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Write to Comprehend



Using Writing as a Tool to Build Reading Comprehension

Aligns to International Reading Association and
National Council of Teachers of English Standards

Vicky Lynott and Anthony D. Fredericks



Good Year Books
Culver City, California

Dedication

*This book is dedicated to Phyllis Fredericks, an amazing, talented woman with endless ideas. —V.L.
For my wife, Phyllis, who inspires, supports, and encourages . . . with love and passion! —A.D.F.*

Write to Comprehend contains lessons and activities that reinforce and develop skills as defined by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English as appropriate for students in Grades 4–8. These include 1) Students read a wide range of print, 2) Students read a wide range of literature, 3) Students apply a wide range of strategies to text, 4) Students adjust their use of written language, 5) Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write, 6) Students apply knowledge of language structure to text, 7) Students conduct research on issues and interests, 8) Students use a variety of technological and information resources, 11) Students participate in a variety of literary communities, and 12) Students use language to accomplish their own purposes. See www.goodyearbooks.com for information on how lessons correlate to specific standards.

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Cover Design: Gary Smith, Performance Design
Text Design: Dan Miedaner
Illustration on page 26: Sean O'Neill, Boilerroom Studio
Cover Image: Photograph by John Archer, courtesy of istockphoto.com.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-59647-120-7
ISBN eBook: 978-1-59647-214-3

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

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Preface

As teachers, we constantly find ourselves asking lots of questions: queries that begin with “What if . . . ?” “Why can’t . . . ?” “What’s another way of . . . ?” “Why do you believe . . . ?” “Can you elaborate . . . ?” and “What do you think about . . . ?” We suspect that this inquisitive nature is a natural consequence of our more than sixty combined years of working with students of all ages and all abilities. It is our philosophy that effective teachers are those who are always seeking new dimensions for exploration, stretching those already in existence, or attempting to expand the parameters of creative thought.

Write to Comprehend was born of a perceived need to infuse specific writing strategies into all of the content areas—promoting and expanding students’ comprehension, specifically their reading comprehension. It grew out of conversations with educators around the country as well as those in our own “backyard.” Teachers told us that they wanted to promote writing as a vehicle through which students could explore and understand every dimension of their world. These same teachers said that they wished to facilitate those discoveries through an active, process-oriented, and personally meaningful program that weaves reading and writing into every subject area.

This book is a result of those conversations. It is designed to offer fourth-through eighth-grade teachers a participatory approach to reading and writing instruction—an approach that says that when students are provided with proven, successful and multi-dimensional writing strategies in concert with a focus on reading comprehension, then their education expands exponentially.

It’s important to know that the strategies and activities in these pages come from real classrooms and real teachers. However, as you use this book, you can modify, alter, or elaborate on any of the strategies or models as you see fit. You know your students best—their needs, interests, and inclinations should be the springboard for any extensions or modifications of these ideas. It is also important to encourage your students to create their own learning activities for selected areas (language arts, science, social studies, and math) of the overall curriculum. By providing students with real opportunities to create and developing meaningful activities, you give them the motivation and inspiration to take an active role in their own education.

It is our hope that you will discover within these pages a wealth of learning possibilities for your classroom and that your students will discover an exciting array of mind-expanding and consciousness-raising experiences. With this book, we believe you will be able to create a classroom environment in which students continually ask questions—not to find right answers or simple solutions, but rather to discover a host of new and divergent learning possibilities.

Let’s begin the discovery!

—Vicky Lynott
—Tony Fredericks

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Teaching Writing

In the “good old days” writing was taught as a separate subject. It was divorced from the rest of the curriculum—having its own textbooks and endless workbook pages to fill in and complete. There was a designated time in the school day (or week) to teach writing. Teachers proscribed and students dutifully tackled a wide range of topics and exercises presumably designed to improve their writing competencies. The thought of integrating writing activities and procedures into other elements of the fourth- to eighth-grade curriculum was heretical. Logic said that if students improved their writing in a “Writing” class, then surely their writing would improve throughout their scholastic careers. Writing was promoted as a product—an assignment or worksheet to be completed—it was seldom seen as a means to a greater good.

Fortunately, that thinking has changed. Writing today is viewed more as a process rather than a product. Good writing emerges from a sequential series of steps that are personal and reflective. Like the metamorphosis of an egg to a tadpole to a froglet to an adult frog, writing is transformative—it’s an evolutionary activity and a process of discovery for a writer. We like to think of writing as a dynamic series of stages that is developmental as well as creative . . . engaging individuals in varied levels of thought to make meaning on paper.

However, all writers—from novice to professional—need the support and encouragement of others. They need mentors or teachers who guide them through the process of their creations. Teacher involvement is critical to the success of the overall classroom writing program, just as much as it is critical to the success enjoyed by each student in that program. Teachers in writing process classrooms are not passive; they are actively engaged with students from the start of writing to the final draft and sharing. We believe that writing becomes a cooperative venture—one with continuous support, encouragement, and possibilities.

Writing as a Comprehension Tool

In all our teaching experiences, here are two inescapable conclusions we have come to believe:

- Writing is an active engagement with text; it is an act of thinking.
- Comprehension is an active engagement with text; it is an act of thinking.

Quite obviously, there are similarities between these two statements. Equally important, there are important connections to be made between teaching writing and teaching comprehension. In fact, it has been our experience that when middle school students begin to make their own connections between writing (“Hey, why do we have to do this stuff?”) and comprehension (“Hey, this makes sense now!”), their “learning quotient” is heightened considerably. Interestingly, research in the field of writing instruction also supports this notion. Brewster and Klump (2004) state, “The longer the period of time over which writing activities are spread and repeated, the greater their effect on student learning.”

At this point, let’s stop and look at a definition of comprehension: “Comprehension is the ability to construct meaning by interacting with text” (Cooper, 2003). As teachers, we naturally and easily associate the word *comprehension* with the word *reading*. In fact, in all our college courses and in every teacher manual, the term “reading comprehension” was used with natural frequency.

However, let’s look at comprehension as a process of thinking about text. Many fourth- to eighth-grade teachers subscribe to the notion that reading involves an active and energetic relationship between the reader and the text. The reader-text relationship is reciprocal and involves the characteristics of the reader as well as the nature of the materials. This philosophy of reading, often referred to as a “transactional approach to reading,” has particular applications for all middle school teachers. Here are two principles of that philosophy that serve as the foundation upon which this book is based and which have been successfully used by thousands of teachers, just like you:

- Reading is a lived-through experience or event. Students “evoke” the text, bringing a network of past experiences with the world, with language, and with other texts.
- Meaning is neither in the child nor in the text, but in the reciprocal transaction between the two.

(Just for fun, cross off the word *Reading* in the first statement and substitute the word *Writing*. Do you notice the similarities?)

We like the term “transacting with text,” for it implies that readers have a responsibility to text just as much as the author has a responsibility to potential readers. When we use the word *text*, we mean the reading students do in trade books or literature as well as from content area textbooks. That is to say, the reader brings to the text a mix of experiences, interpretations, and values that affect what will be taken away from a text (that is, what will be read). In essence,

reading to learn and learning to read occur simultaneously, each affecting the other in varying degrees. Or, to state it another way, what readers bring to a text is just as important as what they take away from it.

The implications for teachers are many, a chief one being the fact that they must be able to help their students appreciate reading—and eventually writing—as constructive and meaningful processes. Each of these two language arts is ongoing, not static; engaging, not superficial; and personal, not pedantic. Helping students build personal structures for becoming competent readers and writers is a constant challenge. We suggest that the teaching of comprehension within the “marriage” of both reading and writing gives students a valuable framework necessary to achieve high levels of reading competence and equally high levels of writing proficiency.

We hope you will agree with us that reading and writing are indeed processes of thinking. If we can guide our students in the practices and procedures of thinking about the text they read and write, then we can also assist them in learning about the practices and procedures of comprehending text. In other words, if we are committed to helping students achieve a measure of success in all their reading experiences, we should be equally committed to helping students learn and use strategies (specifically those related to writing) that will assist them in a wide variety of language experiences. Take that one step further and you can begin to see that if we help fourth- to eighth-grade students successfully interact with their own written text, then they will achieve of success in their interactions with printed text. In short, they begin to make connections between what they can write and what they can read.

Our own experiences, as well as those of many other teachers across the country, have shown that dynamic writing strategies can be universally applied to all content areas. We can help students construct meaning in reading, in writing, and across the curriculum in an ever-increasing spiral of learning situations. Of course, this is much more than simply asking students to write a summary of a book after they’ve read it. It is the systematic integration of dynamic writing strategies into the instructional plans of every subject such that writing is portrayed as “part and parcel” of any lesson or learning activity. In short, writing is not an add-on; rather, it is a necessary vehicle for furthering comprehension no matter what the topic or emphasis.

Writing Standards and Comprehension

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) have developed a set of language arts standards necessary for students to achieve academic success—both in school and in society. These standards promote all the language arts (reading, writing, listening, speaking) as essential elements in every student’s scholastic growth in addition to offering a framework for the development of curriculum and instruction. They are not prescriptions or an isolated listing of principles but, rather, a series of interrelated concepts that can help drive students’ literacy growth.

Following is a list of the topics addressed in the standards recommended by the NCTE and the IRA that have a direct application to the teaching of writing:

1. Literary range
2. Literature periods/genres
3. Textual analysis
4. Voice
5. Audience
6. Form/technique
7. Research
8. Technology
9. Diversity
10. Second language
11. Language community
12. Purpose

(For the full text of the standards, visit <http://www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/110846.htm>.)

Many states, lots of districts, and a multitude of schools have used these standards to help build effective writing instruction programs. In so doing they have provided a valuable blueprint for the teaching of comprehension—not just as a goal of the reading curriculum but, just as important, as a critical element of the writing curriculum, too. Please know that all of the NCTE/IRA standards have been incorporated into the strategies and activities throughout the book.

The Advantages of a Comprehension-based Writing Program

The utilization of writing strategies in concert with comprehension development yields a wealth of advantages—for both students and teachers alike. Here are a few we have seen in our own classrooms as well as those of teachers across the country:

- Focuses on the processes of learning rather than the products
- Reduces and/or eliminates the artificial barriers that often exist between curricular areas and provides an integrative approach to learning
- Promotes a student-centered classroom (including all content areas)—one in which they are encouraged to make their own decisions and assume a measure of responsibility for learning
- Stimulates self-directed discovery and investigation both in and out of the classroom
- Assists students in developing relationships between various bodies of knowledge, thus enhancing appreciation and comprehension
- Allows more time for instructional purposes. Language arts instruction does not have to be crammed into limited, artificial time periods but can be extended into each and every subject area and throughout the day.
- Offers opportunities to develop the connections that can and do exist between language arts and other subjects, topics, and themes logically and naturally. Teachers can demonstrate relationships and assist students in comprehending those relationships.
- Allows teachers to promote writing as a continuous activity—one not restricted by textbook designs, time barriers, or even the four walls of the classroom. Teachers can help students extend writing into many aspects of their personal lives.
- Frees teachers to help students look at a subject, problem, situation, or topic from a variety of viewpoints. The “marriage” of writing and comprehension enhances and promotes multiple viewpoints and multiple conclusions.
- Emphasizes teaching students and less emphasis on telling students.
- Teachers can promote problem solving, creative thinking, and critical thinking processes within all dimensions of a topic.

Combining writing + comprehension within the fourth- to eighth-grade curriculum can be a normal and natural part of students' academic experiences. Doing so provides students with valuable opportunities to extend and expand their knowledge of the world around them. By focusing on the development of comprehension through writing strategies, you will be opening up teaching possibilities as well as learning opportunities within the classroom and beyond. Indeed, we believe that this potent combination will help you guide your students to investigate their immediate and far-flung world in an arena that has no limits!