



# Just for the ASKing!



by Bruce Oliver

June 2018

Volume XV Issue V

## The Write Stuff



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning* published by Just ASK.

The ability to write clearly is important in the lives of many people, regardless of their occupation. Repair men/women need to provide a clearly written estimate and complete a detailed invoice for work completed. Technicians must provide understandable, step-by-step instructions that the average person can comprehend. Administrative assistants must convey accurate messages and communiqués for those with whom they work. Many occupations depend on a person's ability to write an email that clearly conveys information, opinions, and ideas that make absolute sense to the recipients. College professors often decry the fact that students in their classes do not know how to write properly. According to educator **Mike Schmoker**, "... writing and speaking constitute the most sought-after skill set in business and industry, and why many corporate recruiters rank these abilities twice as high as managerial skills." It is clear that educators must give students ample time to build and expand their writing abilities so they can better succeed in tomorrow's world in post-secondary education or in whatever occupation they happen to choose.

I am sure that today's educators would find it difficult to argue with any of the above examples. And yet, in many classrooms, writing is not often at the forefront of teachers' plans as they develop learning experiences for their students. For this reason, it is critical that practitioners examine this life-

changing skill in greater detail, and heed the advice of their fellow educators who have learned how to help their children become better writers.

**Children who struggle with writing can become discouraged when they are required to write exclusively in a prescribed fashion.** Children's author **Ralph Fletcher** has observed "A writer needs wide latitude so she can bring all her intelligence to the task." Fletcher has observed that assigning a specific format such as the hamburger essay on a routine basis can curtail novice writers' ability to express themselves in original ways. He writes, "Young writers thrive in a classroom where they have a choice, and I mean this in the fullest sense of the word: choice of genre, choice of topic, choice in how they decide to create a piece of writing."

Humanities teacher **Mike Miller**, in his essay "Let Them Write Plays!" makes the case that conventional essays can stifle a student's creativity. He feels that teachers should move beyond summaries and persuasive essays and instead give students a choice of genres in which to express themselves. When students have the freedom to experiment, they often find their writer's voice and advance in their overall writing ability.

**In order to improve student writing, schools must move beyond minimal requirements.** High school English teachers **Kelly Gallagher** and **Penny Kittle** point out that far too often schools follow a district pacing guide that mandates a focus on different kinds of writing (e.g., narrative essay or persuasive essay) each quarter. In some classrooms, students complete the requisite essay during one quarter and never return to that genre again during the school year. That approach simply does not give students adequate practice to make a significant improvement. Kittle writes, “Writing four major essays simply doesn’t offer enough time immersed in the art of crafting words and sentences. Improvement in writing is grounded in getting words on the page – lots of them. There are no shortcuts. A ‘four big essays approach’ stifles young writers. Worse, it ensures they will never become excellent writers.”

**Progress in writing requires practice since students learn best in incremental stages.** If learners are to become more proficient writers, teachers should employ the concept of **student agency**. As a component of personalized learning, student agency empowers students to create their own path to mastery by cognitively understanding how their skills are improving over time. The aforementioned Gallagher and Kittle apply the concept of “spiral curriculum” to their work with high school learners. Their students revisit the “same topics or skills, with each encounter increasing in complexity, and reinforcing what has previously been taught.” As the process continues, students determine how their ability to write advances over time, their confidence as writers increases, and they can set goals for the future.

**Even highly-paid software coders must remember the basics of good writing.** Steve Jobs is remembered for saying that all the time wasted through bad software writing can “add up to a lifetime lost.” Senior software engineer **Bernard Meister** has written, “If all programmers I’ve worked with in my career had had good writing instruction, they would have been forced at an early age to think clearly, to communicate complex thoughts, and to combine simple ideas into compound ideas.” He feels strongly that in order for the United States to remain technologically competitive, students must learn explicit writing skills during their K-12 years in school.

**“The feedback that struggling students get from writing teachers, while well meaning, is often overwhelming, tries to cover too much at once, and deflates egos.”** The quote above comes from experienced teachers **Selina Ivy** and **Jim LeBuffe** in their *ASCD Express* article, “Guided Self-Correction: A Positive, Focused Feedback System That Improves Writing.” They understand that writing and working mechanics does have a place in helping writers apply basic writing skills. Their approach, which can be used with students in fifth grade through high school uses the most common errors students make as they write and follows the steps below:

- The teacher presents a short lesson on a problem area students are making with their writing;
- Each problem area is identified with a correction code such as “C” for capital letters, “S-V” for subject-verb agreement, or “P” for punctuation;
- As the teacher checks a writing assignment, she placed a code in the margin corresponding to a problem in a sentence;
- Students re-read their work, make appropriate corrections, and resubmit their corrected work with their teacher;
- If the student is unable to identify the necessary correction, the teacher holds a one-on-one discussion explaining the error

Coded items are introduced to students one at a time in brief lessons. After several lessons, the teacher posts a “Guided Self-Correction Code” chart in the classroom. In addition to the previously noted examples, other codes may include “Sp” for spelling, “Poss” for possessive and “Frag” for sentence fragment. The chart may be adjusted over time to address student needs.



The authors note, “Student who struggle with writing, including English language learners and those with special needs, may dramatically improve their writing skills using the guided self-correction method” since the process is logical, students receive feedback on their writing, and the system is cumulative and does not overwhelm students with too much information at once. In addition, student papers are not filled with teacher slash marks, red ink or ambiguous comments. Students are allowed to make corrections in a calm and less frustrating way. Finally, learners must take time to think and address rules of good writing, and over time they become better proofreaders.

**Good writers must develop an “audience-conscious perspective” as they build their writing skills.**

Although it may be stating the obvious, a piece of writing is made to be read by another person, not simply submitted to a teacher for a grade. In her essay entitled, “What the Best Writing Teachers Know,” **Haley Lee** shared the newly-realized perspective of a high school student: “Instead of churning out formulaic essays, I found myself formulating novel opinions and writing in my own voice (with the purpose of lucid communication always in mind).” Lee sees good writing as two-dimensional; writers must not simply put ideas onto paper but must see good writing as “the dialogue between author and reader.” She feels strongly that a student’s writing instruction should not simply conclude “when the teachers exhaust the ins and outs of mechanical techniques,” but extends to a student’s deeper understanding of the power of the written word.

**Students can become more accomplished writers when they discover and experiment with online tools.**

The founder of EmergingEdTech!, **Kelly Walsh**, cuts to the chase when he writes, “The inability to write makes for a stillborn career.” Because so many young people have an interest in technology, Walsh believes that some students can enhance their communication skills by investigating ideas and websites such as the following:

- **Blogging** – When students start their own blog it can serve as a huge motivator to write simply and clearly because students see it as novel and fun. Walsh provides a variety of ways Blogging might be used including individual as well as full class blogs.
- **ReadWriteThink’s “Student Interactives”** – The website introduces students to some tools such as Notetaker, Printing Press, and Webbing Tool. The tools can provide an interactive way for students to improve their writing skills.
- **Model Bank** – This site introduces students to successful writing formats commonly used in middle and high school. Students are able to view examples and compare them to their own writing in the “Writer’s Guide” section.

**Writing across disciplines can have a huge impact on college success.**

This conclusion is espoused by educational consultant **Mike Schmoker**. His conviction is one of many he has reached about the importance of having increased writing opportunities for students in more than just English classes.

Among Schmoker’s conclusion are the following beliefs:

- Writing leads to deeper thinking in any and all curriculum areas. As he notes, “Decades of research attest to writing’s unrivaled ability to facilitate understanding and help people evaluate, reconstitute, and synthesize knowledge. Writing enables students to generate their best thinking in its most effective form.”
- Writing in any subject can occur in a variety of ways. Formats may be short one or two paragraphs, quarterly writing assignments, or lesson summarizers. Students might also respond to sentence stems, comparing/contrasting analyses, or reaching a conclusion based on newly-acquired knowledge.



- Content writing need not include “onerous amounts of paper grading.” Schmoker suggests that teachers provide whole class instruction along with a model of one aspect of writing. Students then practice writing while the teacher observes/interacts with students. The teacher then provides whole class feedback based on observed writing patterns. This approach can be followed by more student practice and displays of strong writing examples by the teacher.
- Schmoker’s final plea wraps up his beliefs about the importance of writing: “For the sake of millions of students, let the writing revolution begin – tomorrow morning.”

Veteran high school English teacher **Yekaterina McKenney** provides a perfect conclusion to this discussion writing:

**“We must enable our students to make choices, personalize topics, develop insights, write freely and share in a nonjudgmental environment. If we do so, even uninspired writers can become passionate communicators willing to improve their work.”**

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