

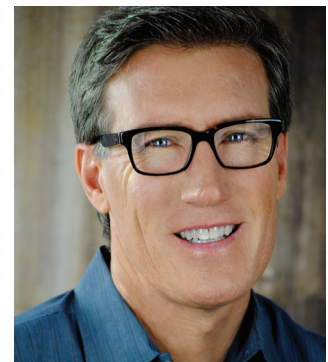
# New Perspectives in Building Readers and Writers

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Those of us who have been in the classroom a long time have noticed a marked fall-off in the reading and writing habits of our students. There is a lot of fake reading occurring, and the number of non-readers is on the rise. Writing skills have declined, and students today rarely take ownership of their writing. How do I come to these conclusions? Beyond my own thirty-plus years in the classroom, I have spoken to large groups of teachers from all fifty states—and in other countries—and wherever I go, I ask them the same question: “How many of you share my concern about our students’ lack of reading and writing fluency?” And wherever I go, teachers answer in almost unanimous agreement. Teachers know that their students are not reading and writing as much, or as well, as they should be.

The reasons behind the drop off in reading and writing are well-documented. We live in an age of “distraction addiction,” where technology competes for our students’ attention (Terkle). Many students are addicted to their smartphones, and these addictions are physiologically rewiring the brain in ways that favor instant gratification rather than valuing the long-term pleasures that derive from extensive reading and writing (Wolf). Wolf has documented that children who stop reading for pleasure often suffer from “word poverty,” and the effects are devastating: by age five children suffering from word poverty have heard 32 million less words than their counterparts. Words, as we know, are weapons and tools, and non-readers never develop the vocabularies foundational to living literate lives.

Given these concerns, what should drive our planning and instruction for young readers and writers? Ultimately, students should develop the reading and writing habits needed for success outside of school: either in college and/or in work. We know all of our students will not attend college, but it is our responsibility to prepare all students for the reading and writing expectations at the postsecondary level should they decide to attend later in life. What kind of student is ready to meet these demands? That’s the question *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* sought to answer. Developed jointly by the Council of College Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project (2011), the document describes, among other things, eight habits of mind that are critical for future success.



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These eight habits are ways of approaching learning that are both intellectual and practical and that will support students' success in a variety of fields and disciplines:

- *Curiosity*. The desire to know more about the world.
- *Openness*. The willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- *Engagement*. A sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- *Creativity*. The ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- *Persistence*. The ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
- *Responsibility*. The ability to take ownership of one's actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- *Flexibility*. The ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- *Metacognition*. The ability to reflect on one's own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

These essential habits of mind cannot be acquired without extensive reading and writing. This means that ELA teachers (and teachers in other subject matter courses) need to consider the four key elements essential to building literate readers and writers.

## KEY ELEMENT #1: VOLUME

Many secondary students are not reading and writing enough to deepen their literacy skills to the levels necessary to compete beyond high school. Many of these students are stuck in "4 x 4" classrooms, where they are guided through the reading of four big core works and assisted in writing four big papers over the course of the school year. This is simply not enough practice, especially for those students who have already fallen below grade level, as well as for those students who have become expert at fake reading.

The volume issue is also critical for college-bound students. Students making the transition from high school to college are often shocked by the increase in reading and writing demands. For example, it is not unusual for a student to be asked to complete 5,000 pages of reading and 90-100 polished essay pages in their first year of college (reDesign 2014). Students need to be in reading and writing "shape" if they are to readily meet the collegiate demands that await them.

Think in terms of this basketball analogy: the only way to become an excellent basketball player is by playing a lot of basketball. There is only one way to become better readers and writers—and that is by doing a lot of reading and writing.

Increasing reading volume occurs when students are provided with a wide range of interesting reading materials. In addition to novels, students should also have an opportunity to read the following:

Fiction  
Short non-fiction  
Short story  
Autobiographies  
Speeches  
Poetry  
Argument  
Magazine articles  
Newspaper articles  
Literary criticism  
Myths  
Memoir  
Graphic novels  
Photographs  
Audio performances  
Podcasts  
Videos

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These elements help students to experience an interesting and varied reading diet, an essential component in motivating young readers. Simply adding ten minutes of reading a day can have measurable positive effects on young readers. For example, if a student is only reading five minutes a day outside of school, adding ten minutes of reading inside of school increases that student's word exposure from 282,000 words to over 895,000 words a year (Beers and Probst).

*Increasing writing volume:* Langer and Appleby propose three critical reasons why our students should be writing more:

- *Writing helps students to draw on relevant knowledge and experience as preparation for new activities.* Often, having students write *before* they read deepens their comprehension. Before reading about the Holocaust, for example, having students reflect through writing what they know about concentration camps helps them to begin thinking in the direction of the upcoming reading. By “framing” the text through writing, students warm up for the reading at hand.
- *Writing helps students to consolidate and review ideas and experiences.* When reading extended difficult text, students’ comprehension increases when they take periodic breaks to capture their thinking via writing. When reading *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, students might stop occasionally to write about key lines or to make written connections between the text and the modern world. Doing so enables students to better follow the narrative and allows them to consider some of the “big” ideas on a deeper level.
- *Writing helps students to reformulate and extend knowledge.* Many times in class I have paused at an intense section of text and asked students what they thought, only to be confronted by a sea of blank faces. I don’t do that anymore. Instead, I now pause before we share our thinking and ask my students to explore their thoughts for a few minutes via writing in their Writers’ Notebooks. This always leads to richer discussion, as students often need to explore their thinking first in writing as a means of preparing themselves for deeper conversation. I have learned that writing is not simply a tool for having students repeat what they already know. Writing is often generative—that is, it *can create new thinking*. Allowing five minutes of writing reflection often turns dumbfounded students into thinkers. Sometimes students have to think before they can think, and writing short reflections enables them to *discover* what they think.

One way to address the writing volume issue is by providing students with a lot of quick writing as a way of helping them to discover their thinking. Additionally, students are stretched as writers when they are provided with numerous opportunities to plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish extensive written work in various genres, including narrative, argument, and informative/explanatory.

“writing is not simply a tool for having students repeat what they already know.”

Most importantly, the program stresses the importance of weaving reading and writing experiences together, so that students receive a richer integrated experience.

## KEY ELEMENT #2: CHOICE

Students are more actively engaged in reading and writing when they are given some choice.

The privileging of choice in reading is seen when students are offered the following reading choices: short stories, narrative nonfiction, explanatory nonfiction, a magazine article, public letter, poems, argument pieces, excerpts from novels, photographs, and narrative nonfiction. Having this many reading options gives teachers—and students—choice in reading the pieces they find most relevant. Additionally, units are often aligned with trade books to facilitate the reading of longer works, thus giving students choice when selecting books to read.

The privileging of choice is echoed in writing instruction when students are asked to respond to “open-ended” prompts. For example, students might read a short story and then be asked to produce an alternate ending. Or they may be asked to write narratives capturing experiences from their own lives. Or they may be asked to create a script for a podcast.

## KEY ELEMENT #3: MODELING

When George Lucas was making *Star Wars*, his special effects team was at a loss on how to realistically film the aerial dogfight scenes. They storyboarded them, but they found that simply drawing the scenes on paper did not help them to understand the pacing and the rhythm of the fights. Needing additional inspiration, they spliced together footage of real dogfights from World War II

documentaries and copied them. Many of the dogfight scenes shown in *Star Wars* are frame-by-frame replicas of actual war footage.

In teaching writing, we can learn a lot from the George Lucas anecdote. Today, when students sit down to write, they also benefit greatly when they have exemplary models to read, analyze, and emulate—models to guide them *as they are drafting*. If students are going to write an effective argument, for example, they need to internalize the elements found in effective arguments. They need to see how other writers do it. Via mentor texts and other scaffolds, young writers can be shown how to:

- organize an argument
- state a claim and support it
- gather evidence from multiple sources
- recognize and refute counterarguments
- develop specific skills (e.g. transitions between key points)
- revise to make the writing better
- edit to make the writing correct

These models should not come solely from the examples found outside the classroom; students also benefit greatly from studying models produced from the best writer in the classroom—the teacher. Teachers should be encouraged to write in front of their students, and to share their thinking as they work their way through the writing process.

Modeling is also key in helping to sharpen students' reading skills. There are three essential reading questions students should master in order to deepen their comprehension:

1. **What does the text say?** Students need to be able to answer this question before they can delve into the “deeper” reading questions. The best way to develop this skill is to have students practice summarizing, and this is best learned when the teacher models how to concisely reduce longer text.
2. **What does it not say?** This question is asking students to hone their inference skills. For example, after summarizing what they know about a character, students might be asked, “What do these details reveal about the character?”
3. **How is the text said?** In answering this question, students are taught to pay close attention to the moves and techniques made by the author. Specifically, what makes good writing “good”?

Students who recognize the moves good writers make begin to implement these moves in their own writing. This reading skill is best practiced through focused, close reading of short mentor passages.

## KEY ELEMENT #4: FEEDBACK

Young readers and writers benefit greatly from feedback generated by both formative assessments and from summative assessments:

**Formative assessments** can sometimes be better thought of as “informative” assessments—they are administered “mid-process” and help to inform the teacher as to what should be taught—or re-taught—next. In reading, for example, students might be assessed *as they read* to see at what level they are comprehending and interpreting the text. In writing, a teacher may check in on a specific feature before the final draft is due to see if students have acquired the skill.

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**Summative assessments** are “finish line” assessments, and help the teacher to understand the skills students have acquired. These assessments are best when they are “backward planned,” so that the instruction uses scaffolds to lead students to better performances. Students use their notes, knowledge, and skills generated within the unit to demonstrate mastery of skills.

Both types of feedback—formative and summative—are critical to the development of readers and writers. Teachers should use a wide range of valuable formative and summative assessment tools, both in print and/or online, that serve to deepen students' reading and writing skills.

## CONCLUSION

How do we make kids better readers and writers? By remaining cognizant of four key elements: 1) We pump up the volume of their reading and writing, 2) We build

choice into the curriculum, 3) We model the skills employed by excellent readers and writers, and 4) We provide meaningful and timely feedback while students are acquiring these skills.

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