Strategies for teaching secondary students to write effectively

Strong writing skills can be essential for students to express themselves, work with others, and succeed in educational and career opportunities.[1,2,3] The need to develop writing skills extends far beyond the early grades. Secondary students need opportunities to practice and improve writing skills, which can lead to stronger critical thinking ability and increased postsecondary success.[4,5]

Teaching Secondary Students to Write Effectively, a Practice Guide developed by the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), makes three recommendations for teachers to help students in grades 6–12 sharpen their writing skills. The following recommendations include tips on how to implement each recommendation along with the level of evidence supporting each recommendation's effectiveness.[6]

? HOW TO

Explicitly teach appropriate writing strategies using a Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle

WWC LEVEL OF EVIDENCE: **STRONG** | *Eleven studies found that explicitly teaching writing strategies using Model-Practice-Reflect had positive effects on at least one writing outcome.*

Educators can help students understand, choose, and apply effective strategies for each step of the writing process. The following are example strategies for each step of the writing process, and more strategies can be found in the Practice Guide.[7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15]
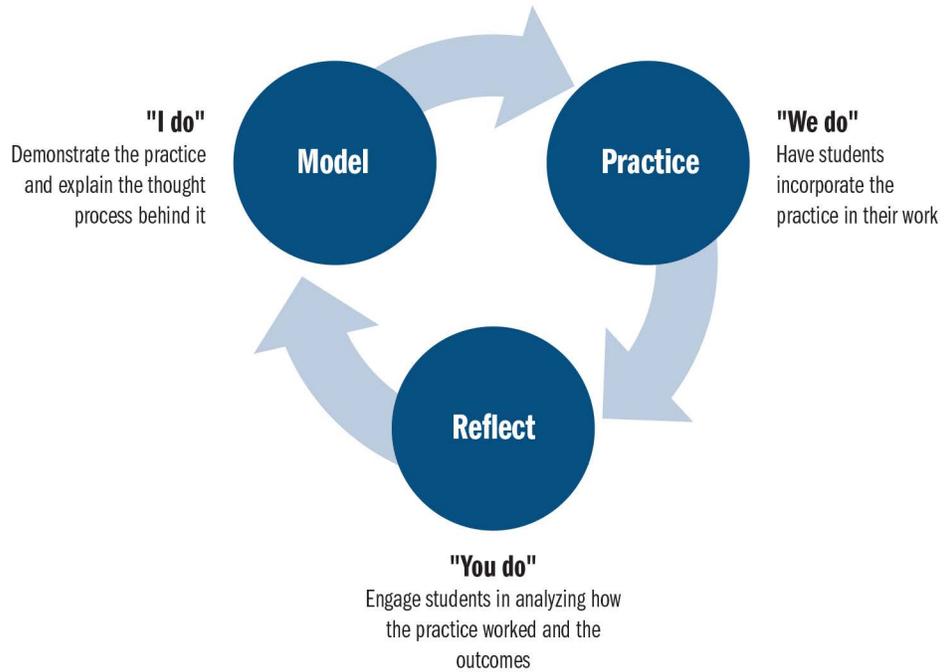
TIP

Teach students about cognitive strategies that can improve both writing skills and overall critical thinking.

Planning	Goal Setting	Drafting	Evaluating	Revising	Editing
K-W-L (Know-Want to Know-Learn) diagram	Individualizing goals	3-2-1 (3 things you've learned, 2 you'd like to learn, and 1 question)	Ranking the evidence	Peer feedback	COPS (Capitalization-Overall appearance-Punctuation-Spelling)
Outline	SCHEME (Skills check-Choose goals-Hatch plan-Execute-Monitor-Edit)	DARE (Develop-Add-Reject-End)	Color coding	WIRMI (What I Really Mean Is...)	Job cards

Teachers can use the Model-Practice-Reflect approach to reinforce writing strategies.

TIP

Use the Model-Practice-Reflect instructional cycle to teach strategies to help students learn from teachers, peers, and their own written work.

"I do"
Demonstrate the practice and explain the thought process behind it

Model

Practice

"We do"
Have students incorporate the practice in their work

Reflect

"You do"
Engage students in analyzing how the practice worked and the outcomes

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? HOW TO

Integrate writing and reading to emphasize key writing features

📖 WWC LEVEL OF EVIDENCE: **MODERATE** | *Seven studies found that integrating reading and writing had positive effects on at least one writing outcome. One study found indeterminate effects.*

Reading and writing share four types of cognitive processes and knowledge. Educators can build reading and writing skills by doing the following:

TIP

Use a diverse set of written texts to highlight key reading and writing features.

Teachers can use the following strategies to foster reading and writing skills together:[15,16,17]

▸ Using sentence starters to prompt students to think critically about writing and reading assignments.

▸ Identifying story impressions or key words that define a story's narrative.

▸ Synthesizing multiple texts or multiple perspectives on the same text.

▸ Sharing exemplars of different writing styles (e.g., persuasive, narrative, reflective).

▸ Having students reflect on the writer's Role, Audience, writing Format, and Topic (RAFT).

▸ Doing a Copy/Change exercise to apply different writing structures to the student's own work.

How can you support secondary students' literacy development? Check out this REL Southwest infographic and Ask A REL reference desk response to learn more.

Use assessments of student writing to inform instruction and feedback

📖 WWC LEVEL OF EVIDENCE: **MINIMAL**[18] | *Four studies provided evidence for this recommendation. However, all of these studies tested using assessments of student writing in conjunction with other practices.*

Formative assessment cycles include the following steps:[19]

💡 TIP

Use iterations of formative assessment to assess student mastery of key concepts, use the assessment results to adjust instruction, and help students meet the intended learning goals.

Learning objectives, goals, and standards → Targeted instruction → Assessment → Data analysis → Targeted feedback

💡 TIP

Support students' individual learning needs using these strategies.

▸ Assess students' strengths and opportunities for growth before diving into new content. The following assessment models can be easily incorporated:

  ▸ On-demand writing prompts.[20]
  ▸ Graphic organizers.[15]
  ▸ Exit slips to check understanding after a lesson.
  ▸ Error analysis, or reviewing student work for specific writing challenges.

▸ Analyze student work and tailor instruction:

  ▸ Customize activities for individual students or small groups that build on opportunities for growth.
  ▸ Collaborate with other teachers to tailor instruction across classrooms, grades, or subjects.[2]
  ▸ Provide students with opportunities to receive feedback from multiple avenues such as the following:[21]

    ▸ Teacher feedback—highlights a student's strengths and provides scaffolding and support for improvement.
    ▸ Peer feedback—teaches students to analyze and provide meaningful feedback to others.
    ▸ Self-assessment—helps students recognize their own strengths and opportunities for improvement along with reflecting on the overall writing process.

▸ Monitor students' progress on a regular basis.

To learn more, browse the full WWC practice guide.
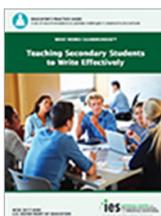
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[6] For more information about what each level of evidence entails, watch this short video.

[7] The selected examples were chosen for ease of understanding by a novice audience, not for a particular methodological reason.

[8] Page-Voth, V., & Graham, S. (1999). Effects of goal setting and strategy use on the writing performance and self-efficacy of students with writing and learning problems. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 91*(2), 230–240.

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[16] McGinley, W., & Denner, P. R. (1987). Story impressions: A prereading-writing activity. *Journal of Reading, 31*(3), 248–253.

[17] Adapted from Mast, S. (2002). Copy change: Rewriting the prologue from Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. *The Quarterly, 24*(2).

[18] The WWC evidence rating of "minimal" indicates that the Practice Guide panel did not uncover an established body of research that demonstrates the practice's positive effect on student achievement either because of a lack of experimental research on the topic or weak or conflicting evidence of effectiveness. However, a minimal evidence rating does not indicate that the recommendation is any less important than other recommendations with a strong evidence or moderate evidence rating.

[19] Adapted from Greenstein, L. (2010). *What teachers really need to know about formative assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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