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Writing Reminders

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Tools, Tips, and Techniques

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JIM BURKE

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

National Council of Teachers of English: Teaching Composition—A Position Statement xv

How to Use This Book xix

WHAT TEACHERS MUST DO

Create a Community of Writers	1
1 Write with Your Students	6
2 Confer with Your Student Writers	9
3 Use Writing to Assess, Synthesize, and Extend	14
4 Use Writing Across the Curriculum	21
5 Be Patient, Consistent, Courageous, and Confident	26
6 Provide Students Options When Appropriate and Possible	31
7 Have Students Write About Subjects of Personal and Social Importance	35
8 Provide Opportunities to Write for Real Audiences	39
9 Establish and Reinforce the Value of Good Writing	46
10 Establish and Foster a Culture of Revision in the Classroom	48

Teach and Support Students**53**

- 11** Use Models to Support Instruction 55
- 12** Develop Writers' Independence 61
- 13** Use Groups to Improve Writing 67
- 14** Provide Good Directions 71
- 15** Use a Variety of Instructional Techniques 75
- 16** Use Graphic Organizers 80
- 17** Scaffold Your Writing Instruction 83
- 18** Provide Scoring Rubrics Before Students Begin to Write 88
- 19** Teach Students to Ask Useful Questions 96
- 20** Teach Students How to Talk About Writing 99
- 21** Use Minilessons to Provide Specific Instruction 103
- 22** Use a Writing Process 107
- 23** Develop Writers' Capacity 113
- 24** Make Yourself Available to Student Writers 117
- 25** Integrate the Teaching of Language and Conventions 120
- 26** Prepare Students to Write 125
- 27** Support Struggling Writers 130
- 28** Support Students with Special Needs 136
- 29** Teach Students How to Write Under Different Circumstances 140
- 30** Provide Timely and Useful Feedback to Student Writers 143
- 31** Provide the Necessary Tools to Teach and Work on Writing 150
- 32** Use Computers to Improve Writing Instruction 153

Evaluate Your Teaching and Students' Progress 157

- 33 Establish and Monitor Progress Toward Specific Writing Goals 160
- 34 Consult the Standards 163
- 35 Teach by Design 165
- 36 Review, Reflect, and Revise 167
- 37 Look for Patterns of Error and Progress 171
- 38 Know the Terms, Principles, and Concepts of Effective Writing 175
- 39 Check for Understanding and Growth 182
- 40 Compare Effective and Ineffective Writers 187
- 41 Use Writing Portfolios 191
- 42 Revisit the Six Features of Effective English Instruction 196
- 43 Consider the Traits of Effective Literacy Instruction 199
- 44 Manage the Paper Load 203

WHAT STUDENTS MUST BE ABLE TO DO**Write in Many Genres** 209

- 45 Write a Response to Literature 211
- 46 Write a Narrative 228
- 47 Write an Expository Essay 238
- 48 Write a Description 250
- 49 Write a Persuasive Essay 258
- 50 Write a Comparative Essay 267
- 51 Write a Reflective Essay 272
- 52 Write an Essay Exam 282

CONTENTS

- 53 Write a Research Report 288
- 54 Write Creative Fiction 298
- 55 Write a Speech 301
- 56 Write a Letter 310
- 57 Write a Précis or Summary 319
- 58 Write a Bibliography 323
- 59 Write a Poem 329
- 60 Keep a Journal 334
- 61 Write an Infotext 342
- 62 Write a Review 349
- 63 Write a College Application Essay 353
- 64 Write a Proposal 360
- 65 Write a Resume 365
- 66 Prepare a Web Site 374

Appendices

- A Works Cited 378
- B The Six Traits (Plus One) of Effective Writing 382
- C How to Help Your Child Write Better 386

Index 388

33

Establish and Monitor Progress Toward Specific Writing Goals

My working habits are simple: long periods of thinking, short periods of writing.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

RATIONAL E

Goals give both students and teachers a target to aim at, a context and a purpose. Some goals are waiting at the door the day students first walk in. These goals might include standards created by the state or district that all students must master before they graduate. Other goals might be unique to the teacher, who believes that all students must learn to persuade people or that correctness counts above all else. Thus, we must be aware of the goals imposed on us as teachers and those which we impose, depending on our own biases, on students.

Obviously the goal of any writing course or instruction is effective written communication. To monitor writers' progress in any area, however, teachers must evaluate their current level of understanding and ability. This evaluation may come from the previous year's portfolio or be generated by initial writing assignments designed to show what the student knows and is able to do. In my class, for example, I often use the summer reading as the basis for such a writing assessment, as it shows me not only what they know about writing about literature but also how well they can write in general.

WHAT TO DO

- *Assess their current skills and knowledge.* As mentioned earlier, there are several ways of doing this, but the point is you cannot create or progress toward goals if you do not know what you can and cannot do now.
- *Establish course goals.* This way you'll know what you are trying to accomplish by the end of the course. Such goals should also be aligned with the appropriate standards. Another way of conceiving this is to ask, What do I want them to know and be able to do at the end of this course? Such "backward planning" allows you to figure out the steps that will help you and your students achieve that result.
- *Establish short- and long-term goals.* In his book *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement* (1999), Mike Schmoker emphasizes the importance of "rapid results," by which he means short-term goals that can give teachers and students a sense of immediate improvement and create

a feeling of momentum, and long-term goals that serve as the foundation of a teacher's or school's program. When instruction, planning, professional development, and curricular resources are aligned with these short- and long-term goals, and implemented in a coherent, competent, and consistent way in a course and throughout the school, improvement is the natural result.



- *Create goals that are appropriate.* Goals must consider the individual student's needs and abilities. While those external goals such as the state exit exam or the SAT matter very much, the students begin where they are. Students arrive in the class at different developmental stages and with a range of needs and abilities. The reason individualized goals are so important is that they can account for students' unique needs; the student with learning differences, for instance, who truly struggles to generate or organize ideas for a writing assignment, can focus on that, making that a priority. The teacher can then teach them strategies and introduce them to software applications and other tools that might help them gain a level of fluency that allows them to write with greater ease and confidence.
- *Align instruction and goals with the standards.* As you plan, begin by asking which standards are most appropriate to this part of your course, and be sure that what your students do builds their capacity to meet such standards.
- *Individualize your goals.* I do not mean that you should create some labyrinth of 143 different sets of goals for each student. Instead, students need to become responsible for their own learning, must develop—with the teacher's guidance through conferences, if necessary—their own goals so that they may internalize these goals. These goals should then be written down, for example, in the students' writing folder or in their binder so they can revisit them easily.
- *Reflect on progress toward their goals.* Both you and the students should evaluate how much progress they are making and the reasons for it. Reflection is key to improved ability; if the writer does not increase their awareness of their craft, of how one choice improves or undermines a piece of writing, they will not develop to their full capacity. Students can engage in such reflection at various times: before they begin, while they are working on an assignment, and after.
- *Refine and revise goals.* As students demonstrate some mastery of a goal, they should make it more specific or move on to new goals that seem the next logical step in their progress as a writer.
- *Focus your feedback.* Instead of giving students feedback about everything they did right and wrong throughout the paper, limit your comments to those goals you are currently focusing on in the class.



• *Measure progress by multiple means using data from multiple sources.* Students and teachers can and should measure improvement by both formal and informal means. An anecdotal comment by a student that it's getting easier for her to write is valid, important evidence of her improvement. Portfolios and writing folders offer more organized means of monitoring progress since teachers and students can thumb through, comparing their recent work with earlier efforts on similar assignments. Teachers can assess the appropriateness of goals and what gains have been made through conferences and curbside chats at the student's desk; for example, the teacher can stop by to see how well a student is beginning the paper, if that is something a particular student has identified as a problem for them. Rubrics also provide targeted feedback about students' performance in a specific domain; ideally the rubric will be aligned with the traits you are teaching. State exit exams, while problematic, are an obstacle students must clear; thus, their score on these tests gives you and the students specific feedback about their performance and those standards that continue to stand in their way.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Zmuda, Allison, and Mary Tomaino. 2001. *The Competent Classroom: Aligning High School Curriculum, Standards, and Assessment*. New York: Teachers College Press.