Writing: Instruction or Instructions?

Writing is the sticky wicket of instruction. Most teachers like to assign writing, as in give instructions for an assignment, but few like to actually teach it. Let’s face it-writing is hard. It’s personal. It makes you commit to an idea publicly, which involves risk and vulnerability. For this reason and many more, teachers sometimes shy away from the direct instruction of writing. And students, of course, often avoid the writing process at all cost. They would rather do just about anything than sit down and write a 5-page paper. This aversion to writing has lead, in part, to a dramatic decrease in the writing skills of Americans in general.

It’s no surprise that when you google the phrase, “why Americans can’t write” a lot of interesting theories come up. Technology is a factor, poor instruction, motivation,…..the reasons run the gamut. But they all seem to boil down to one simple thing.

Zachary Garris, in the article, “Americans Can’t Read or Write” asserts, “The title is somewhat misleading. Most Americans can read and write—they just happen to do both quite poorly. Americans in general cannot read or write well.”

http://teachdiligently.com/articles/americans-cant-read-or-write

This statement rings true. Most young adults can read and write, but how well they are able to do this varies greatly. Natalie Wexler wrote a controversial piece in The Washington Post on this very topic. She stated, "It’s no secret that many Americans are lousy writers. Just ask any college professor or employer, including those at prestigious institutions. With the advent of e-mail, writing ability has become more important than ever, and writing deficiencies have become increasingly apparent.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-americans-cant-write/2015/09/24/6e7f420a-6088-11e5-9757-e49273f05f65_story.html?utm_term=.b5bbb1faa7c9

So while many might agree that writing is an issue and we likely haven’t cracked the nut of how to suddenly make it all easy, there are some great resources and strategies that can at least help to get students and teachers comfortable with writing. Here are a few ideas:

1. **Have students write something every single day**-even just a few sentences. Writing takes an enormous amount of practice.
2. **Put away the red pen.** Teachers groan at the suggestion above because they don’t have time to grade all of that writing. The truth is, it doesn’t all need to be graded with a fine-tooth comb. Sometimes practice is just that and a check if you did it, is fine.
3. **Use mini-lessons to hone in on specific writing skills.** Use the red pen just on that skill when you grade the writing.
4. **Provide quality models.** Students write better when they understand what the genre or task is specifically asking them to produce. Showing a model and having students identify the positive features goes a long way in deepening understanding.
5. **Provide non-models for analysis.** Show a half-baked example of the task and have students identify what is missing from the paper. This makes them better peer editors and helps them see the holes in their own work.
6. **Make it fun, not drudgery.** Not all writing has to be overly academic and serious. Teach the structure of the writing genre using fun topics. Allow students to work collaboratively and get feedback from one another.

7. **Celebrate successes in writing.** Publish classroom books filled with various writing tasks from the semester. Keep student writing in portfolios so comparisons can be made from the first assignment to the last—nothing is more concrete to show writing growth!

For more on writing strategies, come to our October writing trainings! For the K-5 *Focus on Writing* event, register here: [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-123602](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-123602) or for the grade 6-12 *Argument Writing Without the Fight*, go to [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113490](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113490).

And as always, please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of any assistance! Have a great month!

Cheers,

Leslie and Della

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**What’s on Deck….**

**October 18 & 25: A Focus on Writing, K-5**
Register @ [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-123602](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-123602)

**Oct. 19 & Nov. 2: Argument Writing Without the Fight, 6-12**
Register @ [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113490](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113490)

**October 21: Literacy Leaders Collaborative**
Register @ [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113198](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113198)

**Nov. 16 & Dec. 7: Implementing & Sustaining New Instructional Programs**
Register @ [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113439](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113439)

**Nov. 29 & Dec. 9: Developing a Cohesive and Effective Integrated ELD System**
Register @ [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113443](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-113443)

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**Registration now open!!** Don’t miss out on our first annual *Literacy Lifts* conference slated for April 13, 2017.

For more info: [http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-122071](http://lacoe.k12oms.org/1540-122071)

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