

Back to the Basics with Writing

by Julie Stannard

At the beginning of every school year teachers everywhere teach the rules and procedures for their classroom because they don't assume the kids know them. Teachers are very sensitive not to assume background knowledge for students in many content areas. Take for example writing. Should a teacher assume that students can write a complete sentence, and base the instruction on that assumption, later to find out that they were wrong?

I have certainly been guilty of this. As a second grade teacher, I assumed that my students were able to write complete sentences with correct punctuation. I felt frustrated when I watched my students write and their capitals, periods, and spaces were non-existent. Students were able to hear their errors when these sentences were read back to them. They would often say, "That doesn't make sense! I meant to say....." However, they were often unable to transfer their thinking clearly to the page. I have since come to realize, with help from writing workshops, that I could not assume prior knowledge and skills were present when it came to writing. I need to review what a sentence is, just like I review the rules and procedures of my classroom.

I now start my first week of school with a review called, "What is a Super Sentence?" I use community building activities to support a review of basic writing skills as students write descriptive sentences about themselves and their classmates. Below, I share an overview of this review process. The benefit of doing this is that my students are able to transition to formal writing instruction for the year with increased success and less frustration.

OPENING UP THE WRITER'S WORKSHOP: AN OVERVIEW OF ONE APPROACH

DAY 1: Where do capitals belong?

I start by passing out cards with capital letters to my students. Next, using the document camera, I present sentences such as "what is your favorite animal?" and ask my students to identify the problem with the sentences. Once students recognize that a capital is needed, the student with the capital "W" raises their hand and says, "The beginning of this sentence needs my capital "W" because it is the first word in a sentence." Using

the same structure, together we correct all the sample sentences and generalize a class rule for how to use capitals at the beginning of a sentence.

DAY 2: Punctuation

The routine I established on day 1 is revisited on day 2. My instructional focus is now the end of a sentence. I give students cards with periods, question marks and exclamation marks. On sentence strips I again write sentences, for example, I like playing outside, and I ask my students to identify the problem in the sentences. The student with the correct end punctuation mark card leads the class through the needed correction. The class session closes with a generalized rule that all sentences must end with a punctuation mark.

Day 3: Space between the words

On this day, I write sentences using sentence strips with no spaces between words. In very small groups, students cut the words apart and glue them onto another sentence strip using spaces. This activity leads to a discussion about the function of white space between words and the difficulty in reading and understanding a message with no spaces.

Day 4: Does that make sense?

The goal for day 4 is to encourage students to re-read their work and self-monitor. I purposely write sentences for my students that make no sense. For example, I went park to play. The class takes turns reading these sentences and determining if they make sense and then they write revisions where needed to improve clarity.

Day 5 Time to review our learning and move onto the next stage of our workshop

Students ask me questions about myself. Their job is to speak and also to listen. I explain that good writers are also good listeners because in order to reflect on the feedback, good listening is necessary. After I talk about myself for about 10 minutes, I use Guided Language Acquisition Design (G.L.A.D.) strategies. Partners are given two different color markers to write a "super sentence" about me. It can only be facts that were stated. When we come back as a team, I have another piece of paper where I write the heading of Ms. Stannard. I quickly explain



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what a topic sentence is for this activity with the understanding that additional instruction on topic sentence construction and identification would come later. For this activity, the topic sentence is given. "My teacher is Ms. Stannard." Partners present their sentence after checking if the capitals, spaces and punctuation is done. We next read aloud to make certain the sentence makes sense. At the conclusion of the lesson, the students have a firm understanding of the required elements of a sentence and as a bonus, I am able to

show how more than two sentences can turn into a paragraph. In order to assess their understanding, students are given a graphic organizer entitled, "All about me!" After completing the organizer, where 3 or more sentences are written, they share their sentences with the class.

Conclusion: What I learned can be a reminder that at the beginning of the year, when it is necessary to review expectations, it is also important to review foundational writing skills such as to what constitutes a sentence. Learning to

write well is developmental, just the same as learning skills in math or learning to decode. Assuming all students have a strong foundation in writing skills because of their age or grade, is setting them up to fail. Instead, taking the time to review or teach those foundational skills early in the school year, allows the remainder of the writer's workshop to go smoothly as students are able to build on those basic skills to improve their writing.



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