Putting Gel Pen to Paper

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Middle school teachers can integrate writing strategies across the curriculum to enhance students’ content understanding while improving their everyday writing skills.

Teachers know that students should write and write often. But, they ask, how can we get our students writing every day and still meet the requirements of a full (and growing) curriculum? What teachers need are strategies that engage students in daily writing and augment their learning by extending—rather than adding to—the curriculum.

The key to good writing is meaningful sentences and paragraphs. With practice, students’ sentences can develop from simple statements into concise, complex expressions. Teachers can use sentence and paragraph generation strategies—strategies that help students write reflective, information-rich sentences and paragraphs about what they are learning—before or during lessons or as a way to wrap up instruction and check student understanding.

Teachers already have a daily writing tool at their disposal—student notebooks. A great way to begin incorporating student writing into the curriculum is to work with students to transform their notebooks from repositories of lecture and reading notes into portfolios of reflective writing. I have used the following strategies in my 7th grade history class to get students writing in their notebooks every day.

Sentence Synthesis

Sentence synthesis, a quick-write strategy in which students construct meaningful sentences using three or four key words from a lesson and then share these sentences with their classmates, encourages students to review the lesson’s key concepts and synthesize what they have learned. First, the teacher selects several words that capture the main ideas of a lesson—and that students can use together in a sentence—and displays the words in front of the entire class. To facilitate a review of a lesson on the separation of governmental powers, for example, a civics teacher might select the words separation, Constitution, and branch.

Next, students use all three words to construct a meaningful sentence that
summarizes the main idea of the lesson. One student, for example, might build the following sentence:

Separation of powers is the constitutional principle that divides power between the different branches of government.

Finally, students share their sentences with the rest of the class and discuss one another's ideas. Teachers can use students' sentences to prepare them for upcoming lessons that continue to build on the same key words and concepts. In the separation of powers example, most of the sentences would relate how the U.S. Constitution divides the powers of government into the three branches. The reading of the sentences and discussion would provide the teacher with a number of entry points to begin dealing with any of the branches, the concept of the separation of powers, checks and balances, or other constitutional principles.

**Question All-Write**

Using the Question All-Write Strategy, teachers interrupt a lecture or class discussion or pause a video to pose relevant questions for students to consider and respond to in their notebooks. Teachers can then use students' responses to enrich the lecture, prepare them for viewing the next video segment, or enhance the class discussion. For example, students in a science class may watch a video clip about nuclear fission and fusion. The teacher pauses the video and asks students to write a sentence about the difference between nuclear fission and fusion. Following this exercise, the teacher leads a discussion based on the students' sentences.

The Question All-Write takes little class time and helps students think about what they are learning and discussing. Posing a question and providing students with time to respond also helps teachers build “wait time” into their instruction. Even more important, the strategy gets every student writing simultaneously.

**Outcome Sentences**

The outcome sentence strategy has students respond in writing to a teacher's prompt during a lecture or other learning experience. The teacher prompt should be a sentence stem, such as “I learned that. . .” or “I still wonder why. . .”. After they have responded in writing to the sentence stem, students may share their sentences with their classmates and compare and contrast responses. A history class, for example, might have a lesson about the Iceman, the 5,300-year-old man found frozen in the Italian Alps. Following the activity, students have a brief amount of time to write a sentence about the Iceman beginning with, “I wonder . . .”. One student, for instance, might write, “I wonder why the Iceman was so high up in the mountains,” while another writes, “I wonder where he lived.” After the writing period, students read their sentences aloud and the teacher continues the lesson, building on the students' questions and using them to spur a class discussion.
Frames

Frames are skeletal paragraphs that contain information, important ideas, and transition words from the lesson that students will use in their writing. They guide students in thinking through ideas addressed in class and in developing well-formed paragraphs. Frames are particularly useful after students have completed a reading. One completed frame following a reading on Roman emperors, for example, might read (the frame words are in italics):

The emperor Augustus Caesar ruled Rome from approximately 43 b.c. to a.d. 14. His accomplishments included bringing about government programs that benefited many citizens. Some of his shortcomings included his bad temper and losing an important battle in what is today Germany. In summary, he is remembered most for bringing 200 years of peace to the Roman Empire.

The use of writing frames requires students to pull the information from a reading, lecture, or video program and to write about it. Because of the form of the frame, it gives students practice in writing good paragraphs.

Short Statements

The short statement strategy requires students to write one or two paragraphs of three or four well-developed, information-rich sentences each. In this way, students learn to be precise and concise in their writing.

The short statement encourages students to use research techniques in their writing. Because the resulting “research paper” is only several paragraphs long, however, teachers can assign many more research essays as writing assignments than they could if students were producing long research reports. In addition, the short statement strategy makes it much more difficult for students to plagiarize their sources.

Most students are thrilled when they first learn that many of their research papers will be only one to two paragraphs long. After completing a short statement, however, students learn that writing an effective, concise essay often requires at least as much research and thought as they put into much longer papers.

The brief bio. In this short statement strategy, students create brief biographies of historical or modern figures whom they have studied or will study. When I use brief bios, my students research their subjects just as they would for a lengthy research paper. The difference is that students must condense pertinent information into only one or two paragraphs. Students build substantive brief bios when they

- Briefly explain the actions or ideas that make their subject notable.
- Place the person in historical context.
- Use action words.
- Use concise language and combine sentences (using five or fewer sentences per paragraph).
The place/event statement. Students provide a brief description of a place or event that they have studied or will study. They put the place or event in its historical context, explain what makes the place or event significant and memorable, and discuss the major players in the event. Again, students must use concise language and pack a good deal of information into a short space. For example, a student in a U.S. history class might write

Concord, Massachusetts, has an important place in U.S. history. In 1775, a shot was fired at a bridge outside Concord that that was “heard around the world.”

In the remainder of the paragraph, the student briefly explains how the incident at Concord was an important event in the break of the United States from Great Britain.

Other short statements. When students write compare and contrast short statements, they address the relationship between terms or ideas presented in class. Students write a thesis sentence containing the main point of their paragraph, a comparison sentence that points to similarities between the terms or ideas, and a contrast sentence that highlights the differences between the two. A student in a science class might write a compare and contrast statement on the difference between a virus and bacteria, or between a protist and a fungus.

Students can also write short “process” statements, which discuss a particular process in one or two paragraphs and which are particularly appropriate for science and math classes. Middle school math students, for example, might write a process statement on finding a ratio or a percent proportion.

Video-Viewing Guides

Students use a video-viewing guide to take notes when their teacher shows a video or DVD. A viewing guide asks students to process information in chunks during the video and then to reflect on and write about what they have learned after the video is over.

The teacher begins the lesson by explaining to students how to use the viewing guide's three sections: Record, Elaborate, and Extend. Before showing the program, the teacher cues students about the program's important information and ideas. Then the teacher shows the video or DVD program in segments, ensuring that students know what to watch and listen for in each segment.

- **Record.** While they view the video, students jot down key points and significant ideas in the Record section of their viewing guide. Students should keep their points brief, recording only short phrases, because the process of transcribing should interfere as little as possible with the process of watching and listening.
- **Elaborate.** The teacher pauses the video to allow students to process the information they have seen and heard. Students examine their recorded notes and write a
specified number of full sentences in the Elaborate section of their viewing guide that describe what they have learned. Teachers may use sentence stems to help students start writing.

- **Extend.** The entire class discusses the elaborated points. Students then respond to an open-ended question in the Extend section of their viewing guides, synthesizing what they have learned from the video.

Here is an example of the video-viewing guide in practice: A world history class is about to view a portion of a video on ancient Egypt and the Rosetta Stone. Without using the words Rosetta Stone, the teacher previews the guide by explaining to students that they will watch a clip about the language of the ancient Egyptians. The teacher further explains that they should watch for what happened to this language, and how it was eventually rediscovered. As the video is played, students watch and record brief phrases related to the cues they have been given. Following the segment, students elaborate on their notes, writing full sentences on what happened to the Egyptian language and how the Rosetta Stone was found. Following the writing and discussion period, students extend what they have learned by writing paragraphs that explain the importance of the Rosetta Stone in understanding the ancient Egyptians.

### Writing Every Day

Writing should involve discovering, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating—not just copying or downloading. Unfortunately, as every teacher knows, students often express themselves poorly, demonstrate a limited evolution of thought and a limited command of the language, and intentionally or unintentionally plagiarize others in their writing.

When teachers embed writing strategies in instruction, they enrich and enliven the required curriculum. They help students turn their notebooks into writing portfolios. Most important, they check for student understanding and enhance learning while helping students improve their writing skills, so that students can simultaneously become better thinkers and better writers.

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