

Write ... from the Beginning

(Theoretical and Research Base)

Write...from the Beginning is based on Jane Buckner's twenty-five year journey into the work of noted researchers of writing, as well as her own firsthand explorations and observations of the most effective methods for teaching writing to elementary students. This journey was paralleled with the increased focus on statewide writing assessment and teachers' accountability for the writing proficiency of their students. In *Write...from the Beginning*, she has attempted to take recommendations from noted researchers, as well as her own experiences and observations, and couple them with state assessments that require students to produce an effective piece of writing in a specific time frame, commonly referred to as "demand writing." Following are the essential components of the *Write...from the Beginning* program.

Thinking Maps® as a Foundation

Write...from the Beginning utilizes Thinking Maps to develop students' writing habits. Thinking Maps consists of eight specific visual tools that correspond to eight fundamental thinking processes. More than simple graphic organizers, they can be utilized individually or in various combinations to form a *common visual language* for students and teachers at all grade levels, in all subjects.

Research points to the use of certain thinking skills and the use of graphic representations as having a positive effect on student learning. Below is a sample of some of the research into effective instruction.

Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J.E. Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement (2001) McREL.

In this text, the authors focused on the results of a study conducted by researchers at Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) and identified nine specific instructional strategies that proved effective when used by teachers in K-12 classrooms. Using meta-analysis, the researchers combined the results from many studies to arrive at an average effect for a given technique.

The book cites the following nine instructional strategies as having, on average, a positive effect on student achievement: Identifying similarities and differences; Summarizing and note taking; Reinforcing effort and

providing recognition; Homework and practice; Nonlinguistic representations; Cooperative learning; Setting objectives and providing feedback; Generating and testing hypotheses, and Questions, cues, and advance organizers. Thinking Maps® directly relate to two of these techniques (Identifying similarities and differences and Nonlinguistic representations) and can be used as a tool for the others. Below is a brief overview of the findings for these two techniques and a statement regarding how Thinking Maps relate to each.

Identifying Similarities and Differences

Average Effect Size:	1.61
Percentile Gain:	45
Number of Effect Sizes:	31
Standard Deviation:	.31

For students exposed to this instructional strategy, the compilation of studies reflected an average positive gain of 45 percentile points on assessments versus the control group. This difference could be considered a large effect. (p 6) The authors arrived at four general conclusions from the research and theory about this technique:

- 1. Presenting students with explicit guidance in identifying similarities and differences enhances students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge.**
- 2. Asking students to independently identify similarities and differences enhances students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge.**
- 3. Representing similarities and differences in graphic or symbolic form enhances students' understanding of and ability to use knowledge.**
- 4. Identification of similarities and differences can be accomplished in a variety of ways. The identification of similarities and differences is a highly robust activity. According to the authors, four highly effective forms of this activity are comparing, classifying, creating metaphors, and creating analogies.**
(pp 15-16)

Thinking Maps directly foster the identification of similarities and differences through use of the Double Bubble Map. Teachers and students use this visual tool specifically to compare and contrast two subjects. Thinking Maps also directly relate to the other highly effective forms identified by the authors (classifying – Tree Map; creating metaphors and creating analogies – Bridge Map).

Nonlinguistic Representations

Average Effect Size:	.75
Percentile Gain:	27
Number of Effect Sizes:	246
Standard Deviation:	.40

For students exposed to this instructional strategy, the compilation of studies reflected an average positive gain of 27 percentile points on assessments versus the control group. This difference could be considered a medium to large effect. (p 6) Citing work by Gerlic & Jausovec (1999), the authors noted that “engaging students in the creation of nonlinguistic representations stimulates and increases activity in the brain.” (p 73)

According to the authors, research shows that the following activities enhance the development of nonlinguistic representations in students, and therefore, enhance their understanding of that content: creating graphic representations, making physical models, generating mental pictures, drawing pictures and pictographs, and engaging in kinesthetic activity. (pp 73-74)

By their nature, Thinking Maps are nonlinguistic representations used with linguistic representations to improve students’ understanding of the content they are taught. Teachers not only present information in the Thinking Maps form, they are encouraged to promote student creation of the Maps, which are used as student tools for independent thinking. These tools are a required element of *Write...from the Beginning*.

A School-wide Writing Program

In 1978 Donald Graves, a noted researcher and expert in the subject of writing, received a small grant from the Ford Foundation to look at the imbalance between teaching reading and writing. His conclusions were that writing was receiving very little emphasis in the classroom, while reading instruction was more than substantial. Further studies led Dr. Graves to conclude that there was a strong connection between reading and writing; those students who were successful in writing were also successful in reading. As students learned to write in certain domains they learn to recognize the same elements in written text. Just as school-adopted reading programs ensure vertical alignment and opportunities for student success, *Write...from the Beginning* is a writing program that is vertically aligned and used by an entire school. In the late 1990’s, an extensive four-year study of over 225 schools found that an emphasis on writing is one of

the five common characteristics of schools with high academic performance irrespective of demographics. They found a “striking association” between writing and performance in other academic disciplines. The researchers summarized, “it is difficult to escape the conclusion that an emphasis on writing improvement has a significant impact on student test scores in other disciplines.” (Douglas Reeves, Ph.D., *Accountability in Action: A Blueprint for Learning Organization* (Denver: Advanced Learning Press, 2000)

A Developmental Perspective

Every parent who has cleaned crayon marks off of a wall understands that children learn to “write” before they learn to read. No one understands this strong connection between reading and writing better than Dr. Marie Clay, the developer of the respected Reading Recovery Program. In her publication *What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behavior* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), Dr. Clay observes seven principles that develop before children become writers. This development is facilitated when caregivers/teachers allow children to explore print by drawing scribbles that eventually become pictures with a message. With repeated writing practice, children will produce marks, according to Clay, which resemble, more and more, the writing they see in print around them. *Write...from the Beginning* stresses the importance of early “writing” in the preschool/kindergarten classroom through the use of writing centers, literacy props, and focused journal writing.

Jean Piaget’s work is covered in college educational-psychology courses. One of his important principles pertains to the stages of brain maturation, notably the difference between the concrete operational thinkers of age 5 to 10, and the abstract thinker of age 10 and higher. These principles are applied through the use of concrete activities for mini-lessons and teacher modeling.

Modeled Writing

Teacher modeling is a key component of *Write...from the Beginning*. Donald Murray (NCTE,1978) and Donald Graves (*Balance the Basics: Let them Write*. The Ford Foundation, 1978) are representative of authorities who have stressed that the effective teacher of writing at any level is a writer herself, not just a critic of students’ writing. Donald Graves has stated on numerous occasions: “Good teaching involves good showing”. (Instructor, 1995)

In his research, Don Holdaway (Heinemann, 1979)) applied the conditions of natural learning to the classroom setting, and developed a model that includes *demonstrations, participation, practice, and performance*. During

whole class group times the teacher plays the dominant role as *demonstrator*. Students *participate* in the learning and during *practice* the children work on their own and with their peers. During practice the teacher directs her attention toward individual children, and responds specifically to the child's work. These same principles are used in *Write...from the Beginning*. When students are first learning a domain of writing, the teacher models/*demonstrates* his/her own piece of writing on the board. At specific intervals the students are asked to participate. Next, the students practice individually what the teacher has demonstrated as the teacher monitors each child's progress.

In *Write...from the Beginning*, the initial objective is effective writing. Children, according to Dr. Donald Graves, direct their attention to the concerns the teacher addresses. In his publication, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), Dr. Graves reports from his research that if teachers deal primarily with the conventions of print, the students will be concerned first with correct mechanics. According to Harp & Brewer (Harcourt Brace, 1996), "It is imperative that during the composing and drafting phase the focus is on the creation and communication of meaning, not on the mechanics." Based on these important findings, *Write...from the Beginning* stresses content before conventions. Once the students are able to convey their messages through print, the teacher begins the important task of teaching conventions.

Donald Graves defined the writing process for us – the sequence of steps that all effective writers go through. He introduced the groundbreaking notion that young writers need to follow that process for their classroom writing. This process involves prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. When using *Write...from the Beginning*, all of these processes occur in the prescribed sequence; however, the time allowances and procedures are somewhat different. Prewriting takes the form of brainstorming, which is demonstrated first by the teacher before the modeled writing begins. Drafting can be a one or two day process in which the student's compose their own pieces of writing as the teacher models writing on her own self-selected topic. Revising occurs during two oral rehearsals in which the students engage, one done individually and the other with a peer. Editing occurs when the writing is "taken off of the map." When the draft is completed, an analytic rubric directs attention to the conventions of print.

Oral rehearsal, which is a part of the *Write...from the Beginning* modeling process, is supported by research from the National Council of Teachers of English which concluded that "written language is closely related to oral language. Teaching should emphasize and exploit the close connection between the two."

Mini Lessons

Mini-lessons are an essential component of *Write...from the Beginning*. Lucy Calkins, who first used the term *mini-lesson* in her publication *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), found that “the ritual of beginning every writing workshop with a whole-group gathering brings form and unity to the workshop.” The mini lessons are used to direct the attention of young writers to some aspect of good writing, beginning with the first day of school. *Write...from the Beginning* uses mini-lessons in several forms. Sometimes they serve as the teacher’s forum for modeling writing strategies or raising a concern. At other times they can be a time for students to show other students a strategy that they have learned. Mini-lessons can also be a time for brief experimentation following the introduction of a strategy when everyone is asked to try it for a moment. The topic of the mini-lesson, as suggested by Dr. Calkins and practiced in *Write...from the Beginning*, is based on the observed needs of the students in the classroom. In the publication *...And with a Light Touch* (Heinemann Educational Books, 1993), Carol Avery used Dr. Calkin’s mini-lesson concept in her classroom in a “light, informing, playful way” so that these lessons served as invitations, not mandates. Such is the nature of the *Write...from the Beginning* mini-lesson.

Analytic Assessment

Most states use holistic scoring to assess student writing. While this type of scoring provides an overall general impression and serves as a useful snapshot of writing achievement, it does not provide the most information about writers and writings according to *Children’s Writings: Perspectives from Research* published by the International Reading Association in 1998. This document proposes that “analytic assessment, unlike holistic general impression scoring, looks at multiple elements or characteristics associated with effective writing. It provides the most information from which to draw conclusions about writers and writings. As an assessment system, analytic scoring offers information that can best assist instruction because each element in a writing is evaluated separately, with each characteristic marked on a scale that indicates how well it has been presented.” *Write...from the Beginning* provides analytic rubrics for teachers to use during individual conferences with students to discuss their strengths and needs. In addition, teachers learn to use these rubrics to create class profiles that guide the selection of mini-lessons that will be used with the large group or with the entire class.