Handout: Writing

The Writing Process

Having a consistent process to use when writing helps students become more confident writers. It provides them with a structure they can follow when they are unsure of where to start. It relieves the pressure of being perfect because it allows time to go back and fix mistakes. It provides the structure they need to write independently. And ultimately, it results in a final product they can be proud of. Follow the process below when writing with students.

Prewriting

This is the first step in the writing process, Here, students decide what to write about and brainstorm their ideas. This is probably the most important step in the writing process, but it is also often the step that teachers and students pay the least attention to. The more time spent in the prewriting step, the easier the remaining steps will be. Ideas may come from conversation between you and the student, a practical need, or thoughts generated from reading. If a student wants to do practical writing—such as writing a resume and cover letter or birthday invitations—you might start by analyzing examples of that type of writing. Mind mapping is a good way to capture and organize the ideas generated in this step.

First Draft

The first draft is a student's first attempt to give structure to his or her ideas. The first draft focuses on the message rather than on punctuation, spelling, grammar, or handwriting. It is not even necessary for the first draft to contain complete sentences. A student who has difficulty with a word or phrase can guess, draw a symbol, or ask for help.

Revise

In this step, the student works to clarify and expand the content. When revising, the student should focus on the overall organization of information, adding and removing information, description and detail, and word choice. You can help by asking the student to read his or her first draft and then asking questions about it. Read the piece aloud yourself, and ask the student to listen critically.

Edit

In this step the student improves the mechanics—spelling, punctuation, and grammar. The amount of editing will depend on the student's level and the purpose of the piece. For beginning writers, focus on editing to correct one or two reoccurring problems rather than trying to make the piece perfect. For example, you might have a student edit a piece specifically for noun/verb agreement, proper use of apostrophes, and the spelling of words that have double letters because you know these mechanics give that student the most trouble. Create a customized editing checklist for the student to follow that includes what he or she is looking for as well as common mistakes and ways to fix them.

Final Draft

In the final draft, students publish what they have written. Publishing means creating a clean copy of a piece of writing and then using it or sharing it with others. Publishing might mean sending a resume and cover letter to a potential employer, or putting envelopes with birthday party invitations in a daughter's backpack to deliver to her friends at school. Publishing is very important because it represents the end of the writing process. Students may go through the revise and edit cycle several times. Without publishing, revising and editing can become an endless loop. If a student has written something he or she is especially proud of, consider ways of publishing the writing to enhance that pride. This might involve submitting the writing to be published in the literacy program's newsletter or on their website, or taking a collection of the student's writings to a printer and having them bound. This can go a long way toward changing a student's attitude about writing from negative to positive.

Instructional Strategies for Writing

The following strategies have a positive impact on the overall quality of students' writing.

Process Writing

Having a consistent process that students can use when writing results in a consistently higher quality product. The process provides students with a way to start when they are unsure of what they want to say. It also allows them to focus their efforts on smaller components of writing, improving each component.

Strategy Instruction

When you teach students strategies for writing, revising, and editing their work, they can draw upon these strategies when writing on their own. When students can effectively use strategies, it changes their self-image from a poor writer to a competent and capable writer. Examples of strategy instruction include teaching a student to brainstorm ideas about one small part of the writing subject at a time to improve description and detail, or to edit their writing beginning with the last sentence and working back to the beginning so they accurately read what's on the page.

Summarization

Teaching students to summarize in writing what they have read improves writing as well as reading comprehension. Summarization specifically helps students to organize their writing and provide explanation and detail.

Collaborative Writing

Providing opportunities for students to work together when writing improves the overall quality of their writing. In addition to benefiting from other people's feedback in the revising and editing stage, collaborative writing removes much of the pressure students feel about thinking of something to say.

Setting Specific Product Goals

Understanding the purpose for writing improves a student's ability to write effectively. It is important for students to have clear, specific goals and to understand how the writing will ultimately be used.

Word Processing

Teaching students to write using computers with word processing programs and other tools is helpful. These tools often make it easier for students to revise and edit their drafts and to proof for correct spelling and sentence structure.

Sentence Combining

Teaching students to combine simple sentences into compound or complex sentences can have a significant impact on the quality of their writing and can also improve their reading skills.

Prewriting

As we mentioned earlier, this is a very important step in the writing process. Students often think good writers just sit down and start writing. Teaching that brainstorming and planning are important and providing them with useful tools and strategies improves their overall writing. It is especially important to emphasize how vital prewriting is with students who will be taking timed tests like the GED. When time constraints are introduced into the writing process, the prewriting step often suffers. When this happens, the quality of the student's final product will likely also suffer.

Inquiry Activities

In inquiry activities, students are presented with data. They analyze that data, draw conclusions, and then write about those conclusions. For example, you might put several objects in boxes where students can feel the objects but not see them. Students would write about their touch observations. Then give them a chance to discuss their observations, touch the objects again, and refine their descriptions. The cycle of continuous inquiry, discussion, and writing results in a narrower focus and increased specificity of detail in writing.

Models

Studying models is a good way to introduce students to different writing genres. Discuss the different elements, patterns, and forms of the writing model or models, and then analyze how effectively they were executed. Examples of models include poems for a creative writing project, biographies to help students write their own stories, resumes and cover letters for job-related writing, absentee notes for real world writing, or five-paragraph essays for students preparing to take high school equivalency exams.

Grammar

Understanding grammar rules is important for producing high quality writing. However, writing instruction that emphasizes grammar or treats it as something independent from composition has a negative effect on the overall quality of student writing. Effective grammar instruction involves the practical application of grammar rules to what the student is writing. It is part of the editing process and the effort to improve the final product.

Correcting Grammar Mistakes

One reason people do not like to write is that they are afraid they do not know or remember all the grammar rules for writing, so whatever they write will be incorrect. Students want their writing to be correct, but instruction focused purely on grammar is ineffective. When providing grammar instruction to correct mistakes, follow these strategies:

- **Base grammar instruction on the student's gaps in knowledge.** This means that you should teach the grammar rules a student doesn't know or has trouble with, not the things he or she already knows. How do you know what a student knows and doesn't know about grammar? Get the student to write, and observe which errors show up. This means you shouldn't start teaching grammar until a student has produced a body of writing—about three to five writing activities.
- **Grammar instruction requires the direct instruction model:**
    - Explain the grammar rule and how to apply it.
    - Provide examples of application of the grammar rule. Also provide examples of common errors and how to fix them.
    - Provide guided practice with worksheets and examples from the student's own work.
    - Have the student edit future writing for the specific grammar rule.
- **Simplify grammar rules.** Remember, one of the reasons that people do not like to write is the perception that there are a lot of grammar rules they need to remember. You are trying to help students improve their writing by eliminating frequent errors. Simplifying grammar rules will facilitate this.
- **Model common errors and how to fix them.** Students need to easily recognize the errors they make and have specific strategies for fixing them. Sometimes these strategies involve applying grammar rules. A strategy might be to rewrite the sentence.
- **Apply the grammar rule during the editing process.** Once a student understands the grammar rule, it is important for him or her to edit work by specifically applying that grammar rule. Once students have learned to recognize and correct an error in their work, it is unlikely that they will continue to make that error.

Grammar Resources

You can use these websites as references to explain aspects of grammar.

- **Butte College Tip Sheets: The Eight Parts of Speech**
  (http://www.butte.edu/departments/cas/tipsheets/grammar/parts_of_speech.html)
  This site contains a good overview to use when preparing to explain the parts of speech to students.

- **Guide to Grammar & Writing** (http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/)
  This is a good resource for tutors, but it's probably too complicated for students to use. In addition to very detailed grammar information at the word, sentence, and paragraph level, it has lots of examples and quizzes you can use to help students practice applying grammar rules.

- **English Grammar 101** (https://www.englishgrammar101.com/)
  This is a good learning and practice site for students. It may be difficult for them to navigate initially, but the lessons are short and easy to understand. Each lesson covers one topic, followed by an exercise section to test students' understanding.

- **Road to Grammar** (http://www.roadtogrammar.com/)
  This website has lots of quizzes that students can take online or that you can download as PDFs to use in class.