Growing Extraordinary Writers: Leadership Decisions to Raise the Level of Writing Across a School and a District

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More and more schools are realizing that the teaching of writing needs to be a priority. What does research say about the conditions that will accelerate students' growth as writers, and how can school leaders help whole schools provide those conditions to every child?

Nearly 50 years ago, Murray's (1968) groundbreaking work *A Writer Teaches Writing* sparked a revolution in the teaching of writing. Murray asked the question: Why aren't young people being taught to write the way that professional writers write? He brought the nation's attention to the seemingly obvious fact that all writers—whether they are journalists or fiction writers, scientists or historians—engage in a process of writing that is as fundamental to writers as the scientific method is to scientists. Writers collect and organize; they draft, they revise, they edit.

Bloggers sometimes go through the writing process in a day, and novelists might stretch the process over many years. The process is often iterative and differs depending on the writer and the situation, but each writer goes through a process to compose a piece of writing. Even when student writers only have 20 or 40 minutes, as is the case on so many high-stakes exams, they need to take a moment to collect their thoughts and their evidence and to plan, and then they need to draft and revise on the fly.

The writing process is a learned skill. It comes from many hours spent writing a lot. It comes from a mind-set that whenever you write, you consider not only what you will write *about* but also how you will write *well*.

More and more schools in today's world are realizing that the teaching of writing needs to become a priority. The increased focus on writing comes in part from the technological revolution that has transformed our lives. As new ways of communicating—texts, tweets, e-mail, social media—seep into every nook and cranny of our days, as more and more jobs connect people across the globe, adults and children are writing more than ever.

In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Wagner (2008) named seven survival skills that the upcoming generation will need in our increasingly competitive global economy. The ability to write is paramount to two of those seven skills.

In discussing the escalating need for students to develop effective communication skills, Wagner (2008) cited interviews with corporate leaders who complained that new hires had difficulty being clear and concise. He noted that it was hard for these young workers to create "focus, energy, and passion" around

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the points they want to make, and he explained that the business leaders he interviewed were not complaining about grammar, punctuation, or spelling so much as about "fuzzy thinking" and young people not knowing how to access and analyze information and to write with "a real *voice*" (p. 36).

Wagner's research was prefigured by the National Commission on Writing. A decade ago, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) called for a "writing revolution," suggesting that children needed to double the amount of time they spent writing in their classrooms and to write not only narratives but also arguments and information texts. That call has since been echoed by every version of globally competitive standards.

The good news is that across the nation, thousands of schools are finding that when students participate in a culture that values writing, are given explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient writing, and work toward crystal-clear goals and receive feedback on their progress, their writing skills increase dramatically.

When the writers' workshop approach to teaching writing was developed and popularized 30 years ago (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1968), many of us implemented it with a kind of "write your stories and whatever you desire while we play music to help you write, write, write" feeling. There was a joyous release to that atmosphere, and many students who came to class fearing writing ended up loving it. As this article explains, many of the conditions that were important to students' writing then remain important, and there is now a widespread agreement that both crystal-clear goals and expert, explicit strategy instruction also matter when you want to accelerate achievement.

The Enduring Elements of Good Writing Instruction

When Murray (1968) first wrote about teaching writing process, he wrote that writers need three things:

time, choice, and response. That is, they need protected time to write, they need choice over their topics, and they need response from a community of writers. Nearly 50 years later, we haven't radically changed this list.

When you set out to raise the level of writing in a classroom or across a school or district, these levers quickly become significant (see Figure 1).

Essential 1: Protected Time to Write

First and foremost, to accelerate students' development as writers, a school must set aside protected time for writing. Writing, like running or reading, is a skill that develops with use. Writers need time to write. In too many schools, this time is compromised.

In a survey of American secondary classrooms, Applebee and Langer (2011) found that students were expected to write only 1.6 pages a week and spent only 7.7% of time in their core subjects devoted to writing a paragraph or more. Meanwhile, Gilbert and Graham (2010) found even less time for writing in fourth through sixth grades—students wrote an average of only 25 minutes across the entire day.

So, your first step is to investigate how much time students spend writing and how many pages they are producing each day and each week. Writers need to write often, and they need to write a lot.

To us, an ideal writers' workshop includes about 10 minutes of explicit whole-class instruction (often incorporating the method of demonstration), followed by at least half an hour for writing time (during which the teacher holds conferences and small-group instruction), ending with 5–10 minutes for students to share what they've done with another writer and set goals. If any one part of that equation—the actual writing time, the time to receive instruction, or the time to share and reflect—disappears, writers are less apt to improve rapidly.

Essential 2: Choice

To write well, writers need to write about topics they know a lot about and care about. To raise the level of

Figure 1
Levers for Lifting the Level of Student Writing Across a School and a District

- Take care of essentials.
- Develop a shared vision of good writing and of good writing instruction.
- Work within a strategic schoolwide curriculum that builds across grade levels.
- Create shared assessments and progressions.
- Make a commitment to ongoing, serious, classroom-based professional development.

student writing, therefore, it's worth thinking about how to give students more choice over both topic and ways to write about a topic. A writer's commitment to his or her subject leads that writer to bring the imprint of his or her own passions to the page, writing with that magical quality we call voice. When it is important to a writer to communicate an idea accurately to readers, he or she uses conventions of spelling and grammar with care (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2010).

According to Allington and Gabriel (2012), three decades of research have confirmed that there are six elements every child should experience every day—and one of those is the opportunity to write something meaningful to the individual. This was also Murray's (1968) finding, nearly 50 years ago, when research on the teaching of writing was new in this country. Choice continues to matter.

The importance of topic choice can also be seen through an examination of the factors that cause writers difficulty. Often, what looks like trouble with writing is really trouble with a student's command of the subject. The implications of this suggest that if a class is researching a shared topic, the quality of writing will go up if students are allowed to choose the subtopics into which they inquire, the primary research they pursue, and the positions they defend. Teachers who want to raise the level of students' writing about reading should give students choice over the books they write about, the themes they address, and the sides of the argument they advance.

It is also important for students to choose the strategies they'll apply as they write. Teaching students to self-regulate and set goals for their own writing not only increases their investment but also raises the quality of their work. In their review of the research around effective writing interventions, Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, and Harris (2012) found that teaching students to self-regulate their writing strategies increased student investment and skill. They found that both typical and struggling writers "benefited when they were taught how to apply self-regulation procedures, such as goal setting and self-assessment, to help them manage the writing strategies they were taught" (p. 889).

Self-regulation might mean first graders using a checklist to assess their own writing and set goals for their next piece. It might mean eighth graders studying a mentor text for strategies that they haven't tried and making decisions about what they'll try next. The point is that writers become powerful by learning to make smart choices about their work.

Essential 3: Response in the Form of Feedback

When writers' workshop was new, it was often called the conference approach to teaching writing. Teacher–student conferences that occurred in the midst of the writing process received a spotlight then, and that emphasis on responsive feedback continues today, both among researchers who study writing and those who study effective teaching.

In *Visible Learning*, Hattie (2009) reported on his findings from synthesizing 52,637 studies of ways to accelerate student achievement. In this meta-analysis, encompassing data from 240 million students, Hattie highlighted feedback as one of the two most effective methods for accelerating learning. He argued that the best feedback includes medals and missions—compliments and next steps. Feedback is most potent when students don't yet have mastery and when it is given just in time to learners in the midst of work.

Reeves (2008), who also documented the value of feedback, especially emphasized that the best feedback is given frequently, close to the time when the writer writes, followed by opportunities for more practice.

Research by Leahy and Wiliam showed that "when formative assessment practices are integrated into the minute-by-minute and day-by-day classroom activities of teachers, substantial increases in student achievement—on the order of a 70 to 80 percent increase in the speed of learning—are possible" (as cited in Hattie, 2012, p. 128).

Writers' workshop, with its protected time set aside for independent practice and teacher feedback, is designed to enable teachers and peers to give writers feedback when they most need it—while they are engaged in the process of writing. In fact, look across 30 years of research and you'll find that elements that were regarded as essential decades ago continue to matter. In a recent meta-analysis of writing process approach, Graham and Sandmel (2011) emphasized "the critical role of process in writing, collaboration, personal responsibility, authentic writing tasks, and a supportive learning environment" (p. 405).

Researchers Call for New Elements of Good Writing Instruction

Explicit Expert Strategy Instruction

Researchers today, however, also emphasize that effective writing instruction includes explicit strategy

instruction. In a more recent publication, Graham, Harris, and Chambers (2016) again suggested that to flourish as writers, students today need time to write, a supportive writing environment, and feedback. But the researchers also suggested that students need explicit instruction, opportunities to use 21st-century writing tools, and opportunities to use writing for a variety of purposes, including that of supporting their learning in the content areas (Graham, Harris, & Chambers, 2016, pp. 221–222). Graham and Sandmel (2011) suggested that the effectiveness of writing practices increases with "explicit and systematic instruction" (p. 405).

At the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, this explicit instruction is provided efficiently through the writers' workshop, which allows for minilessons, conferences, and small-group work. We have found that when curriculum is organized so all students in a class (or better yet, at a grade level) are working within a shared genre—employing strategies and emulating mentor texts of that genre—teachers have a context within which to explicitly teach the craft and structure of that particular genre. Students can then apply that instruction to their work and provide support and feedback to each other because they are all working within a shared genre-based unit of study.

In fifth-grade classrooms that are guided by *Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing* (Calkins, 2013), for instance, students debate issues such as whether or not chocolate milk should be served in schools. These students benefit from recent research in argumentation that emphasizes dialogic argumentation with peers to support written arguments (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Taranto, 2013; Crowell & Kuhn, 2014; Felton & Herko, 2004; Kuhn & Crowell, 2011; Kuhn, Hemberger, & Khait, 2014; Kuhn & Udell, 2003).

To prepare for their panel presentations, students learn to "flash debate," which helps them develop the skills of gathering, sorting, and ranking text evidence, introducing and organizing coherent arguments, and listening and responding to counterarguments. Teachers who teach this unit are learning that teaching from a research center makes a tremendous difference in accelerating student achievement.

Writers Work Toward Clear Goals

Although the essentials that Murray emphasized nearly 50 years ago continue to be critical today, there is a new emphasis not only on the importance of explicit instruction but also on the importance of goal setting. This is an extension of the emphasis on the importance of feedback, including the feedback that self-monitoring students give to themselves. Effective feedback is goal driven. Hattie (2012) wrote that "feedback aims to reduce the gap between where the student 'is' and where he or she is 'meant to be'" (p. 115). To accelerate achievement, learners need to answer the question, "Where am I going?" (p. 116).

Learners need a crystal-clear vision of what it is that they want to achieve. For divers, this means watching films of expert divers. For writers, this means crystallizing a vision of what good writing looks like in a particular genre and discipline. Research has shown that teaching students about the qualities of good writing and also teaching them to emulate mentor texts results in better writing (Graham et al., 2016).

Ideally, students study mentor texts that represent accessible and, to them, attractive images of possibility. Teachers find such mentor texts in magazines such as *Cricket*, *Junior Scholastic*, *Upfront*, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and *Sports Illustrated* and in the books students love most. A teacher's own writing can also provide a compelling model for student writers.

Although many qualities of good writing are equally relevant across various genres, it is also the case that different genres place different demands on writers. When the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010) first came out, we considered carefully whether the Standards' treatment of all the myriad forms of writing as one of three overarching kinds of writing would be helpful to students. Putting aside the quibbles that adults brought to this question (that many types of writing are hybrids; a poet may argue and a fiction writer may explain), we found, in researching across thousands of classrooms, that consolidating the variety of writing was helpful to students.

When young writers are introduced to a specific genre of writing as an example of a more overarching type of writing, this helps them transfer and apply what they learn from one writing opportunity to another. For example, it is helpful for the young writer to know that the work he or she did writing petitions can undergird new work writing a persuasive letter or an editorial. And this allows older students who may be working on writing position papers in language arts classes to carry this knowledge across the curriculum to their work on science proposals

and history arguments. That is, when writers know that a host of different kinds of writing are all examples of argument writing (or narrative or informational writing), this increases the likelihood that they will transfer what they learn while working on one text to work on other texts—and, in turn, this increases their independence (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012).

According to Wiggins (2010), students often don't realize that what they learn in one classroom can help them in another. The truth is that sometimes *teachers* don't realize this, either.

The Leadership Work That Supports Large-Scale Reform

Teachers Need a Shared Vision of Good Writing

It is important to provide teachers across a school with the opportunity to develop the shared expectations and language that will allow them to communicate a cohesive vision of what good writing looks like. Teachers benefit from studying mentor texts together and, in doing so, learning from each other's ways of talking and thinking about effective writing.

In schools where writing instruction flourishes, teachers not only study published writing but also collect and analyze student exemplars from across classrooms. When examples of student writing are shared among a community of teachers, this helps teachers develop a rich portfolio of exemplars and align their expectations for students, democratizing instruction between one classroom and another.

One of the most potent ways for a school or a district to lift the quality of good writing is for teachers across a grade level to meet together to norm their expectations of student writing, learning to look at student writing with shared lenses.

Teachers Need a Shared Vision of Good Writing Instruction

Students and teachers both benefit from crystal-clear goals. This translates into the fact that it is vitally important for teachers to talk together about qualities of writing instruction.

In *Professional Capital*, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) pointed out,

> Teaching like a pro…cannot be sustained unless all your colleagues teach like pros too. Whether you are alone in your classroom or working in a team, teaching like a pro means that the confidence, competence, and

critical feedback you get from your colleagues is always with you. (p. xiv)

They went on to say that whole-system change "absolutely requires individual and collective acts of investment in…a coherent set of actions that build everyone's capability and keep everyone learning" (p. xvii).

Just as teachers benefit from talking together about student work, norming expectations, and developing a shared discourse, so too do teachers benefit immeasurably from observing teaching together, talking afterward about what worked and what could have been better. In the schools the two of us know best, conversations among expert practitioners within and between schools have led to shared beliefs about effective methods of teaching writing (see Figure 2 for a list that captures some of these effective practices).

As individual teachers' knowledge of the teaching of writing grows, it becomes increasingly important that schools develop ways to democratize knowledge. Raising the level of writing in a school or district takes a collaborative mind-set.

Teachers Need to Teach Within a Strategic Cross-Grade Curriculum

When we work with school leaders, we often ask them, "What is the Bill of Rights that you give to all students as writers within your school?" If the question confuses them, we are apt to elaborate: "When a new student enters your school and you talk to the child and his parents about the education the child will receive, chances are that you say to the parent, 'Your son doesn't have to luck out to be taught math. No matter which teacher the child gets, he'll have 50 minutes of math instruction a day. You can count on it. And whether he is in one classroom or another in fourth grade, you can count on him receiving expert instruction in…' So, what do you promise parents and students about the writing instruction all children will receive?"

In too many schools, kids need to luck out to get a teacher who teaches writing. The problem is that proficiency in writing is essential to success not only in language arts but in most subjects. A student will not be a skilled historian or scientist or reader without skill in writing. More than this, teachers will not be able to teach higher level writing skills if they can never assume that students come to them with prior knowledge and skills in writing. Just as it would be hard for kids to learn to multiply fractions if they'd never been exposed to fractions at all, so

Figure 2
Effective Methods of Teaching Writing

- For teaching to make a lasting difference, classwork must enable students to do things on their own, often, and with independence. Good instruction develops students' skills and broadens their repertoire in ways that invite them to draw on, consolidate, adapt, and apply these skills often.
- Teaching toward independence means developing a language not of assignment and obedience but of invitation and expectation. Instead of giving directions, such as, "Today I want you to...," teachers should teach strategies, using their own discourse to ensure that they are teaching toward agency: "Today I will teach you a powerful strategy for.... Writers use this strategy often when...."
- All students benefit from cuing systems for transfer, such as anchor charts and tools that help students remember and apply strategies they have learned. In an age of smartboards, teachers need to attend to the records they leave of their instruction so students (and other teachers) are more likely to expect transfer.
- The primary methods of the writing teacher include demonstration, guided practice, inquiry, and responsive observation and coaching.
- Teachers have to give feedback while students are in the midst of working, not after their writing is "done." This means focusing most effort on feedback versus grading. It also means that teachers need to use instructional time judiciously and efficiently.

too would it be hard for kids to write counterarguments if they'd never learned the basic structure of argument writing.

When a school tackles the goal of improving writing instruction across the school, one important step is for teachers across grade levels to agree on a progression of skill development and corresponding units so instruction at one grade builds on instruction in the prior grade, with units of study fitting tongue and groove together. No one would consider teaching students to multiply fractions before teaching them place value, addition, and multiplication of whole numbers. In the same way, a thoughtful writing curriculum supports a progression of writing skill development.

Whether or not a state has adopted the Common Core (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010), the Standards provide a starting place for schoolwide conversation about an alignment of expectations and curriculum. Teachers can discuss ways in which their curriculum will and will not align to the Standards. The Common Core omits poetry, for example, and teachers within a school might differ, deciding to prioritize poetry. Similarly, the Common Core highlights the importance of opinion/argument writing, and a school may or may not follow suit (Calkins et al., 2012). The bigger point is that if students are going to be taught to write in ways that the world demands of young people, then teachers would be wise to engage in conversations within and across grades so students are supported across a trajectory of skill development.

If a school takes on the work of raising the level of students' writing, it is important for teachers across grade levels and subject areas to engage in shared conversations about good writing.

Teachers Need Shared Expectations and Ways to Track Growth

The wonderful thing about teaching writing is that neither a teacher nor an administrator needs to wonder whether instruction is having an effect on student learning. All you have to do is look at the writing to notice the way writing changes over time. Here's a tip, though. Because it is especially important to know what students can do independently, it is especially important to study on-demand writing, in which students work from start to finish without input from others.

On-demand writing is any writing that students do to demonstrate their current skill level. It acts as ongoing performance assessment. Often, when you finish a unit of study, it's worth it to have students show off their skills by composing an on-demand piece.

When teachers study students' on-demand writing from the start of the year until the most recent assessment, what they see is the effect of their instruction over the year. This requires a mind-set wherein teachers study student work not only as a reflection of students' progress but also as a reflection of the teachers' teaching. The important thing is for

teachers to observe student work, asking, "Why has some of my instruction led to visible results in student writing but other teaching isn't as visible?" As Hattie (2012) emphasized in *Visible Learning for Teachers*, to become an expert, a teacher must be skilled at monitoring the current status of student understanding and progress toward the success criteria.

In *Writing Pathways* (Calkins, 2015), we suggested that students write a quick on-demand draft before and after each writing unit. That writing provides a window onto students' growing mastery of a particular kind of writing. The writing reveals what students can and cannot yet do—and that knowledge helps a teacher adjust instruction so it is appropriately (yet not overwhelmingly) ambitious.

This performance assessment helps the students themselves track their own progress, and it sets them up to engage in goal-driven, deliberate practice that makes for dramatic progress. In *The Checklist Manifesto*, Gawande (2009) created an ode to the power of the checklist, describing how it has empowered professionals from pilots to doctors. A powerful checklist helps a writer assess his or her own writing, note things he or she is doing well and things that are goals, and set to work to achieve those goals. In "Best Practices in Teaching Writing," Bromley (2011) asserted that writing instruction has "improved dramatically over the past several decades," and she pointed to stronger systems of writing assessments—ones that inform teachers and students (p. 307).

If you begin to use on-demand writing as an ongoing schoolwide system of performance assessment, it is best to think of this as a way to spur student progress more than a way to evaluate, rank, and reward that progress. It is powerful for students to study calibrated and genre-specific checklists of qualities of good writing that are aligned to exemplar texts that illustrate those checklists.

You can create those tools, or you can benefit from the work that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project has done. The assessment system in *Units of Study* (Calkins, 2013, 2014), described in *Writing Pathways* (Calkins, 2015), was developed with help from teachers around the globe and experts from the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. This includes a collection of normed student exemplars of opinion/argument, information, and narrative writing from kindergarten through ninth grade. (See Figures 3–6 for examples of these checklists and for tools that help students become familiar with the goals and techniques of writers.)

Using these assessment tools will help students will achieve dramatic growth. This improvement in student writing transfers across genres and across disciplines. Imagine a teacher launching a unit on literary essay by asking students to annotate a personal essay so as to recall the features of such an essay. Then, imagine the teacher asking students to annotate a literary essay and to discuss first with a partner, then with the class as a whole, ways in which the literary essay is like and unlike the personal essay. Then, imagine writers bringing the opinion or information writing checklist into their social studies classroom. Imagine writers bringing that same checklist into the work they are doing, reading expository or argument texts, with the checklists now helping them to study the craft in the texts they are reading.

Shared assessments, exemplars, and tools for self-assessment and goal setting can make an important contribution toward helping a school move from an individualistic culture to a collaborative culture—one in which teachers think not about "my kids" but about "our kids." Fullan (2014) spoke at Teachers College about good and bad drivers in education. He named system-ness as a good driver, which in this context means teachers working together so the way writing is taught is consistent and makes sense to students across the disciplines and grade levels. When you teach writing this way, you raise extraordinary writers.

A Focus on Serious Professional Development Matters

Professional development can transform the teaching of writing in your building. Professional development will be the heartbeat of your school. It should be intense, collaborative, collegial, and practical. It should be focused on strengthening teachers' methods and spirits. It should be varied in form, flexible, and responsive. Good professional development creates lasting communities of practice.

In their report *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) argued that writing is every teacher's responsibility and recommended that "state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers" (p. 32). There is widespread agreement that to raise the level of student writing, the first step is to raise the level of teacher knowledge. The implementation of new standards in writing will "require teachers to have more expertise" (McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016, p. 342). Ongoing, comprehensive professional development is key to this work.

Figure 3
Argument Writers Use Techniques Such As...

|		
Including personal stories and anecdotes	Repeating key terms or phrases	Giving examples to illustrate their point
Bringing in expert opinions and quotes	Addressing readers/listeners directly and asking them to reflect on their own experiences	Asking questions
Defining key terms and including technical vocabulary or terminology	Being deliberate about tone or changes in tone	Using parallelism
Varying sentence rhythms	Making comparisons or connections	Incorporating humor, when appropriate
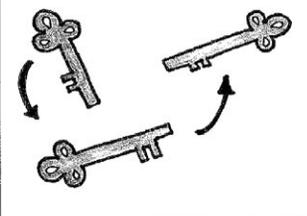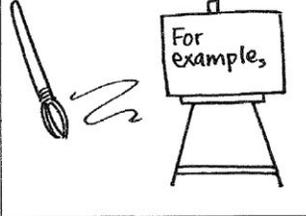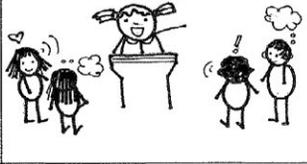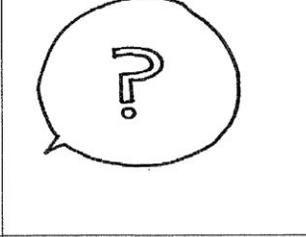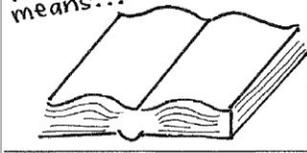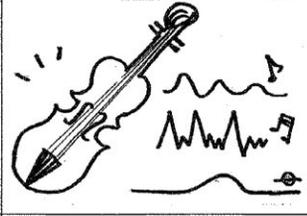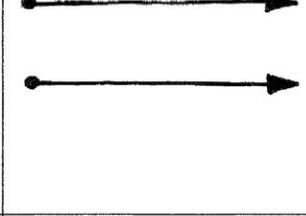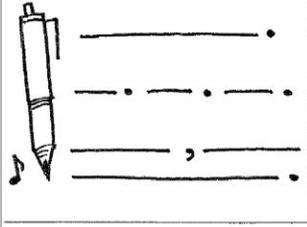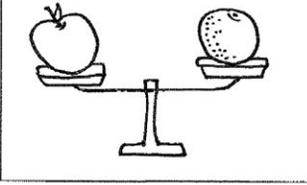
Note. The Art of Argument: Research-Based Essays. From *Units of Study in Argument, Information, and Narrative Writing, Grades 6–8: A Common Core Workshop Curriculum* (p. 128), by L. Calkins, K.B. Hohne, & A. Taranto, 2014, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2014 by Heinemann. Reprinted with permission.

Supporting teachers of writing through strong professional development is especially important because teachers can be hesitant about their abilities to teach writing. Fleischer (2004), the codirector of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project, argued that "many writing teachers find writing a bit frightening" (pp. 25–26), possibly because they do not often write as adults other than in the service of routine tasks. They also may feel unsure of their knowledge of writing (Fleischer, 2004). When teachers do not see themselves as writers, they can feel uncomfortable teaching writing. This, then, means that it is helpful if part of the teaching of writing includes support for teachers as writers of many different kinds of texts.

New reform agendas mean the need for teachers to develop new knowledge of content and skills

Figure 4
Argument Writers Aim Toward Goals Such As…

Note. The Art of Argument: Research-Based Essays. From *Units of Study in Argument, Information, and Narrative Writing, Grades 6–8: A Common Core Workshop Curriculum* (p. 128), by L. Calkins, K.B. Hohne, & A. Taranto, 2014, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2014 by Heinemann. Reprinted with permission.

as well as to reflect critically on their own practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin advocate for professional development that supports teachers both as teachers and as learners and "allows them to struggle with the uncertainties that accompany each role" (p. 82). As they asserted,

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice. In addition to a powerful base of theoretical knowledge, such learning requires settings that support teacher inquiry and collaboration and strategies

Figure 5
Opinion Writing Checklist: Grade 1

Grade 1			
STRUCTURE			
I wrote my opinion or my likes and dislikes and said why.			
Did I do it like a first grader?	NOT YET	STARTING TO	YES!
I wrote a beginning in which I got readers' attention.	☐	☐	☐
I named the topic or text I was writing about and gave my opinion.	☐	☐	☐
I said more about my opinion and used words such as *and* and *because*.	☐	☐	☐
I wrote an ending for my piece.	☐	☐	☐
I wrote a part where I got readers' attention and a part where I said more.	☐	☐	☐

Note. From *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, Grades K–8* (p. 151), by L. Calkins, 2015, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2015 by Heinemann. Reprinted with permission.

grounded in teachers' questions and concerns. To understand deeply, teachers must learn about, see, and experience successful learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices. (p. 83)

When you plan and advocate for professional development, then, advocate for time for teachers to develop shared images of good writing and good methods of teaching writing. Help them wrestle with ways to support a cross-grade progression of skill development. Above all, make it safe for them to teach and write and learn within collegial communities of support.

It's important to think big when you think about professional development. Investing in teachers will raise student achievement in writing, but more than this, it will create a lasting, powerful community of practice within your school (see Figure 7).

Figure 6
Opinion Writing Checklist: Grade 3

	Grade 3	NOT YET	STARTING TO	YES!
	Structure			
Overall	I told readers my opinion and ideas on a text or a topic and helped them understand my reasons.	☐	☐	☐
Lead	I wrote a beginning in which I not only set readers up to expect that this would be a piece of opinion writing, but also tried to hook them into caring about my opinion.	☐	☐	☐
Transitions	I connected my ideas and reasons with my examples using words such as *for example* and *because*. I connected one reason or example using words such as *also* and *another*.	☐	☐	☐
Ending	I worked on an ending, perhaps a thought or comment related to my opinion.	☐	☐	☐
Organization	I wrote several reasons or examples of why readers should agree with my opinion and wrote at least several sentences about each reason. I organized my information so that each part of my writing was mostly about one thing.	☐	☐	☐
	Development			
Elaboration	I not only named my reasons to support my opinion, but also wrote more about each one.	☐	☐	☐
Craft	I not only told readers to believe me, but also wrote in ways that got them thinking or feeling in certain ways.	☐	☐	☐
	Language Conventions			
Spelling	I used what I knew about word families and spelling rules to help me spell and edit. I got help from others to check my spelling and punctuation before I wrote my final draft.	☐	☐	☐
Punctuation	I punctuated dialogue correctly with commas and quotation marks. While writing, I put punctuation at the end of every sentence. I wrote in ways that helped readers read with expression, reading some parts quickly, some slowly, some parts in one sort of voice and others in another.	☐	☐	☐

Note. From *Writing Pathways: Performance Assessments and Learning Progressions, Grades K–8* (Digital Resources), by L. Calkins, 2015, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright 2015 by Heinemann. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 7
Kinds of Professional Development

- Institutes where teachers study particular aspects of literacy, such as writing instruction, reading instruction, and argumentation. These institutes are usually best led outside of the school year so teachers may focus deeply on their own learning.
- Site-based literacy coaches or lead teachers who will lead study groups and classroom lab sites where teachers may experiment, work on their own practice, and research responses to instruction.
- Staff developers from outside the building—from a university, district, or other professional, research-based organization. Often, bringing in a staff developer from outside a school allows for more objective professional conversation, assessment, and movement.
- Access to workshops and conferences for teachers and for administrators to be exposed to new research, professional resources, and potential colleagues.

Graves (2001) said that just as a good writing conference gives a student more energy for writing, good professional development should give teachers more energy for teaching. Teachers, like any other professionals, get tired. They don't get tired, though, when they get results.

Professional development will help teachers work together toward lasting changes in students' work, in their teaching, and in their own learning community. The most important thing about professional development is that it envelops the whole school in the beautiful and sustaining art of continuous improvement.

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