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We Know How to Teach Writing

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Writing recently at *The Washington Post*, Jeffrey Selingo adds another example to the “[Why can’t students write?](#)” ^[3] genre, a genre, on which I’ve weighed in [a time](#) ^[4] or two myself. [\[1\]](#) ^[5]

The complaints about the quality of student writing are perennial, which says as much about the complainers as it does students.

For example, in 1878 Harvard professor Adams Sherman Hill said, “Everyone who has had much to do with the graduating classes of our best colleges has known men who could not write a letter describing their own commencements without making blunders which would disgrace a boy twelve years old.”

Whenever people like me, or Jeff Selingo, are tempted to condemn the abilities of the current generation, we would do well to remember a few truisms about writing:

1. Writing is hard.
2. Writing is a skill developed through deliberate practice that takes time and in reality never reaches an end point.
3. We often overestimate our own proficiency at writing, particularly in hindsight.

I am actually not worried so much about the writing abilities of students -- I see students write well all the time [\[2\]](#) ^[6] -- as I am concerned about the attitudes toward writing in school contexts that I perceive in first-year writing students. It’s not so much that students are poor writers as they aren’t prepared to do the kind of writing that will be demanded of them in college and beyond.

In his column Selingo mines the opinions of some of his former writing teachers for insights into how best to teach writing, and they give some good, sensible advice that, nonetheless, collectively suggests when it comes to approaches to teaching writing, we don’t know all that much, and we lack a consensus on approaches that truly work.

This is not true. In fact, I think [I\[3\]](#) ^[7] can generate a list of statements regarding the teaching of writing that the vast majority of those in the rhetoric-composition and writing instruction field will agree with:

1. The more reading and writing we do, the better.
2. Writing is best taught as a recursive process which includes (but isn’t necessarily

- limited to) pre-writing, drafting, revision and editing.[4] [8]
3. Writing should engage with the rhetorical situation: message, audience, purpose and genre.
 4. Reflection and metacognition are key ingredients to developing as a writer.
 5. Isolated exercises in grammar and mechanics that don't engage with the students' own writing are not helpful [9].
 6. Sentence diagramming is not an important skill for good writing.
 7. Peer response and collaboration are useful tools in helping developing writers
 8. Writers write best when engaging with subjects they are both interested in and knowledgeable about.[5] [10]
 9. Developing as a writer requires a mind-set where we seek to increase our expertise without ever declaring ourselves expert. (There is always more to learn.)[6] [11]
 10. Writing itself is an act of thinking that allows for discovery while writing. In other words, the ultimate message is constructed through the act of writing, as opposed to being fully formed prior to starting to write.
 11. Developing writers benefit from close one-on-one instruction from an experienced mentor.[7] [12]

But contra Selingo, or even an otherwise insightful recent *New York Times* piece [13] from Dana Goldstein on the state of K-12 writing construction, we know a lot about what works.

The National Council of Teachers of English has even codified these things in more comprehensive and detailed ways than I've offered here in their guidelines on Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing [14]. These principles reflect the consensus of many experienced teachers of writing, have been available for many years and are not exactly hidden from view.

Supposed tensions such as “Do we hold students accountable to sound mechanics?” or “Do we let students engage in self-expression?” are not actually tensions when students are required to work in a full rhetorical situation because they are forced to do what all writers must do -- make choices and wrestle with ideas that will be presented to interested audiences.

Do that enough times in enough different contexts and not only will you learn how to write, but when you're confronted with a type of writing you haven't done before, you'll be able to figure out how to write in that form or genre as well.

In reality, the problems of writing instruction have much less to do with our state of knowledge on how to teach writing, and much more with the systems in which students and teachers must learn and teach. Because of the increasing emphasis on standardized metrics as the route to “college and career” readiness, prior to college, students spend little time engaging with writing that demands they work inside a full rhetorical situation.

Many, if not most, K-12 teachers are also burdened with far too many students and other demands on their time and spirit to provide the kind of one-on-one instruction that is optimal for writing instruction. At the college level, a significant proportion of writing instructors are low-paid contingent faculty who must service far more students than recommended under conditions not conducive to quality engagement.

As Seth Kahn put it recently [15] here at *Inside Higher Ed*, at too many colleges, writing instruction is viewed as having “lower value” than other work, which perpetuates a cycle of limited resources and missing support.

This lack of support seems shortsighted given that, as Selingo shows, employers

consistently say they want to hire people with strong writing and communication skills.

The state of writing instruction says much more about what we value, or don't value, as the case may be, than what we know about teaching writing, which is a lot.

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[1] [16] Including at Selingo's [own newspaper](#) [17].

[2] [16] These [essays](#) [18] written in the aftermath of white supremacists marching in Charlottesville, Va., seem like pretty good writing to me.

[3] [16] I'd like to acknowledge that feedback from [Paul Thomas](#) [19], a professor at Furman University who writes frequently on writing and education pedagogy, and Susan "George" Schorn, senior program coordinator and curriculum specialist for writing at the University of Texas at Austin (who will be guest blogging for me next week), inform the list.

[4] [16] Ultimately, over time, every writer [1] will find their way to a unique process that may not resemble the neat and tidy one we tend to teach, but the point is to teach the process so students may develop their own without requiring them to stick to the model when it might be counterproductive.

[5] [16] This is one of the tricky parts about looking at student writing. Often, in academic contexts, students are still building the underlying knowledge that will allow them to write well. The difficulty of learning the specifics of disciplinary conventions are frequently underestimated by faculty. When declaring that a student "can't write," it's often a judgment on difficulty writing in a particular genre or field. They may be excellent writers in other contexts.

[6] [16] Applying the 10,000-hour rule for writing "mastery" is sort of silly and counterproductive. There is no ultimate mastery. The best you can hope for is achieving a kind of belief that each time out, no matter how much evidence to the contrary, you have a chance at winning the struggle to express something meaningful.

[7] [16] As a corollary I'd add that machines cannot evaluate or teach writing.

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[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/08/11/why-cant-college-graduates-write/?utm_term=.1a4b39a38b90

[4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/why-cant-my-new-employees-write>

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[9] <http://doughlashed.com/in-which-i-write-the-new-york-times/>

[10] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/we-know-how-teach-writing#_ftn5

[11] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/we-know-how-teach-writing#_ftn6

[12] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/we-know-how-teach-writing#_ftn7

[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/writing-education-grammar-students-children.html?_r=0

[14] <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teaching-writing>

[15] <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/08/07/colleges-should-hire-writing-instructors-right-experience->

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[16] https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/we-know-how-teach-writing#_ftnref

[17] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2017/05/08/we-are-teaching-kids-how-to-write-all-wrong-and-no-mr-miyagis-rote-lessons-wont-help-a-bit/?utm_term=.1a55ab77549b

[18] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/opinion/university-virginia-uva-protests-charlottesville.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region®ion=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region>

[19] <https://radicalsolarship.wordpress.com>

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