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When Writing Workshop Isn't Working

ANSWERS TO TEN TOUGH QUESTIONS
GRADES 2–5

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Foreword by Stephanie Harvey

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Dedicated to all of the students and teachers
who so generously gave their time
during the writing of this book.

for concerns: I typically put a circled *sen* next to students' names when they are in need of extra work with sentences, or *cap* when they need work with capitalization. Circling these concerns makes them stand out from the non-circled codes which indicate students' strengths. The coding system doesn't matter—what matters is finding ways to know your writers.

One powerful result of charting and coding as I walk around the room is a visual reminder to me of who I have missed. If I have nothing by a student's name for several days, then I need to meet with the student. The charting process helps me to balance my time with students, so that I don't unfairly give all of my attention to only a few students.

Even with this most informal type of assessment, I let students know what I am doing:

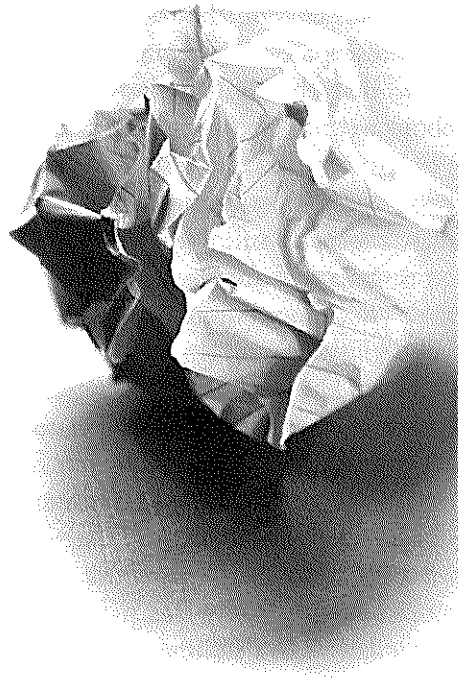
> "I take quick notes or mark on a piece of paper either what we have talked about or what I notice in your writing. If you ever have any questions about what I notice, ask me! I would be happy to tell you what I notice about the work you are doing."

Careful observation is not just a tool for good writers, but for good teachers also.

Final thoughts

Assessing writing, and especially giving writing a letter grade, can go against the grain of what we most strongly believe in a writing classroom. Writing is about taking risks, and growing—it is not supposed to be about a single score which cannot possibly communicate all the amazing work students have created in a semester or a year. But if we save student work, and if we make them part of the process, and if we create rubrics and criteria in their language, then students can become more clear about how they can continue to improve as writers. If a body of evidence is used to help determine what instructional steps to take, then it can be easier to determine final proficiency levels. I believe an essential component of a writing classroom must be the teacher as researcher. This is the type of teacher who uses purposeful assessments to guide instruction as the students continue on their journey to become

CHAPTER 9



How Can I Prepare Students for Standardized Testing Without Compromising My Writing Program?

We live in an age of high stakes testing. In my state of Colorado, students are tested in grades 3 through 10 on reading and writing, and in math and science at some of the grades. The state testing program has become the one indicator of student performance that is used to measure the gains students are expected to make each year. This high stakes testing has created a lot of stress for teachers, but I think of it as a double-edged sword.

The tests have created more awareness of the need for strong writing instruction. While I do not advocate the use of standardized tests as the only measure of student growth, I do feel that our dialogues about instruction and how to help students improve have become more focused since the advent of testing. I have al-

level of discussion about student work and how to help students of all abilities to grow has increased since the state tests came along. Now that the SAT includes a writing portion, the discussions about writing are becoming even more intense.

I worry that the tests have created the feeling that there are two types of writing: writing for a test, and then "real" writing. In other words, teachers often talk to me about how the requirement that students respond to a prompt on a test takes away their choice, and therefore does not reflect what writers really do. While I agree with this in part, I also feel that writers always have choices. The most talented writers in my fifth-grade class wrote beautifully on the standardized tests I had to give, and the writing did not look much different from the writing they produced for me on a regular basis. Students less comfortable with writing struggled on the tests, and their writing also did not differ from what they produced for me in class. Examining the released items scored by evaluators has proven to me that good writing is rewarded, even on standardized tests. The rubrics used for scoring are not the best scoring guides I have seen, but they do reward strong word choice, well-organized thoughts, and creativity. Yes, students must respond to a given prompt on standardized tests, but if they are grounded in the qualities of good writing, they are more likely to produce strong writing, even when responding to a prompt.

So, how can we help our students be prepared for standardized tests without compromising what we know about writing instruction?

Use writing to a prompt as a method of helping students improve their writing

I have generally been against the use of prompts during writing class. Students in my class might all be writing within a particular genre, but they had many choices about how to approach the genre as a writer. Although we might all be writing fictional stories, for example, the range of stories might vary from fantasy to historical fiction.

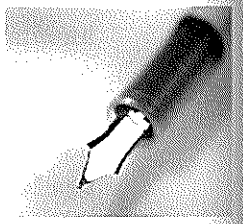
I have taken a number writing courses in the past three years, and I now feel a bit differently about how prompts can benefit writers. When I was part of the Denver Writing Project, we started every morning with some kind of prompted free write or quick-write: we were asked to write about a childhood memory, or we would choose a picture on a postcard to respond to. These were very open-ended writing activities, but they were prompted in the sense that we were given something to start from. I also have taken poetry and fiction writing workshops, and nearly every one of my classes began with some kind of idea to jump-start our writing. We were warming up, practicing our craft. Books on writing craft are full of ideas to get the words flowing, and I see these as a form of prompted writing. What I learned from taking these courses and going through exercises in writing books is that I often produced writing I was proud to share. One of the best pieces of writing I developed stemmed from a ten-minute quick-write during the Denver Writing Project. As participants in the workshop, we all received a postcard-sized photo one day. Mine featured a camel in the desert. I wrote a very short story about a woman who realized, while on the back of a camel in the Gobi desert, that she needed to leave her husband. I don't know where the idea came from, but the picture prompted me to write. This type of exercise, and others like it, has convinced me that introducing an idea for writing does not equate to lifeless products from students.

I see my role in helping students get ready for tests as being no different from what my instructors were trying to do for me in writing courses: the central goal is to improve writing. Exercise helps.

An example of a prompt assignmen focused on strong writing

Hank Wotli was concerned that his fourth graders were not writing with enough voice. He also wanted students to practice responding to a prompt. I began the lesson with two prompt-response examples from students. Both were well written, but one had far more specific details than the other. I frequently save student work from year to year and take student names off when doing this type of exercise. I am very careful to never share a bad example of student writing: I only share well-written examples, though I often look for more advanced pieces to compare with average pieces.

After asking students to read each piece, we made a list together about the qualities they liked in each piece. The students picked specific words, phrases, and sentences, and then told me what they noticed. I wrote this on the chalkboard:



Good writers

1. Write using their senses (seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling)
2. Use similes
3. Use strong words that not everyone would think of
4. Use good verbs

For each one of the items, students were able to identify one or more examples in the very strong piece, and a few examples in the average piece. I asked them to add one detail to the average piece, using the criteria they developed. I told them:

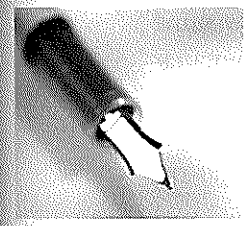
> "Since we know what good writing looks like, find one place where we can make one of the pieces better. Use one of the techniques we discussed, and when we share, identify what you did as a good writer to make the piece even better."

This part of the lesson only took a few minutes. I allowed students to work in pairs, and I left some examples of strong verbs, similes, and sensory writing on the chalkboard as a reference.

It was now time to write original pieces. I asked students to write about their favorite food using some of the techniques they had listed on the board. I wanted them to keep these techniques in mind consciously *while they were writing*. As a rehearsal, I asked them to join a partner, and while talking about a favorite food, to purposely use the strategies listed on the board. Each partner was given thirty seconds to talk about a favorite food, and then I asked several students to share what technique they had used in their verbal rehearsal. I pointed out examples of voice as students shared aloud. I defined voice as coming up with a way of saying or writing something that only you might think about. This verbal rehearsal allowed me to determine if my ELL students would struggle. I let them know they could use their native language if it was easier, but I also monitored the ELL students' rehearsal to see if they had trouble coming up with enough words. As the writing begins, I always monitor the progress of all the writers in the room, watching to see if anyone needs some words written on the board, or more verbal rehearsal prior to actually writing.

As students finished their writing, I asked them to make a checklist numbered 1 through 4 on the side of the page. The numbers refer to the qualities of good writing they developed while reading writing from other students. Each quality is assigned a number, and I asked students to put a check mark by each item for which they have a strong example. If they couldn't mark each item, then I encouraged them to go back and add that quality to their writing.

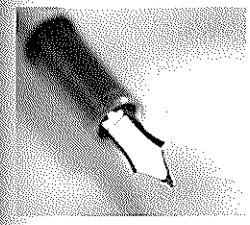
Katie checked off all four items from the list on the board, and then shared her piece with the class:



When my mom orders fried rice, I feel very enthusiastic. Finally, the juicy, steamy fried rice. I race to the door like a cheetah at its fastest. I spring to them and, snatch the fried rice, and start inhaling the rice. I could eat it morning, afternoon, and night, even for snacks if I could. After one day of Chinese, there's always tomorrow.

When Katie shared her piece aloud, she was able to point out her examples of strong writing, making it very clear to us all that she knew the qualities of well-crafted text.

Chelsea wrote about chicken, and also felt that she included the qualities of good writing in her piece:



I love chicken. If it was up to me, I would eat chicken every day. When my grandma buys KFC I race my sister because I can smell that chicken. Then I sit down to gobble down tender, juicy, spicy chicken. I put honey on my biscuits and gravy on my potatoes. And I grub. It's so good, I feel like I'm in heavenly heaven. I was the last person at the table scarfing down the chicken. It was the bomb!

Chelsea was also able to discuss with the class her use of strong writing, and I could used examples from both students' writing to talk about how they used voice to write well. Each piece is clearly written by someone who is enthusiastic about the food she loves, and the voice of each student comes through loud and clear.

This is an example of a lesson based on a prompt. Students were asked to write about a food they loved for about ten minutes at the end of the lesson. But because I framed our discussion around the qualities of strong writing, I feel I was helping each student to become a better writer. Good writers think about strong verbs, and word choices not everyone would think of. Writers try to find a place to add sensory details, and they use similes when appropriate. These qualities of writing appear in the rubric that students' work will be measured against, and these qualities also appear in the state of Colorado Language Arts Standards, which align closely with the national standards. But the qualities transcend tests, rubrics, and standards, for these same traits exist in all good writing, whether it appears in stories, magazines, newspapers, or novels. Whether writing to a prompt or writing from passion and choice, student writing should reflect these qualities.

Keeping the needs of the students in mind

The lesson described above grew from a need identified by a teacher in a class: students were not writing with enough voice. I used the prompted writing examples of voice because the teacher also wanted to focus on helping students to become better at writing to prompts. The whole lesson took approximately one hour, and by the end, all students had examples of strong writing they could share based on criteria they developed. As soon as a few students shared, it became clear that choice is inherent in any writing, even prompts: very few students chose the same food to write about, and all of them used their own word choices, and their own voices, to write about a food they loved.

I do not advocate using prompts as a focus for writing instruction. I believe that students should be given choice, and that we should talk with our students about their goals as writers. But I do believe that with the methods described above we can keep our instructional focus for writing on solid, process-oriented ground by not completely separating writing on a test from what we know about good writing.

The issue of time

Good writing can take a lot of time, and a lot of revising, and this is where the testing issue most goes against what I believe about writing instruction. Students are expected to create a well-written piece in a relatively short time on standardized tests. If students are stuck for long, they won't finish, and the resulting scores will not reflect their abilities as writers.

I think there are many strategies for helping students through the time limitations. In the lesson mentioned above, students first examined writing, identified qualities they liked, tried out some of the things good writers do on a piece that was already written, verbally rehearsed their own writing, wrote, and then shared. The writing part took only about ten minutes. Not everyone produced a full paragraph, but the majority of the class produced about half a page of well-written expository text. This reminds me of the prompt exercises I mentioned earlier: in many writing workshops and classes I have taken, the class begins with a ten-minute quickwrite. I didn't always feel that I produced a strong piece of writing during these exercises, but when I did, I was pleasantly surprised that I produced anything at all worth sharing in only ten minutes. These exercises were often followed with a quick revision idea, and we were given another few minutes to examine our writing and improve it based on a revision tool. So in twelve minutes, I could produce something worth sharing. If this built my confidence as an adult, then I think it can also build the confidence of students.

Writing practice exercises lasting for ten minutes can help students build confidence. They aren't stuck for topics if we give them an idea to write about, and if they are able to produce something they want to share in this short amount of time, then they start to believe they can write. I have heard many professional writers speak about their process, and they often talk about how they may labor over several sentences in a story, but at other times,

the writing just "happens." It is the practice of writing that all of these writers mention. Students can have good writing "happen" if we provide opportunities for this best of moments, when the right word just comes to mind.

At the end of Katie's piece about Chinese food above, she writes, "After one day of Chinese, there's always tomorrow." I praised her for coming up with such an interesting concluding statement for her piece. When I asked her how she thought of it, she said, "I don't know—it just popped in my head." It was not the prompt that created this situation, but rather our discussion about the writing. In other words, we do not have to rely on prompts to create moments of revelation for our students, but if we use even standardized test practice as an opportunity to discuss what writers do, then the students will become more aware of their own writing process.

Prompt writing in the primary grades

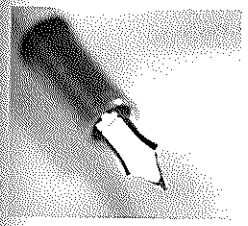
In Colorado, third grade is the first year for standardized writing tests. This causes much anxiety for third-grade teachers, and the stress has manifested itself in second grade as well. Primary teachers want to support their colleagues, so they often decide to prepare students for what is to come by practicing prompts.

I have worked with teachers who make practice in prompt writing part of their writing classrooms, by using it as just another way of helping students become better writers. I worked with Karen Sundling's class at Antelope Ridge, and she wanted to see how students would respond to practicing a prompt with me.

I avoided calling our work "test practice," and I grounded our discussion of what we were about to do in terms of what writers do: they come up with ideas, and they think of how to write them, and then they use the best possible words while they write.

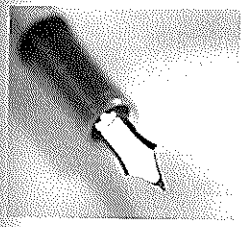
I followed a very similar format to the lesson described earlier: I had saved some writing second graders produced, which described their bedrooms and how they would change them if they could. We examined two pieces, and decided together that the stronger of the two pieces had words that made pictures in our minds, gave the reader details, and used similes. I asked them to picture their rooms in their minds, and then to think about what they wanted to change in their rooms. They rehe

first, I modeled my own thinking and writing for a few r
and then they wrote. We allowed about fifteen minutes, w
built in for those who wanted to draw their rooms prior to
Students were ready to write by the time their pencils hit t
and many of them produced strong writing within the tim
An excerpt from Shahbaaz's piece demonstrates his unders
of how to add specific details. His room included the fo
features:



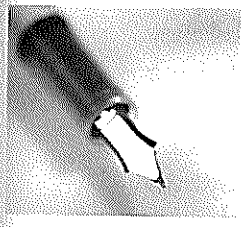
A pleasant night light, a life-saving smoke alarm,
chair that smells as if someone put perfume on it
to read for a good night's sleep.

As is typical in some classrooms when simi
mentioned, some students used multiple simil
short piece. Brooke is doing the job of a writer—she is pra
her craft—in the following excerpt about her room:



My bedroom is as purple as grapes! I have a s
pillow as soft as velvet! I have a bunk bed as w
snow!

These students explored an idea in the conte
writer's workshop: though they were given an i
write about, the lesson began with a discussion about what
do to make readers want to know more. Then, after drafting
ideas aloud, and drawing, if needed, to visualize prior to w
students worked on their pieces. They each included
unique to them, and in some cases their personalities
through, loud and clear. Katie had this to say about her
bedroom:



I wish I had a Spongebob TV with a Spongebob r
control and a little couch. I also wish that my
wasn't sooo messy. It would be a lot cleaner and fu
ways wish that would happen. Soon. Really soon.
dooper soon!

Students enjoyed sharing these pieces with their class

goals in this particular lesson was to see how well students would respond to an idea they were asked to write about, we followed a process approach to instruction, and we were pleased with the results.

The importance of modeling

In addition to asking students to periodically practice prompted writing to get ready for testing situations, I often model writing to a prompt. I ask them to give me a topic, and then I spend five or ten minutes writing, recording my thoughts on the overhead or on chart paper while thinking aloud. It is important to think aloud during this process because then students can hear what I think as a writer. I keep a list of qualities of good writing nearby, so that they can see that I refer to them often. It is always a risk to write in front of students, but I can't imagine not doing it now that I model for them so often. If we are going to model good reading, and good math work, we must also model good writing. I often do not produce my best writing when I model for students without advance warning, but I am getting better, and I always think about what makes writing strong as I write. The fact that I am getting better at writing on demand in front of students after a lot of practice proves to me again that practice is what will help students the most as they get ready for testing.

Test practice: How often?

When I last taught fifth grade, I didn't want to burn students out on practicing for tests, so I made a calendar in my plan book and marked about ten different days when I would complete a prompted activity similar to the one described earlier in this chapter. When I asked students to practice by writing to a prompt, I planned my instruction based on their needs. So, if I noticed they were not using strong verbs, I would find some student writing with strong verbs, examine it, and then model my own writing process to a prompt that would lend itself to strong verb choices. I would ask students to help me identify the strong verbs in my own writing, or to help me to change weaker verbs to stronger verbs. After a verbal rehearsal, students would complete their own writing. By spreading this practice out during the year, students didn't get burned out, and they also connected it to their own writing because I was working on a craft I noticed they needed to improve. The writing was not divorced from what we were already doing in class.

One of the most successful techniques I have used to help students monitor their own progress in writing was given to me by a master teacher named Steve Johnson. After students respond to a prompt, and after they have had a chance to determine how well they performed based on criteria we have created as a class, I collect each student's writing and assign it a random number. I don't want students to be able to identify who has created the piece of writing, so I ask them to leave their names off, and I put a number on it. Then, I hand out papers to groups of four students, making sure that each group has no student papers from group members. Each group member is given four sticky notes, and they record on the note which qualities from the criteria that the class established are found in the writing pieces. Only positive comments are allowed on each paper. I then ask the groups to choose one paper they would like to share aloud with the class as an example of a piece that uses many or all of the qualities of good writing. We end this part of the lesson by sharing aloud one paper from each grouping. This process creates ownership for students: they are determining what works in each piece, and they know they will get their own paper back with specific qualities of good writing recorded on sticky notes. The process is positive: everyone is praised, and the pieces shared aloud are written by fellow classmates, which reinforces my belief that the best models of writing can come from students themselves. The only problem I have had with this approach has stemmed from the fact that some students do not write legibly. If their writing cannot be read due to handwriting, I normally take the paper out of the initial stacks, and talk with the student about it. If students complain that they cannot read an illegible paper, then it has sometimes motivated the student who produced the paper to be more careful about writing.

Students may feel they are left out of this process if their paper is not shared aloud by the group. There are a few ways I have used to honor each piece in the class. One way is to ask the students in the group to read one or two sentences of strong writing from every paper. Then, I collect the papers and read a few aloud the next day in full, so they can hear how a piece flows. I can also do the

opposite: I can ask groups to share a completed piece, and then I can lift one or two sentences from each piece that was not shared and bring those to class the next day as further examples of good writing.

When students are encouraged to identify strong writing in their classmates' papers, it creates an environment where writers are mining each other's work for elements to praise rather than pick apart. I feel very strongly that students can help each other become better writers, but in order to build the trust of everyone in the class, I often ask them to focus only on the positive examples of strong writing they notice in each other's pieces.

Grammar instruction

I include the discussion of grammar in the larger question of testing because a large portion of a student's writing score on the state assessment in Colorado is based on knowledge of grammar. The issue of grammar is also important to discuss in the context of the writing-process classroom because it is something we all worry about, even when we have the best of intentions. Misspellings, capitalization errors, and poor sentence structure often pop out when we read student writing, overwhelming our ability to actually "see" the content. Teachers notice errors in student work, and they become frustrated because they have worked with students on the conventions of language. They feel that students should transfer this knowledge regularly to their writing.

I, too, used to be very frustrated with my students when they would make errors in their writing. I would complete a two-week unit on the sentence, only to find my fifth graders still writing in fragments and run-ons. Is it possible to have the best of both worlds? Can we hold students accountable for conventions, help them get ready for grammar questions on mandated tests, and still nourish their creativity in a process-oriented classroom?

This is a complicated issue. There are no simple solutions, but it has been proven through research such as Constance Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context* that grammar exercises out of context do not improve student writing. Since this is true, I think the place to start is with each student. We must try to find a way to consider the individual needs of the students without feeling the need to create dozens of individualized plans. The process of helping students with conventions must be doable, or we will just remain frustrated.

Developing a set realistic grammar mechanics expectations for y students

When I look at student writing to develop ideas for a direction for instruction in conventions, I keep a few basic questions in mind:

Do the students in general have a sense of sentence structure?
Do they have a command of punctuation and capitalization rules?
If there are spelling errors, can I still read the words they were trying to spell?

For me, these questions create a hierarchy. I concern myself first with sentences, and then capitalization/punctuation, and finally with spelling. When I do this, it allows me to not panic about everything at once. My first step when I focus on conventions is to look at sentences. If I notice that a number of students are having difficulty producing correct sentences, then I hand back the student work, and I first praise them for the work they have done. I generally will lift some strong writing from the class and make copies for everyone to examine. I want to preface any discussion about conventions with a focus on good writing. By reading in advance for strong writing, I can create a handout with examples from the class to prove to them that they are writers. Once I praise and reinforce the strong content from the class, I am ready to talk about conventions.

After the students have their papers back, I hand out colored pens or pencils. I generally use blue, green, or purple—red has too much of a negative connotation. I then ask students to check for sentence and capitalization errors in their pieces:

"Find your sentences by marking periods"
and
"Find the places where you need to add capital letters."

Notice that working on sentences, which is first in my hierarchy of conventions, also includes a focus on capitalization and punctuation. I often model a quick correction of a sentence I have written on the overhead or chalkboard to demonstrate that I do not want students to erase. If students do not have errors, then I ask them to write, "No Errors" at the top of the page in color. I generally allow about five minutes for this. My purpose is to accurately inform my instruction. If even a few students can find their sentence errors in this five-minute time frame, then I know these students do not need more direct instruction in sentence structure: they just need a reminder. The students who are not able to identify their errors, or who change their sentences incorrectly, will become a group I can instruct further. Depending on the size of this group, I can work with them as part of my guided instruction in the course of the day.

I have abandoned the idea of using sentence worksheets because I was not seeing direct translation into student writing. If I can determine exactly who needs more instruction in sentence construction by using the method above, then I can pull this group of students and go through some of their writing, sentence by sentence, individually, to understand what students are thinking. Sometimes the problem of incorrect sentences is easy to solve, and sometimes it isn't. Requiring everyone in a class to complete conventions worksheets makes no sense when everyone does not have the same difficulties. But asking them to find their errors and correct them before I look at the papers again separates my class into three groups: those who consistently write correctly, those who need reminders, and those who need some more direct instruction.

As a rule, I quietly remind all students of sentence structure, capitalization, and punctuation as I walk around the room examining student work. I try to encourage students to think a bit about conventions as they write so that they do not have to go back and fix too many things at the end of a page. Obviously, I differentiate this depending on the needs of the students, but I want to make sure that as many things are correct as possible before I read the work.

I use the same technique mentioned above for capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. I hand out colored pens or pencils after I have read the work, I quickly model a correction in my own writing, and then I ask the students to spend a few minutes trying to identify and correct their own errors. If they think they have a spelling error, but are not able to correct it, I ask them to circle the word they believe they have misspelled. When I do this often enough, and look for patterns of error, I can find teaching points for those students who have a hard time with spelling. Again, I can differentiate for these students: while they are writing, if they know they cannot spell a word, I ask them to approximate the spelling, and to move on with their writing, but to mark that line with a quick check mark so that they remember to go back and check their spelling at the end of the writing time. This reinforcement of expecting students to become independent editors eventually helps most of my students improve in their skills. These ideas are not uniquely my own: I have worked with teachers who have used similar ideas with their classes, with students of varying needs. And, I have seen these same students greatly improve in the content, style, and conventions of their writing. I have also seen these same students approach grammar sections on state tests with more confidence. In a process-oriented classroom, it does not need to be either–or: we help students to be more careful writers even as we encourage them to be more passionate about what they are writing.

Testing and ELL students

I have used the techniques mentioned above in classrooms with ELL students. I always leave an example of some good writing on the chalkboard or chart paper to look at as a model, or I may even help an ELL student get started by helping with the first few sentences. The models used to produce the criteria list help students to understand what type of writing we are discussing. I include visual cues to represent the qualities of the good writing. For example, if sensory details are mentioned, then I sketch an eye for "seeing details" and an ear for "hearing details." If strong verbs are mentioned as a quality of good writing, then I ask students to act out the verbs, so that everyone can make a clear picture of what the verb actually means.

The verbal rehearsal is a key element in practicing for writing to a prompt. I encourage the ELL students who have mastered some English to be part of the verbal rehearsal, because when a

partner practices a prompt out loud, it can help the ELL students continue to acquire more language. If the ELL students have enough language to say only some of the words they want to say in English, but they are literate in their own language and can write to the prompt, then I encourage them to write in their native language. If they are limited in English, and are not quite clear on the purpose for writing outlined in the prompt, then I still try to get them to produce something on the page: a picture of a favorite food, for example, or a drawing of a place they have visited. With enough picture cues and a list of vocabulary left on the board, I can normally help all ELL students produce some writing that creates meaning. I insist they remain with the group and stay with the process, because then as they acquire more language they will already have mastered the routines of the writing classroom.

The ideas for grammar in context mentioned above also work well with ELL students. ELL students are more likely to make errors in subject-verb agreement than native-English-speaking students, and they are more likely to use words that do not quite carry the exact meaning they are trying to convey. But if I look carefully at their writing, and make my decisions for instruction based on who needs reminders and who needs direct intervention, I find myself being more successful with all students. Sentence structures in English are quite complicated when compared with many other languages, but the more that ELL students are exposed to the language, and the more they try it out, both verbally and in writing, the better chance they have of becoming successful.

When I first started working with ELL students and assumed writing was too complex for them, I asked them to work on the computer, or some fill-in-the-blank worksheets instead. But my expectations were not high enough. Many master teachers I have observed since my first days of working with ELL students have convinced me that it is important that all students take part in the classroom rituals for each subject. When all students are included, I am sending a strong message about the importance of creating a learning community.

Final thoughts

Do we have to abandon best practices in writing instruction when testing time nears? I don't believe we do. Good writing is good writing, and we can help our students be ready for anything by building their confidence as writers. If choice and tools for improvement are at the core of an approach to writing instruction, I believe our students can take a test with confidence. Even when writing to a required test prompt, students should feel empowered because they can make choices about specifics to include, and they can choose the tools they will use as they craft their responses. As teachers, we have no control over the uses of testing information, or the fact that it is often just one test that measures a school district's progress. But we do have control over how we use our instructional time. Our goal should be to help students become the best writers they can be, so that when they are met with any writing challenge, they can approach it with confidence.