research-supported stances. The paper addresses what writing is, why it's important, and how NWEA can better meet the needs of the writers we serve through our products, services, research, and advocacy.

Empowering writers

Our first writing stance sets the stage for the importance of teaching writing: "Writing empowers; writers use their voices." In our white paper, we explain that writing "is a critical tool for participation in society, presenting the writer with multiple pathways to opportunity, engagement, discovery, expression, influence, agency, and advocacy. Because of writing's social, political, and civic impacts— and because of the lifelong implications for the writer—writing must occupy a prominent space in students' academic experiences."

To learn more about how to empower student writers, I interviewed Bethany Douglass, a 15-year veteran teacher and a National Writing Project fellow. Our interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

Before we dig into your experience teaching writing, let's start at the beginning: why do you write?

I think I use writing to make sense of the world, and I think that happens in everyday experiences. For example, when preparing for my son's birthday party, I found that, in my head, there was a mess of items that I needed to take care of. So I made a to-do list, and as I was looking at the list, I thought, "I can do this." In that act of writing, I made sense of all the chaos that was in my mind. It was empowering.

I'm also a huge journaler. When I'm trying to make a decision about something or trying to reflect on next steps, journaling is part of my process.

It sounds like you've been using writing to make sense of things for a long time. What other roles has writing played in your life?

Writing is something that has been a part of my life as far as I can remember. Writing has taught me—and this is really important to me—how to fail. Writing has taught me how to receive feedback. Writing has played a role in exploring my voice. It has certainly been a vehicle for my voice when I felt like there were things that I couldn't say out loud.

I even met my husband online. Our first communication was through writing.

The ability to communicate through writing is a gift, and I am grateful for all the ways I have used it outside of a professional setting.

I really like those observations. They're both profound and incredibly relatable. Okay, let's turn to the classroom. What role does writing play in your students' lives?

Writing helps kids make sense of the world, too. It's also a way that I get to know my individual students, their unique interests, their talents, and the things they need to work on, whether those are part of the writing process or issues they're working on personally.

> Writing prepares students for life beyond school because writing requires you to think critically and communicate precisely.

Writing prepares students for life beyond school because writing requires you to think critically and communicate precisely. When you are writing, you're writing for another audience (unless you're journaling). Students have to think rhetorically about the words they choose and how the audience is going to receive them. It also requires them to think logically and rationally: "How am I going to execute my point and how am I going to support my point?" All of that has to do with communication, the communication between the writer and the reader. I think that regular practice with writing wires the brain to think in a way that is clear, to think in a way that is about considering the audience.

Having to consider the needs of an audience builds empathy for others. I hadn't really thought about that until hearing you talk just now.

That's so true. Teaching empathy, or helping to understand others, connects to the idea of a counterclaim. Writing a counterclaim is one of the most challenging tasks for students because they must anticipate what someone else might say, think, or feel about their position. Frequent experience and practice with writing wires your brain to be more empathetic because it certainly makes you think about how you're going to respond to someone who disagrees with you. And that's hard.

I recently came across the idea that <u>assigning writing is not the same as teaching writing,</u> and it has really stuck with me. How do you approach writing instruction in your classroom?

I approach writing instruction in a very structured way, and that is because I have historically taught students who have had very little writing instruction or writing experience. I think that when you're working with a novice writer, you have to create safety nets for them.

Also, I do tons of modeling. Tons. I am never going to ask students to produce a writing product for me if I haven't shown them how I would do it, unless I'm just trying to get a baseline. This creates that safety net because they can always go back to the model.

I give tons of feedback, too. Kids do not read what you write on their papers, so one-on-one feedback is so much better. Of course, time becomes a huge issue, but I have dedicated entire class periods to conferencing. I've had, sometimes, 35 students in a class, and I sit down and conference with each one of them, give them at least five minutes to talk through strengths and weaknesses and next steps with papers. I've found ways for students to still be learning independently at their seats while I'm conferencing with other students. That conference time is just invaluable.

Receiving feedback and persevering through rounds of revision can be psychologically tough. How can teachers build a classroom community of writers that is welcoming and resilient?

We have to get rid of the magic curtain.

I recently wrote a model paragraph that was an analysis of Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," and we were dissecting my model when a student good-naturedly asked, "How did you write all this about just two lines of poetry?" My response: "I thought about it a lot, and a lot of practice."

> Modeling is the best way to show students what *you* expect, and it is also the best way—especially live modeling—for students to see you stumble a little bit, too.

Students think we are doing some kind of magic when we write, and we're just not. We have to tell them about our struggles as writers. We have to write in front of students off the cuff. We have to put ourselves in the same position as them. Otherwise we're asking kids to go out on a limb we're not willing to go out on.

I love that idea. To build community, we have to show our vulnerability. What about value? How do we help students see the value in writing? That writing is worthy of their time?

Through writing personal narrative. Personal narrative is the way I always start the year. I try to pick a topic that is going to make them think about themselves.

The other thing that gets students to find value in writing is giving them choice. Most recently, I encouraged students to choose argumentative topics. I provided students with a list of topics, but I also told them that they could come up with their own. When you give students the opportunity to choose, especially an argumentative piece, they take ownership of it.

What is a memorable teaching moment you had in the classroom?

I don't necessarily consider myself a strong creative writer, but I do enjoy teaching creative writing. I love creative writing because it provides an avenue for students to express themselves in a way that I think we don't provide enough opportunity for in the classroom anymore. But students use creative writing to explore where they are emotionally. They use it to explore their relationships with their peers, with their family. Creative writing is a great way to earn your students' trust. It certainly builds community within a classroom.

I had this amazing creative writing class once that, honestly, I was a little overwhelmed by at first. Those students ended up being one of the most amazing groups of kids that I've ever worked with. They wanted to enter a literary magazine contest through Books-A-Million. They stayed on me and stayed on me about it. I was pregnant at the time and was very overwhelmed with how I was balancing and going to continue balancing life. And they said, "No, no, no. We'll do it. You just guide us through."

We ended up winning third place. Books-A-Million printed our book, sold it, and hosted a book signing and everything. These kids felt like rock stars. And they did all of it, from the cover art to the writing. This particular group of students would never have connected with one another on campus had it not been for this writing opportunity. These were students who you would not have seen hanging out together in the hallways or in the cafeteria. I would venture to guess that some of them still communicate to this day.

What a great memory. Okay, it's a new school year and a perfect time to make new writing memories with students. What advice would you give to teachers for this school year?

Model, model, model. There is a perception that at some point in a student's educational career, they know how to write, and so we can just start to assign writing. I've taught students from 6th grade through 12th grade. I've taught students taking AP literature and composition, and I've taught students who have had minimal experience with writing. The truth is, no matter where a student is, what grade the student is in, or how much experience they've had with writing, they have not had writing with you. Modeling is the best way to show students what you expect, and it is also the best way—especially live modeling—for students to see you stumble a little bit, too.

I also try really, really hard not to use the words "good" or "bad." Writing is a human act, and it is connected to your sense of who you are, especially for extremely vulnerable teenagers as they're maturing. I have made the mistake of saying, "This is good" or "This is bad," and when that happens, students take that to heart. They pin that to who they are as an individual, and it's not about that at all.

I think that's really great advice. Writing is a skill we develop over time. It takes a lot of practice and a lot of constructive feedback to get better at it.

Writing really is a gift. As teachers of English and across the curriculum, we have the opportunity to give that gift to students every day. If we do it often enough, and if we show them that writing is something everyone can do effectively, then hopefully it will open up a world of opportunities for them. **TLG**

Understanding the writing process and how it can help your students

Kellie Schmidt

When I was in school, I learned about the writing process in a way that made it seem linear. In my mind, it was akin to a drive along an interstate: long, mostly flat, and straight, with only occasional diversions to be had. As an adult, my approach to the writing process looks like a map of the greater Los Angeles area: dizzying swoops and tangles of freeways, long boulevards carving their way through multiple cities, detours, attractions, and frequent instances of traffic at a complete standstill.

When I started college, it did not take me long to discard the linear approach to the writing process I had adopted so dutifully in school. Outlines? Please! Formal drafts? Ha! Rather, I followed the risky process of sitting down at my desk and seeing what happened. I would revise as I went along, sometimes sailing through a section and other times needing to loop back repeatedly to one particularly complex or sticky point.

While I initially thought that I was just being a rebel, I later realized I was settling into *my* writing process. Over the years, I had gained enough experience and confidence as a writer that I could discard my formerly linear approach to writing. What I ended up with isn't tidy and isn't always pretty, but it's me.

I would never recommend my messier approach for a young writer. There's value in a more traditional and structured writing process for young students. It is the academic equivalent of training wheels, giving one the confidence to move through a writing process in a delineated way until the writer comes into their own identity through experience. This more traditional and structured approach is rooted in the work of two scholars, Linda Flower and John Hayes.

Flower and Hayes and the writing process

In our eBook *How to support writing at home: A guide for families*, several of my colleagues and I focused on exploring the Simple View of Writing, which explains that a writer must juggle the demands of transcription, executive function, and text generation, all within the confines of their working memory, when they take on a writing task.

The Simple View of Writing, which is typically associated with emergent and developing writers, owes much to Flower and Hayes. In 1981, they published "A cognitive process theory of writing," an article in which they shared a non-

linear model of the writing process that centers on three stages: 1) planning, 2) translating, and 3) reviewing.

This model has held up well over the past forty years, and with good reason. While the three stages may not seem revelatory, what Flower and Hayes emphasized is that writers may move back and forth between the steps as they create or refine their writing goals.

Flower and Hayes drew their research from proficient writers, and they knew that writers may change their writing goals (and ideas) as they write. A writing piece does not typically emerge fully formed from one's pen or keyboard; our brains are processing, neurons are firing, and new connections are being made as we write. Per Flower and Hayes, writing is a recursive process, meaning that it can repeat and loop back on itself.

In writing stances issued by NWEA, we state that, "Writing is both a product and a process; writers use writing to think more deeply and critically about ideas. . . the process itself is just as valuable as the product." Similarly, NCTE's recent "Position statement on writing instruction in school" states that educators are encouraged to, "Advocate for writing instruction that is process- (rather than product-) oriented and that invites students to become writers who (1) write for authentic purposes and (2) make authentic choices about processes and products."

> **Per Flower and Hayes, writing is a recursive process, meaning that it can repeat and loop back on itself.**

Both NWEA and NCTE are making nods toward Flower and Hayes, who said that, "common sense and research tell us that writers are constantly planning (prewriting) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write), not in clean-cut stages."

What did Flower and Hayes think the three components—planning, translating, and reviewing—might look like? Before starting with any of them, a writer has to identify a "rhetorical problem." For young students, the rhetorical problem will frequently be what is handed to them in the shape of the assignment they receive from a teacher. This assignment typically consists of a question or topic to center their writing around, and the assignment has requirements for length, audience, formatting, research support, and other things.

The planning stage

The planning stage can and should evolve for writers as they mature. Depending on the age of the writer, planning could look like a detailed outline, graphic organizers, or even a thesis statement followed by some scribbled notes. This is where writers begin to set goals.

As I noted above, gaining the discipline to engage meaningfully in a planning process is invaluable for young writers. If nothing else, it demands that a writer

determines a goal or goals and how they may reach those goals before they plunge into the translating stage. Whatever manifests from the planning stage becomes almost a touchstone for the journey of writing: "This is where I am going, and this is roughly how I plan to get there. This is what is most important to communicate in this piece of writing."

The planning stage is a place where the writer's thinking begins to coalesce. The writer is thinking about not only the structure of their piece, but what they want to say, how best to say it, and how to link it with other ideas. It is important to note that the writer's goals can be changed and that this may necessitate a return to the planning stage. Indeed, in our writing stances, we state that "Upon reviewing their writing, writers may discover that their current line of thinking is not viable, and they may return to the planning process to gather additional information or restructure their outlines."

Careful and structured planning can also result in tremendous efficiency for a writer. It is very easy to wander down a tangential road when one is writing (I deleted an entire paragraph from this piece because I belatedly realized it didn't serve the purpose of my writing and did not strengthen my message). If students begin with a strong outline, they can check their writing against it to see if they are on track. Research suggests that savvy writers spend more time in the planning stage and that this ultimately results in higher quality writing.

Translating

At the risk of using a cliché, the translating stage of the writing process is where the magic happens. This is when the writer takes the thoughts and ideas swirling in their head and begins to commit them to paper or screen. The thoughts and ideas, the organization and goals, are translated into the written word.

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For very young writers, the translation stage comes with an extra burden: transcription. Think about how much labor it requires for a first or second grader to hand write or type a sentence. As we mature, we tend to gain increased automaticity with transcription, and this speeds up the writing process by freeing up more of our working memory to devote to text generation.

For writers of any age, the translating process will vary in speed and ease, frequently within a matter of moments. In my own writing of this article, there were times when my ideas were flowing freely while, at other times, I stared blankly at the screen, trying to figure out how to say what I wanted to say.

We are actively thinking as we write; variances in the flow of words should be expected. There may be times in the translating process, though, when we get

in our own way as writers; we drift into the next stage, reviewing, rather than staying focused on the translating. If we divert much of our attention to editing our work as we translate, we can block the flow of our thoughts. With young writers, try to encourage them as much as possible not to edit themselves heavily while they draft.

Reviewing (aka, editing)

Flower and Hayes explain that the reviewing stage relies on two primary tasks: evaluating and revising. Reviewing should extend beyond checking that you have punctuated your work properly and chosen your words carefully; it should extend to making sure your key ideas have been communicated, that the structure you have chosen is what works best (or is required) for your work, and that you have maintained the tone and audience focus that you intended. In short, did you do what you set out to do?

The reviewing stage, like all the others, can be recursive. Making a revision in one place may trigger a thought about a completely different part of the paper. While that thought is fresh in the mind of the writer, the writer will make that change (or make note of it for later). This means that while a writer may intend to move through reviewing their writing in an orderly and linear fashion, they may end up bouncing between sentences, paragraphs, or even sections of a longer assignment. Careful review could even lead to the creation of new goals or sub-goals for the writing, which could lead to more significant rewrites. This is not a cause for alarm; it is, rather, the writer's mind at work. In fact, sometimes the most powerful moments for writers come with the reviewing stage. If a writer is lucky, they may have an "Aha!" moment while reviewing their writing, which leads to a burst of inspiration that could result in fresh new material.

For some writers, figuring out when they are done reviewing can be painful. Some writers (I included) could edit their own writing until the end of time. If you have students like this, make sure to direct them back to the requirements of the assignment. It may help them know when they have achieved their goal and help them release a final product. As a common quotation about writing says, "Writing is never done; it is only due."

The role of feedback

For educators, there is an important step that should be inserted into the writing process, however you decide to structure assignments for your students: young writers need feedback on their writing and the process they engaged in to produce it. Read "Ask a teacher: How to create a classroom community of empowered writers" to hear a veteran teacher share how invaluable feedback has been for her own writing and how she provides it to her students.

Feedback should be available at strategic intervals, and it must be concrete and constructive. For example, a question mark in red ink in the margin is not helpful; a comment that says, "This statement needs more detail to support your main idea," is direct and actionable.

The planning stage is a critical time for meaningful feedback about the writing process. A few clear comments from a teacher at this point can save a writer a great deal of heartache. Writers also need time to reflect on and incorporate the feedback during the lifecycle of that assignment. Whether you provide feedback via written comments, a rubric, or short conferences, your guidance can help shape the writer's thinking and help them troubleshoot as they move along. As writing is recursive, the reach of your feedback could be extensive and transformative.

The journey is worthwhile

Writing is a gift. Each writer owns a voice and style that, even with structure in place, allows them to bring a part of themselves into each piece they write. We can help nurture young writers by sharing the purpose of the writing process with them, and by helping them understand that they are not driving directly from point A to point B. There are many other points of interest along the way, and the writing process helps us see the value in the journey, not just the destination. **TLG**

> **With young writers, try to encourage them as much as possible not to edit themselves heavily while they draft.**

Translanguaging as part of the writing process

Kayla McLaughlin

Like many in the US, I studied Spanish in high school as part of my graduation requirement. While in college, however, my motivation for continuing with the language became decidedly more personal. I met my current partner, whose family was from Mexico and whose parents and grandparents spoke Spanish and very little English. Given that I, in turn, spoke English and very little Spanish, my ability to communicate with them was extremely limited, so I doubled down on my studies and eventually switched my major to Spanish.

As my courses became more advanced, the complexity of the work I was asked to produce increased, from a few carefully structured sentences on homework assignments to short compositions to five-paragraph essays and, eventually, to longer research papers, all in Spanish. Or, at least, all in Spanish on the finished versions that I handed in for a grade. My working documents told a very different story: If I needed to make an outline before writing an essay, I'd usually write the outline in English since it was much easier and faster to plan in my native language. If I was drafting a research paper and didn't know how to express an idea in Spanish, I'd write it in English so I wouldn't lose the thought, then figure out how to say it in Spanish for the final draft.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was doing what researchers such as [Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García, and Wallis Reid](#) refer to as "translanguaging." Rather than limiting myself to using a language I was still working on learning, I was operating *sin restricciones lingüísticas*—without linguistic restrictions— and drawing upon my entire linguistic repertoire of both my second language (Spanish) *and* my native language (English) to analyze content and articulate my interpretation of it. As my confidence in Spanish increased, I used less and less English during the planning and drafting process, eventually getting to the point where I could comfortably plan and write papers entirely in Spanish.

> **Our students are at their best when they're encouraged to access all the linguistic tools they have at their disposal.**

Now, as a professional trained in both Spanish linguistics and second language acquisition, I'm able to fully appreciate just how vital my ability to draw upon and make comparisons with my native language was to my journey toward fluency in Spanish and my comprehension of the topics I studied, and I'm also able to use

my experience as a relevant, personal example of why emergent bilingual students should be not only allowed but also encouraged to translanguage in the classroom and as part of the writing process.

Translanguaging as a way to enhance learning and writing

The term "translanguaging" has been around for a while now, ever since it was coined by Welsh researcher Cen Williams in the 1980s. Since then, multiple scholars (e.g., García and Wei, 2018; Hornberger, 2005; Lewis, Jones, and Baker, 2012; Otheguy, García, and Reid, 2015; Velasco and García, 2014) have investigated the role of translanguaging in student learning. The overwhelming consensus, as Hornberger writes, is that "bi/multilinguals' learning is maximized when they are allowed and enabled to draw from across all their existing language skills (in two+ languages), rather than being constrained and inhibited from doing so by monolingual instructional assumptions and practices." Similarly, NWEA stances on writing assert that "Instead of being restricted to composing in only one language, dialect, or register, students should be empowered to engage in translanguaging—using their entire language repertoire—to express themselves fully during the drafting process."

To further illustrate why this is important, let's pretend I asked you to write a brief composition about your favorite hobby. You probably know quite a bit about the hobby and how to talk about it with enthusiasm, so you likely already

> When we encourage students to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire, we're empowering them to use their fullest, most authentic voice.

have some ideas about what you might include in your composition and could probably write it fairly quickly without a great deal of effort. Assuming you were writing in your main or most-fluent language, that is. Imagine, though, if I told you to write it in a language that you've studied but that you're nowhere near fluent in and that while planning or drafting, you can *only* use the other language and that your main language, the one in which you can most easily express yourself, the one in which you likely learned how to write in the first place, is off limits. Your task just got a whole lot harder!

Now imagine instead that I kept the "write the final draft in your other language" rule but said that during the planning and drafting process, you could do as I did when I was learning to write in Spanish; that is, you could use your main or most-fluent language to make notes, ask questions, solicit feedback, and generally figure out *what* you wanted to say before you worried about *how* to say it. Writing the final composition in your other language would likely still be challenging, but your ability to use your main language as part of the process leading *up to* the final draft would probably help you feel more confident that the final draft more accurately reflected your intended message.

This is precisely why translanguaging is such a valuable, potentially vital part of the writing process for multilingual students: because it facilitates critical thinking by allowing them to bring their whole selves and the entirety of what they know to a given writing task.

Translanguaging and the classroom: Strategies for implementation

Particularly for educators with little knowledge of multilingual students' languages, incorporating translanguaging into the classroom writing process might seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be. My colleague Teresa Krastel has a blog post titled ["Valuing funds of knowledge and translanguaging in emergent bilingual students,"](#) which ends with five suggested practices for supporting multilingual students more broadly. When it comes to writing instruction, consider strategies such as:

- Choosing tasks that are relevant to students' interests and inclusive of their unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

- Providing multiple clear examples of what high-quality writing in English looks like across a variety of genres and encouraging students to make comparisons with similar texts written in their home language.

- Explicitly teaching elements such as transition words and different types of rhetorical devices (e.g., alliteration, repetition) and encouraging students to come up with examples in both English and their home language.

- Allowing students to outline or draft in multiple languages.

- When relevant, encouraging students to consider the purpose of translanguaging in a final draft. For example, if the intended audience of a written text are members of the student's home language community, the intentional choice to use translanguaging in the final product can enhance both the writer's message and readers' understanding of it.

- Pairing students who speak the same languages in peer feedback groups and encouraging them to give verbal or written feedback in the language in which they and the person receiving the feedback are most comfortable.

- Making sure your classroom library includes multilingual dictionaries reflective of the languages your students speak, or allowing students to use apps or the internet to quickly look up new words.

- Reiterating to your students that writing is a recursive, collaborative process between a writer and their audience: the first draft is very rarely the final draft, and that's okay.

For additional guidance on translanguaging and supporting multilingual students throughout the writing process, check out this guide from CUNY, which includes a variety of activities as well as reflection questions on pages 12–19 for teachers of multiple grade levels.

Honoring students' linguistic toolkits

In the words of researchers Velasco and García: "Writing is a highly complex and demanding task. The writer must negotiate the rules and mechanics of writing while maintaining a focus on factors such as organization, form and features, purposes and goals, as well as audience needs and perspectives. Self-regulation of the writing process is critical. The writer must be goal oriented, resourceful, and reflective. Skilled writers are able to use powerful strategies to support them in accomplishing specific writing goals. In emergent bilinguals, translanguaging is one such strategy."

Rather than conceptualizing languages as separate, non-overlapping entities, think instead of all the words, grammatical structures, and other linguistic features you know in *any* language or dialect and imagine them as tools in a single, large toolkit that's available to you at all times. Depending on the context of any given interaction or problem that you're trying to solve, you might use one or more tools from your native language or dialect, or you might use tools from an additional language or dialect you know, or you might realize that this is a particularly complex job and that you need multiple tools from multiple languages or dialects to resolve it effectively.

Just as a skilled craftsperson knows they're at their best when they can access their entire toolkit, our students are at *their* best when they're encouraged to access all the linguistic tools they have at their disposal. When we encourage students to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire, we're empowering them to use their fullest, most authentic voice. We're teaching them the value of communication and collaboration by allowing them to use what they know to figure out where they need additional support, and we're reaffirming that writing is both a product and a process and that there's just as much (if not more) value in the latter as there is in the former. We're recognizing that writers at different levels of fluency in English and at different stages of learning require different types of support and that the type of support a given writer needs will change over time as they continue to hone their craft and discover their voice. We are, in short, reaffirming that writing is a skill, one at which students—*all* students, and not just those who are native English speakers—can excel if their funds of linguistic knowledge are recognized and celebrated as part of the writing process. **TLG**

5 ways to use writing in the disciplines to support learning

Amy Merrill

One day, while working with the interdisciplinary team at my middle school, my colleagues and I were discussing upcoming lesson plans, what had been working well in our classes, and where we were facing challenges.

The math teacher described one lesson that was a huge success: her students would create a word problem with a corresponding visual representation of ratios and proportional relationships. She showed us how one student drafted a restaurant menu with different servings while another designed a map with driving distances to the beach. The science teacher echoed that excitement and told us about how her students would explain their conclusions of how an igloo made of blocks of cold snow could keep people inside warm by writing a picture book for younger students. The social studies teacher chimed in with details on an engaging lesson that allowed her class to choose an ancient civilization to research and then present about to the class.

As I sat listening to all the enthusiasm, it occurred to me that these were all examples of how writing in the classroom can support learning across all content areas. The students' clear engagement with the content, their ability to think and demonstrate their knowledge in different ways, and the incorporation of those skills across the disciplines made me feel encouraged that my language arts students were becoming better writers and thinkers in all their classes.

Why teach writing in my class if I don't teach language arts?

Not all math, science, and social studies teachers feel the same enthusiasm for incorporating writing into their lessons as my colleagues do. But writing is one of the most powerful tools that students can use in a classroom. As the NWEA stances on writing state, "Writing is a … process that serves as a tool for learning and critical thinking, stimulating the writer to think more deeply about a text, topic, or concept. In this way, writing doesn't just show thinking; it *is* thinking, and it is an essential practice across disciplines."

Writing provides a way for students to not only express their thinking but also promotes their thinking. As a result, writing can also help make the learning process more personal for each child. As students process what they're learning, writing becomes a channel for them to see what they do and don't understand. Such individualized expression is vital in classrooms that are increasingly diverse. Emergent bilingual students in particular can use

their native language to think through new content and demonstrate their knowledge in multiple languages. (My colleague Kayla McLaughlin talked about this process, called translanguaguing, in her article, "Translanguaging as part of the writing process.") For all students, processing via writing can help build their self-confidence. The self-confidence that students gain as they find their voice reinforces the benefits of writing itself and increases their enthusiasm for future writing.

Writing also has practical implications for teachers. Think about a classroom of, say, 30 students, each child a vessel of ideas and aspirations. Writing can become a convenient way for teachers to assess comprehension. Does a student really understand the Pythagorean theorem? Have them write about it and then you'll know. You don't always have to require an overly formal writing process, either. Short writing activities—tweets and other social media posts, short blogs, charts, diagrams—are all beneficial ways to expose students to the synthesis of writing and thinking. These types of writing exercises serve multiple purposes: engagement with writing, exposure to real-word applications of the written word, and interaction with academic language without the need for traditional writing formats.

How can I teach writing if I am not a writing teacher?

Since students are writing to think, we must provide authentic, compelling reasons for them to write. Writing assignments should be related to content you've recently taught and allow for multiple forms of writing, such as reflection and displaying knowledge of the topic, even if they may not yet have the academic language to convey an idea.

You may be asking yourself how you can support writing in your classroom without dedicating a ton of time to writing and grading. You may feel like you are not qualified to teach writing. Here are a few tips that can help:

1. **Remember that the act of writing is a tool for thinking.** Since the goal is to use writing to communicate ideas and support those ideas with evidence, any teacher is qualified to help guide students in critical-thinking skills. Don't worry about correcting grammar or spelling when using writing to promote thinking; that can come later when students are polishing a final product.

2. **Cultivate a classroom culture that values writing.** Research has shown that writing impacts students' learning of content only if it takes place within a classroom that values writing. For tips on how to build a classroom community of writers, check out "Ask a teacher: How to create a classroom community of empowered writers."

3. **Integrate short, daily writing activities throughout your lessons.** You do not need to have a highly formalized process to support writing as thinking in your class. Writing can be in the form of notes, a graphic organizer, a few sentences, or even a diagram. And because the goal is to promote learning and thinking, the short activities do not need to be graded.

4. **Reflect on the types of writing that professionals in your discipline do.** For example, mathematicians write proofs, scientists publish their research findings in journals, and historians write interpretations of historical events. Provide opportunities and support for your students to engage in these types of authentic disciplinary writing so they can engage in the type of critical thinking and habits of mind required for the discipline.

5. **Be flexible.** Students demonstrate thinking in diverse ways. Perhaps a multilingual student thinks better in their native language, so allow them to write in whichever language gets the ideas out. Some students may prefer to demonstrate their thinking in more creative ways, like creating visual representations or writing lyrics to a song. Allow for multiple modes of thinking and demonstrating those ideas.

All content areas require thinking

By doing social studies, students learn social studies. By doing math, students learn math. By doing writing, students learn to write—and to think. When teachers give students a safe space and something compelling to write about, they can support writing across the disciplines. **TLG**

Make writing real: 5 reasons authentic purposes and audiences empower student writers

Julie Richardson

There was a heightened sense of excitement, a noticeable hum in the air, as we walked into the middle school library. The space was filling up fast with parents, siblings, teachers, and community members, each wearing ear buds and holding a digital device. Every sixth-grade student stood dutifully behind a colorful poster that advertised their chosen topic of study. Each poster prominently displayed a QR code that, once scanned, took attendees to a multimedia presentation of the student's research and writing.

At first, my son was nervous to engage with an audience he mostly didn't know. But by the end of the evening, he was brimming with confidence. Assuming the role of an expert, he talked (and talked) with complete strangers and became even more passionate about his cause: saving spider monkeys.

Beyond this personal experience as a parent, studies of writing offer more insights into why authentic writing can be so empowering for students. "What do sociocultural studies of writing tell us about learning to write," a seminal work by Charles Bazerman, for example, gives us five specific reasons to ponder.

1. Writing is a social activity, situated within social contexts

If writing is social, then what do we consider authentic purposes for writing? Expert Steve Graham provides us with a good list in "Changing how writing is taught."

Graham says we write to "learn new ideas, persuade others, record information, create imaginary worlds, express feelings, entertain others, heal psychological wounds, chronicle experiences, and explore the meaning of events and situations." It is the audience for our writing, however, that makes the context social. And too often, says Graham, the only audience for student writing is the teacher.

Graham is not the only expert advocating for more authentic writing in schools. Other researchers have found that writing for real-world purposes has a positive effect on students' writing *and* reading abilities. Even college-level students report having greater motivation to write for audiences beyond a professor, citing a strong desire to win their audiences' acceptance or approval.

2. Writing builds relationships with readers

Extending the audience beyond the classroom lets students become the experts, a more typical role for a writer. It also gives students an opportunity to build relationships from a position of knowledge and authority. This can be empowering for many students whose writing is often read by people who know far more about the topic than they do. Authentic audiences can push students to think more deeply about a topic, too. In *Growing Writers*, veteran teacher Anne Elrod Whitney says real-world audiences make writers anticipate and plan for the reactions of readers they don't know.

Within the classroom, Graham emphasizes the need to build an engaged community of writers, which includes the teacher, an idea my colleague Lauren Bardwell explores in "Ask a teacher: How to create a classroom community of empowered writers." Teachers who share their writing with students experience the same vulnerability students feel when sharing their work with others, which can build mutual trust. Teachers who write live in front of a class can also model their own struggles with the writing process and show how good feedback (from students, no less!) can improve writing.

3. Writing is a product of the self

When students are part of a community of writers, they are more likely to develop a voice and identity as a writer. They're also more likely to adopt a growth mindset, including a set of shared beliefs about writing. For example: Everyone has the capacity to write well. I can learn to be a better writer. My teachers can help me improve my writing.

Engaging in a daily writing practice is a great way to build community, as well as support students' social and emotional well-being. Many teachers discovered and experimented with [new forms of daily writing](#) during remote learning.

Giving students greater agency over writing can encourage their development of a writer's voice and identity, too, since agency is critical to motivation. Opportunities for student choice in writing might include what to write about, what lens to apply to a given subject, what processes or tools to use, what products to create, or even what style is appropriate for a given context. [Multilingual learners also need agency](#) to draw from their full linguistic repertoires when producing written texts, as my colleague Kayla McLaughlin explains in ["Translanguaging as part of the writing process."](#)

4. Writing has evolved in a digitally connected world

Students who write in newer genres or forms (e.g., podcasts, vlogs) can become even more flexible and adept writers. While traditional essays and research papers still have a place in schools, digital writing that is published for a mass audience can yield powerful results. Just consider the reach and impact of the [student-created podcast at Stilwell High School](#), a year-long collaboration in which students investigated why *The Washington Post* gave their small town an unfortunate nickname.

Integrating digital tools with writing instruction is another way to increase student collaboration and mimics the type of real-world collaboration that occurs in online spaces where multiple writers can compose simultaneously and receive almost instantaneous feedback. Increasing students' access to digital technologies, such as laptops, can actually [improve student writing and problem-solving](#), especially when students work together on authentic tasks.

5. Writing has material consequences

Authentic writing, at its core, is real-world problem-solving. We can use writing to solve problems for ourselves, like when we gather research and need to understand differing perspectives on a topic, when we take notes or draw diagrams to make a complex concept more digestible, or when we journal to process our experiences and emotions.

We can use writing to solve problems in society, too. In fact, [all disciplines use writing](#) to solve problems. By giving students more opportunities to write for real-world purposes and audiences, they can learn how writing has real-world impacts and consequences, too.

[Social psychologist David Yeager and his colleagues](#) say students are more likely to persist through a difficult task—and can often find a deeper motivation for writing—when they reflect on their goals. The most successful students are

ones who understand how a writing task can benefit them (a self-oriented goal) *and* how the writing task can connect to or benefit the wider world (a self-transcendent goal).

Closing thoughts

Let's return to my son's community event for a moment, where I overheard this conversation:

"Why did you choose to write about spider monkeys?"

"I've been interested in monkeys for as long as I can remember."

"What's the biggest issue facing spider monkeys?"

"They are losing their habitat. People are destroying rainforests to build palm oil farms."

"What can we do about it?"

"Stop purchasing products made with palm oil. You can buy one of these grocery bags I made. It tells you what ingredients to look for on food labels so you don't accidentally buy something made with palm oil."

"That's a pretty clever form of writing."

"Yeah. My mom thought so, too."

A few days later, at the grocery store, I caught my son reading the food label on a bag of chips. He stared at the bag with a furrowed brow.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"These are my favorite chips. But I can't eat them anymore," he sighed. "They're made with palm oil."

"Are you sure you want to give them up?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, with conviction. "If I don't make sacrifices to protect spider monkeys, how can I ask other people to?" **TLG**

4 ways to work smarter—not harder—at giving feedback on student writing

Lauren Bardwell

I loved being a high school English teacher: introducing teenagers to new literature and sophisticated topics, supporting them as they grappled their way through complex texts, and helping them become proficient writers. As a college student, I had attended a school where every course was assessed through writing (I wrote papers in calculus!), so the expectations for what my students would encounter in college and career were very much at the forefront of my mind. I thought the best way to help them become successful writers was to provide feedback—lots of feedback—on their drafts.

While I might have had the best of intentions, this approach didn't always work out (something I struggled to realize for a long time). Many of my students chose not to revise their writing based on my feedback; some didn't even look at my comments.

I have one particularly vivid memory of my final year teaching sophomore English. I had just returned feedback on first drafts of an essay on *The Bluest Eye*. When I returned a paper to one student, he looked at it, crumpled it up, and stormed out of the room. I was taken aback. This student had struggled with writing at the beginning of the year, but he had grown tremendously. Plus, he had provided me a really strong first draft for this assignment. I was excited to give him notes (written in soothing green ink. I never marked papers in red) on how he could revise and refine it to make it even better. Several comments were affirmations of what he had done well.

What I didn't realize then was that this student and I were not on the same page (pun intended) on the purpose of writing feedback. It was clear in my mind, but I realize now that I never actually communicated it clearly to my students. If I could do it all over again, I would have made the following four changes to how I taught writing:

1. Take the time to establish a supportive writing community

Despite the stereotype of the tortured writer sequestering themselves to write in solitude, writing is a highly collaborative process. Writers brainstorm ideas with others; they request feedback from fresh perspectives; and they write for external audiences.

While writing is collaborative, it is also highly vulnerable. Sharing your writing with others can be nerve-wracking. It is critical that educators devote time during their instruction to establish a shared understanding of the purpose of writing feedback and norms on how to provide and receive feedback.

First and foremost, mutual respect and trust must be established between teacher and students. Many students may struggle with trusting teachers for various reasons. However, trust is critical in the writing feedback cycle, because if students don't understand that their teacher wants what's in their best interest, it skews their interpretation of the feedback. The feedback may feel like it is an attack on their identity or intelligence rather than a constructive critique of their writing.

[An interesting study on writing feedback and trust](#) found remarkable results using a simple intervention: teachers provided written feedback as typical on student papers, but before the papers were returned to the students, one of two sticky notes was attached to the front. One stated, "I'm giving you these comments so that you'll have feedback on your paper" while the other said, "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them." The students who received the latter sticky note were far more likely to revise their essays (80% versus 40%), integrate the teacher's feedback, and produce higher quality writing. Amazing results from a single sticky note!

> *My approach to feedback is probably one of my greatest regrets as a teacher. I provided* way *too much feedback.*

Another great way to build mutual respect and trust is to model writing in front of your students while soliciting and integrating their feedback. My teacher friend Bethany Douglass talks about this technique in ["Ask a teacher: How to create a classroom community of empowered writers."](#)

Finally, the power of peer-to-peer feedback cannot be overstated. Indeed, [research shows that peer feedback is more effective than teacher feedback for the writing development of multilingual students](#). But we cannot expect students to provide useful (and respectful) writing feedback without modeling the feedback process for them and supporting them along the way. This involves establishing roles and responsibilities of peer groups, teaching students how to ask for feedback on specific elements of their writing, and showing students how to provide constructive feedback on what their peers have done well and what they can improve. Providing students with sentence starters can be especially useful as students learn the feedback protocol (e.g., "I really like the example you give here because…" or "Can you clarify what you mean by _____?")

Don't forget about empowering students to use their home language or engage in translanguaging when working with peers. My colleague Kayla McLaughlin has a wonderful article about the role translanguaging can play in facilitating the writing process earlier in this eBook.
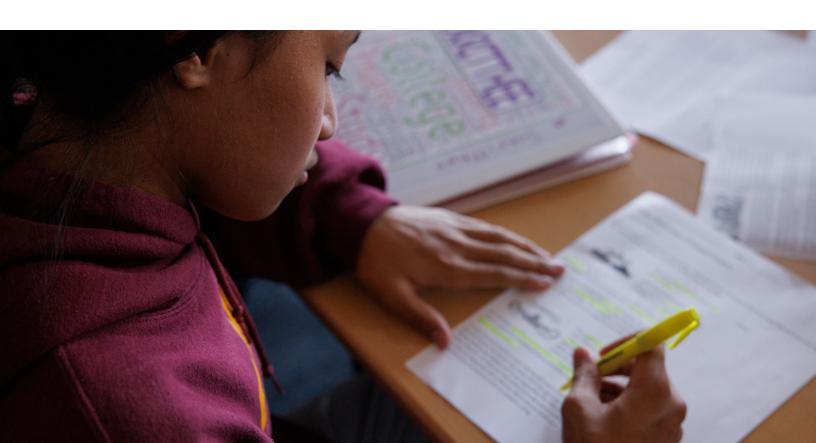
While establishing a classroom writing community can be time-consuming, it sets the class up for long-term success as peer feedback groups can increase the amount of learning that occurs within a class period. As the teacher is providing an individual student or small group feedback during a writing conference, the other students can receive feedback from their peers during the same time.

2. Help students cultivate an identity as a writer

Many students struggle to see what value writing has for them in their own lives. While college and career readiness were always on my radar, that was not necessarily the case for my students, who prioritized different concerns. Plus, writing has value beyond college and career, too; many people journal to process emotions and/or help with decision-making while others pursue creative writing as a hobby.

As my colleague Amy Merrill wrote in "5 ways to use writing in the disciplines to support learning," writing has value as a tool for thinking and learning. When students write about a topic or text, they deepen their understanding of it. As educators, we need to help students make that connection for themselves.

We can also tap into the value of writing beyond self-interests. As my colleague Julie Richardson said in an earlier article, research shows that students become more engaged in the writing process when they "understand how a writing task

can benefit them (a self-oriented goal) *and* how the writing task can connect to or benefit the wider world (a self-transcendent goal)." We can help broaden the purpose for writing by giving students agency in choosing their own topics and broadening the authentic audiences they are writing for.

Also, due to challenges they have encountered in the past, many students have internalized the idea "I'm bad at writing." This negative self-concept can be challenging to overcome, but promising research has shown that having students read about and reflect on growth mindset for less than one hour is linked with a long-term increase in GPA for students identified as at-risk of dropping out of school.

3. Focus feedback on targeted goals

The human brain can only take in so much information at once. When we provide students with too much writing feedback, it can be overwhelming and lead to a shut down. This can be especially taxing for multilingual students who may be receiving feedback in a language they are still learning.

My approach to feedback is probably one of my greatest regrets as a teacher. I provided *way* too much feedback.

> We can help broaden the purpose for writing by giving students agency in choosing their own topics and broadening the authentic audiences they are writing for.

Writing feedback should be targeted to the specific task at hand and relevant to what you have been teaching in whole or small-group instruction. If students have been working on incorporating expert sources to support their claims, then it is a great focus area for feedback. However, if the purpose of a counterargument and how to craft and organize one hasn't been introduced yet, providing feedback on a student's lack of counterclaims is not going to be an effective strategy. Note: Rubrics are a great tool for focusing feedback on targeted goals because they explicitly outline the criteria of success for students and teachers.

Feedback should prioritize the deep features of writing (e.g., development and organization) instead of getting caught up on superficial features (e.g., capitalization and commas). When students take the time and energy to revise deep features of the writing, it leads to deeper learning.

That doesn't mean issues with grammar or spelling aren't important, of course. Readers expect a piece of writing to adhere to a certain level of normed conventions. Refrain from providing feedback on *every* grammar or usage error in a piece, as it can overwhelm students and shut down their motivation to revise. (In reality, even professional writers don't produce error-free first drafts. Shout out to my editor for her proofreading work on this article.) Instead, focus feedback on a recurring issue that you notice in a student's writing (e.g., comma

splices) or a specific topic you've been working on during instruction, (e.g., subject-verb agreement).

Feedback on the deeper features of writing should be especially clear and elaborated on. If students do not understand what is meant by a comment, they will be unable to integrate it in their writing. Comments like "undeveloped," "disconnected," or "rephrase" are unlikely to make a difference because they don't provide enough context for students to make sense of the writing feedback. A comment like "This evidence doesn't really support your claim. Find another detail/example/quote from your research to strengthen the connection to your argument" identifies the problem and offers a potential solution. Of course, a comment like the one above takes more time to write, which is why it is important for student's bandwidth and teacher capacity to limit feedback to focus on specific goals. To save additional time, you might save an online document of frequently used feedback sentence starters that you can plop in as comments on a student's online draft.

Another interesting piece of information from the research for teachers and school leaders to consider is that providing feedback—not grades—is more effective in promoting learning. For more great information on best feedback practices, I highly recommend checking out this research review, particularly the tables at the end. Also of note is the research on grades versus feedback.

4. Provide feedback on the process of writing, not just the product

Perhaps the biggest "aha" moment I've had since leaving the classroom is that I should have put less emphasis on the final written product and spent more time leveraging the many cognitive processes taking place during the *process of writing*. As my colleague Kellie Schmidt wrote about in "Understanding the writing process and how it can help your students," so much learning and critical thinking takes place during writing. Additionally, students learn how to set and revisit goals, plan for their writing, self-assess their writing, and self-regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when encountering challenges. Moreover, research shows that feedback on process and self-regulation leads to a greater transfer of learning than feedback focused solely on the task.

I wish I had sat down with my students to ask them questions about the different processes they were using during their writing, had them reflect on what was working well and what wasn't, and provided suggestions for how they might adjust those processes to be more productive and efficient with their writing the next time around.

Try something different

Feedback is a wonderful tool to promote learning, but it requires the right conditions to be effective. Looking back, I wish I had spent more time at the beginning of each school year creating a positive environment for students to be receptive to writing feedback, not only on their drafts but also on their individual processes for writing.

I also wish I had done more to distribute the work of providing feedback, so I, as the teacher, didn't shoulder all the work. Taking home stacks of paper (or reading online drafts) every weekend is not a sustainable model for work-life balance, nor does it always help students to become independent writers. I wish I had been more intentional with setting the foundation for effective peer feedback groups and helping students be more strategic in evaluating their own writing and writing process.

Learning is a journey for students and teachers alike, and I hope the ideas in this article spark some new thinking on how you might approach writing in your classroom. **TLG**

6 habits of a good (and always improving) writing teacher

Monica Rodríguez

Language arts has always been my jam. When I was about 10, my most prized possession was a boxed set of the entire Ramona Quimby series. Eight years later, it didn't take long to settle on English for my major in college. What ended up surprising me, after so much certainty about what corner of academics I most belong in, was how hard teaching writing can be.

I served as English faculty at a community college in Salem, Oregon, when I was in my early thirties. During my three-year tenure, I was overwhelmed more often than not. I had about a hundred students submitting writing every time class met, most of whom I struggled to give adequate support to (many were overwhelmed themselves by the demands of an advanced writing class).

I was required to assign a final project: a 10-page, single-spaced technical report requiring at least 10 secondary sources, citations, and visuals. When my psych colleagues two office doors down ran a few Scantrons through the machine during finals week and called it a term, the rest of us in the English department buckled under the weight of an endless stack of words to read and grade in just three days.

There's no way around how hard teaching writing can be.

There's no way around how hard teaching writing can be, not really, but since joining NWEA, I've learned a lot from my colleagues about formative assessment, assessment empowerment, the zone of proximal development, and the value of committing to a shared vision of what writing instruction should look like. I've thought a lot about what I like about my practice and what I would do differently, if given another chance in the classroom. I'd like to think that I could approach teaching writing with a little more confidence now.

My four best habits: 1. Eschew perfection, 2. Plan with the end in mind, 3. Model, and 4. Honor individualism

Many of us teacher types are prone to be extra hard on ourselves (as though the work isn't already hard enough). When I reflect on how I would approach teaching writing differently, it's easy to get distracted by memories of how I failed my students.

Maybe the best habit I developed during my time teaching was reminding myself that I could not be perfect. When I felt that crush of being overwhelmed, I would remind myself of the factors working against me: Too-large classes.

Students who hadn't received the support and instruction they needed to be ready for an advanced writing class. Strict deadlines for submitting final course grades. A teacher can only do so much with so many chips stacked against her. Acknowledging that was a huge help. So was repeating little mantras to myself, like, "You're doing the best you can, and the best you can is more than good enough."

Another thing I did was plan with the end in mind. I didn't have the vocabulary to describe this part of my process until I edited a blog post by my former colleague, Brooke Mabry, titled "How responsive planning can strengthen your formative assessment practice." What she describes is really quite simple: think about the goal you want your students to meet, then work backward, establishing a plan that will help them get there, step by step. The goal for my students was clear: that final technical report.

While I couldn't deviate from requiring the report, how I got my students to that finish line was up to me. I decided how many assignments my students needed to complete to be ready for that final project. Since I knew research and documentation were challenging for many of them, for example, I had an annotated bibliography assignment early on that required them to provide citations for and summaries of three articles they hoped to use in their final report. This allowed me to see how well they were doing with finding reliable sources, comprehending the information in the sources, using evidence to support their claims, and citing the sources correctly to avoid plagiarism, skills that could make or break their final report. In another assignment, I would ask them to create a visual representation of data related to their topic that would strengthen their argument.

All told, I had about six assignments related to the report, spaced out over the course of the term to allow enough time for students to complete the work and me to assess it. By the time they had to turn in their final project, they didn't have to do anything new; they just had to pull all their refined or new skills together, portfolio style, after receiving the benefit of discussion and feedback on each individual report component, of course.

During our times for discussion and feedback, I modeled for my students how to complete each and every one of these individual tasks by providing samples that allowed them to see what a ready-to-turn-in assignment should look like. We walked through these models in detail, at the end of a lesson. I made sure every student had a copy of them so they could refer to them as often as needed during their writing process. When providing feedback on their drafts, I would also refer to these models. I would note the ways we knew a source on the sample annotated bibliography was valuable, for example, or point to how the example visual had a clear, well-placed title.

As I think about what I've learned since my days in the classroom, I think there are ways I could have done things differently.

To honor their individualism and foster engagement, I let my students decide what topics they wanted to write about, with some caveats. (Why caveats? Because audience analysis is a critical part of effective writing instruction. I was honest that I was my students' sole audience and that there were some topics they would simply struggle to reach me with.) My colleague Julie Richardson speaks to this, too, in her post "Make writing real: 5 reasons authentic purposes and audiences empower student writers."

Many of my students picked topics related to their major, like firefighting or nursing, or to their lived experience, like service in the Armed Forces or daily life as a single mom. In giving my students this choice, I took that required report and married it with two important truths about writing we have documented in the NWEA stances on writing: it can empower students and help them think more deeply and critically. (It's hard to feel empowered when your teacher tells you what to write about. It's equally hard to engage actively with a topic that means nothing to you.)

Two more habits to help me grow: 5. Get creative with revisions and 6. Accept help more

Because of the overwhelm, I was very strict about late work when I was teaching. I simply wouldn't take it. I rarely allowed students to revise, too. Because, I'm sorry, but can I be real right now? When would I sleep if I did? How could I ever possibly maintain any semblance of sanity over the course of an 11-week term if

I regraded more assignments and bent all the due date rules for students while the biggest due date of all—the day I had to submit final grades—wasn't even remotely negotiable?

As I think about what I've learned since my days in the classroom, I think there are ways I could have done things differently. For starters, I could have experimented with making the grades on all those individual assignments building up to the final report temporary. I could have told my students, "This is the grade you would get on this right now. If you'd like a chance at a higher grade, submit a revision with your rough draft."

If too much regrading got me down, I could have tried something else: Let students know that their grade on the final report would be their final grade in the class. Did they get a D on that assignment to create a bar graph or other visual a few weeks into the term? No problem! The final report was a chance to improve it so much that it would shine as one of the handful of required components of the final report, boosting their chances of excelling on the report and earning an A or a B in the class.

My biggest regret may be how much I went at all this work alone. I could have leaned on the college's writing center or more in-class workshops (or both!) to help students get more personalized support when I wasn't available. All of the volunteers in the writing center were fellow faculty and adjuncts familiar enough with the content of the technical writing class to guide students. In-class peers were the most familiar with what everyone was tasked with and uniquely positioned to provide each other support.

In your classroom

If we could all have infinite time to work with our students one-on-one, I'm certain we could make a bunch of Morrisons out of the lot of them. Unfortunately, we're stuck in a system where we have to support and assess the writing of far too many students at once. All we can do is the best we can. It's so true that the perfect is the enemy of the good.
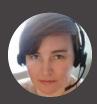
As you work toward being good enough at teaching writing, I encourage you to plan with the end in mind, model assignments, give students the autonomy to select topics they're interested in, and practice approaching grading, revisions, and personalized instruction more creatively. Lean on support where you can, whether that's by having more peer workshops, helping students find tutoring, or encouraging other teachers in your school to require more writing—or all three! **TLG**

About the authors

Lauren Bardwell
Like any good book nerd, Lauren Bardwell began her career as a high school English teacher. She earned her BA in English at Millsaps College and her EdM in curriculum and instruction at Middle Tennessee State University. Prior to joining NWEA's Content Advocacy and Design team, Lauren served as the executive director for adolescent literacy for the Tennessee Department of Education and a principal designer for Odell Education's high school literacy program. Lauren is passionate about ensuring students have access to high-quality instructional materials and assessments; teachers have access to ongoing, job-embedded professional development; and leaders have access to meaningful thought partnerships to improve instruction and achieve equitable outcomes for all students. When she's not working, she's busy hiking trails with her dog and attempting overly ambitious recipes in the kitchen, with varying levels of success.

Kayla McLaughlin
Kayla McLaughlin is a Spanish solutions specialist at NWEA. She holds a BA in Spanish from California State University, Stanislaus, as well as an MA in Hispanic linguistics from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and language in online spaces. She has a penchant for puns and an ever-growing collection of novelty erasers.

Amy Merrill
Amy Merrill is an assessment development manager at NWEA. Previously, she worked as an English language arts content specialist following a career as a teacher. She has taught elementary and middle school students as a special educator, English as a second language, general education, and Montessori education. Amy holds a BA in English literature and linguistics and an EdM in educational leadership and policy. She spends her free time hiking and camping with her husband, daughter, and pug.

Julie Richardson
Julie Richardson brings more than 20 years of experience and a master's degree in educational technology to her role as ELA content lead. Prior to joining NWEA in 2012, she was a high school language arts and journalism teacher who worked primarily with multilingual learners. Julie is passionate about ensuring that all students can see themselves in their curriculum and assessments. While at NWEA, she has worked with a multicultural advisor to expand the diversity of reading passages in MAP® Growth™ assessments, adding numerous works written by authors of color. Julie currently lives in Portland, Oregon, where she enjoys many outdoor activities but perhaps feels most content when cruising downriver on a standup paddle board.

Monica Rodríguez
Monica Rodríguez joined NWEA in 2019 as content manager and is the managing editor of *Teach. Learn. Grow.* In the past decade, she's served as English faculty at Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon, and worked as a writer and editor. She's excited to be part of the NWEA team and to partner with you to help all kids do great things.

Kellie Schmidt
Kellie Schmidt joined NWEA in 2016 as a content manager for ELA. She has over 15 years of experience in assessment and began her career teaching high school. Kellie holds a BA in American history and is currently pursuing her master's in Shakespeare and education.

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