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The lessons in *The Good Writer's Kit* incorporate the best of what I know about how students learn and what educational approaches work.

I first became interested in what the research had to say about teaching writing back in the early 80s. It has been an enduring passion, and I have remained a part of the ongoing professional discussion through reading in the educational journals, through a series of intensive and extensive seminars and workshops, and through my own classroom experience and creative cooperation with fellow teachers.

Below are 9 Key Principles borne out repeatedly by research and practice. These principles inform my teaching and are reflected in the lessons and teaching approaches throughout *The Good Writer's Kit*. Relying on proven principles such as these gives us, as teachers, a solid foundation and sound framework within which we can exercise our unique creativity and flexibility.

I have tried to give examples of how each principle is reflected in the *The Good Writer's Kit*. All the works cited are listed in the bibliography at the end of this article.

Nine Key Principles For Teaching Writing

by Gretchen Bernabei

- 1 For a concept to truly “stick,” students must see a connection to their everyday lives.
- 2 Whatever students can do with a little help now, they will be able to do independently soon.

Lev Vygotsky, a very influential thinker whose works have shaped a lot of my thinking, says that life experiences (for example, writing directions to your house) are difficult for students to analyze but are, by definition, already part of their lives. Many academic and scientific concepts, on the other hand, are relatively easy for students to analyze, but are very difficult for students to connect to their lives.

As teachers, perhaps our greatest and most crucial challenge is to find and demonstrate the relevancy of school lessons to our students' lives. Judith Langer's *Guidelines*, the *Writing Next* report, and many other sources articulate the critical need of making these connections.

Throughout *The Good Writer's Kit* we make a deliberate effort to move back and forth between life experience and writing concepts, showing how the concepts are really part of the complex but familiar spectrum of human communication. In *The Good Writer's Guide*, each section opens with a “What's it like?” feature that draws a parallel between the academic concept in question and something familiar in the student's life.

If each student has some sets of skills that he or she cannot even begin to do (“I can't” stage), some that he or she can do with help (“almost” stage), and some that he or she can do well (“I got it” stage), then the teacher's role may be seen as helping the student move from one stage to the next.

According to Vygotsky, the most effective use of instructional time occurs when teachers challenge students to work just beyond their comfort levels—this is what Vygotsky calls the “zone of proximal development” or ZPD.

The interactive lesson presentations in *The Good Writer's Kit* will allow the observant teacher to gauge fairly precisely how far each student's comfort zone extends. That will help stretch students into their ZPD. And this can happen for all students both simultaneously and individually, allowing for differentiation among students of varying abilities and obstacles. There is also plenty of material to use as guided and independent practice to help push students to the “I got it” stage.

3 Learning to ask questions can be more important than learning to answer them.

Judith Langer’s guidelines emphasize the value of what she calls “generative thinking”—the posing of questions or inquiries without a preconceived answer—over the kind of thinking that is most often tested in multiple-choice methods: learning the answer to a question. Classrooms that foster generative thinking by students are more effective than classrooms in which teachers ask and students answer.

Whenever feasible, the teaching approach in *The Good Writer’s Kit* is to foster student inquiry and exploration of possibilities—not “This is how it is,” but “What would happen if . . . ?” and “How about . . . ?”

4 Students do their best work when they have some freedom and choice.

I first came across the idea of self-selected topics in Nancie Atwell’s workshop description in *In the Middle*. I remember feeling awed by the stark contrast between the traditional teacher-centered classroom and Atwell’s student-centered one, where students moved freely between tasks, empowered and engaged. There’s a related, wonderful, research-based discussion of the need for students to explore ideas and reflect in Judith Langer’s book as well.

So how does a teacher incorporate this student-centeredness into a classroom? It’s difficult, scary, and unrealistic to change completely overnight. It may be more manageable to look at ways to incorporate freedom and choice within individual writing assignments.

The Good Writer’s Kit avoids assigning students closed-ended tasks, favoring instead strategies more like the ones real writers use: uncovering their own topics, deciding on organizational patterns, and then trying out the writing on listeners. There are recurring practices of student choice, freedom to experiment, and evaluation of the results.

5 Outer dialogues serve students as rehearsal for inner speech.

Back to Vygotsky. This is one of the most useful lessons I get from his work. Intuitive teachers know that hearing something said out loud helps you remember it. Vygotsky helps us understand how this works. The upshot is that in order to foster a new thought process, we can teach it first as a two-voiced dialogue, a conversation between two people. Once this is repeated enough for students to internalize it, they begin “hearing it in their heads.” Their imaginary voice will have been activated; speech will have turned to thought.

This concept can be of great help in writing class. If students are having difficulty writing more than a sentence or two when it’s time to write an extended piece, it could be because they are seeing—or hearing—writing as a monologue: one extended and uninterrupted speech. In real life, conversations are much more frequent than monologues. People who write fluently often report carrying on a sort of conversation as they write. How could that be, you ask? They imagine someone asking a question and someone else answering. (They do?) Yep. (You’re joking.) Seriously.

The Good Writer’s Guide promotes this inner dialogue often. In Chapter 3, for example, there’s a lesson for students who have trouble writing enough. They are encouraged to “have an argument” with an imaginary rival. If you physically act this out with a student, the student hears the dialogue. With repetition, this technique gets internalized and becomes part of the student’s thought process. Year after year, I’ve seen this seemingly silly technique help students turn sketchy writing into fully elaborated compositions.

6 In order for students’ writing to improve, students must spend time writing.

This is one of the stated foundation beliefs of most writing projects and programs. Yet research is still showing that students are not spending enough time engaged in writing activities as noted by the National Writing Project and the *Writing Next* report. I had thought that, as a nation, we were improving in this area—and maybe we are at least more aware of the need for increased writing. But the research compiled in *Writing Next* indicates otherwise.

Students need to be allowed time to write in class, in addition to time for learning the craft of writing, and for feedback or reflection about their writing. Managing class time to get the writing in is a real trick, though, and too often we hear ourselves say, “I’m going to have to cut our writing time short today . . .” With that in mind, it’s helpful to design projects and writing pieces to span several class periods, so that there is plenty of time for scrutiny of models, for dreaming up topics, for working on focused craft ideas, and for gathering thoughtful feedback from listeners.

Throughout *The Good Writer’s Kit* you will find activities that allow teachers to engage students every single day in some kind of writing. In each chapter, professional writers talk about their own writing processes, and each of these writers also discusses the need for practice.

7 Students don’t learn grammar when it’s taught in isolation. It’s more effective to teach grammar within the context of writing.

I learned this at the first serious staff development I ever attended, in the early 80’s. I had always suspected that teaching traditional grammar was more like teaching math than like teaching writing, but getting familiar with the research helped me understand why and what to do about it.

The *Writing Next* report contains the research findings, as does Constance Weaver’s book *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Weaver retraces the entire grammar debate, incorporating the research and bolstering teachers’ need for grammar instruction somewhere. How do we weave grammar instruction into writing instruction? Most broadly, by treating it as one of the many aspects of communication, which either serves or hinders it.

In *The Good Writer’s Guide*, grammar activities typically center around manipulating grammatical constructions and sentence parts for effect, both in Chapter 2 within the traits of good writing, and in Chapter 3. A concise and down-to-earth handbook of grammar and style is included as an appendix.

8 Student writing improves when students receive explicit instruction, including strategies for strengthening their weaknesses.

Not surprisingly, many studies, including *Writing Next*, document the fact that students—especially struggling students—improve when they receive explicit, targeted instruction.

Chapter 3 of *The Good Writer’s Guide* is filled with classroom-tested strategies for helping students solve their writing woes. These are part of a growing body of innovative strategies—mostly invented and shared by classroom teachers—that target a specific writing problem or deficiency. I’ve seen these strategies, used in response to students’ particular strengths and weaknesses, absolutely change the performance—and attitude—of struggling writers accustomed to failure.

9 Student writing improves most when students work collaboratively with others.

Real talk is to someone else. Writing is the same way. Writers need readers, or why bother? In the traditional classroom, the only reader is the teacher. Things work much better and much more naturally when the teacher’s role is more like that of an agent, helping to put writers in touch with their readers, putting life into the experience of talking on paper for others.

Every writer has experienced this “life,” and its benefits are reflected in the research. Both Judith Langer and *Writing Next* document rigorous studies showing the effectiveness of collaboration. In his *Book of Learning and Forgetting*, Frank Smith details why students learn so much faster from other students than from teachers.

But there’s a craft to weaving in this collaboration during the writing process. The importance of explicit instruction mentioned above extends to all of the steps of the process. Students must be explicitly taught how to give feedback, and Chapter 1 of *The Good Writer’s Guide* presents the foundation principles and practices of this essential part of the writing process.

There are also many partner and group writing activities, as well as peer-response activities, throughout *The Good Writer’s Kit*. These are typically broken down into short, concrete tasks so that students can build their collaboration and response skills.