Why Write?: A Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Research Basis for *Writers Express*

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Introduction

Writers Express opens with the question: *Why write?* Not an insignificant way to begin a writing handbook for young students in the 21st century: They are so busy. Because the answer to this question—varied as the answers must be—is as profound as the question itself, the *Handbook* authors knew the only way to proceed would be to face the question head on. And so they do, but simply. They begin with a story about a pre-teen and her friends finding an old fishing boat. It's summer, so the kids have some time on their hands.

As friends join the fun, they begin telling each other things they know about boats and ships and oceans. Stories and interesting information spill from them, and eventually they write a play that their buddies and family will see. (This sounds so Greek, doesn't it?) But then, after the story, the authors hit the "profound" pedal, albeit with a *lite* touch:

> Writing is a great way to express what you feel or imagine and
> what you learn. That's why people write stories, essays, and
> reports, and that's why we've created W*riters Express* for you.

The leap from *having* feelings, imaginative thoughts, and ruminations about new learning to writing stories, essays, and research reports, however, mystifies many a student. And so, though the authors have not mentioned it yet, students will find out that the very act of writing, informally and often, will buttress their success with every recognized writing form they attempt. This is because, according to the award-winning essayist and poet, Marie Ponsot, "By its very physicality, writing brings us as close as we ever come to handling our ideas" (Deen and Ponsot).

Students will discover that writing, given all its many uses and shapes, works on their behalf as an *intellectual* force—in truth, a *demystifying* force: Writing nudges from the inside out, where ideas are discovered and nurtured informally, and where thoughts might eventually find a more formal home. It nudges from the outside in, too, where ideas are transmitted across time and cultures through reading, and perhaps incorporated into classical writing forms and the ever-evolving literary forms we have today. The 21st century is an exciting time for young writers, thinkers, and learners, and it is the authors' of *Writers Express* conviction that the *Handbook* will help students capture their intellectual and creative energies and will put them to use in personally meaningful ways.

The Organization of Why Write?: A Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Research Basis for *Writers Express*

The intention of this white paper is to offer administrators, teachers and parents a review of research and established best-practices that form the basis of the 2016 *Handbook* edition. The *Handbook* is divided into four major sections—"The Process of Writing," "The Forms of Writing," "The Tools of Learning," and a "Proofreader's Guide." *Why Write?* is divided accordingly. Commentary within the first three sections occurs in two parts, the first detailing content; the second, the content's practical as well as its theoretical and empirical research basis. Because the proofreader's guide serves as a resource, where students will find answers to questions about punctuation, mechanics, spelling, usage and grammar, this section only details its content and a practical basis for that content.

While a short white paper cannot possibly cover the totality of what is suggested in *Writers Express*, it is hoped the reader will have a better understanding of the grounds upon which the specific instructional strategies and practical advice are offered.

Section One: The Process of Writing

The Content

The Process of Writing is divided into three instructional sub-sections: "Getting Started," "Using the Writing Process" and "Learning Writing Skills."

"Getting Started" begins with *A Basic Writing Guide*, a chapter that answers questions eager students ask, such as, *"What can I write about?" or "How do I get started?"* This is followed by *Understanding the Writing Process*, which outlines the basic steps often followed in composing, from typical prewriting activities—such as selecting topics, collecting information, focusing, and getting organized, to writing, revising, editing, and publishing—with an emphasis on the idea that the entire process is recursive in nature. Next, *One Writer's Process* brings writing to life, where readers follow the development of a draft. The final chapter in this sub-section, *Qualities of Writing,* outlines some basic aspects of a well-written text, which are defined and then detailed with examples.

"Using the Writing Process," the second sub-section, offers writing strategies, from selecting topics that will sustain student interest to revising, editing, and proofreading approaches. The third, and last, sub-section, "Learning Writing Skills," is filled with information on writing sentences and paragraphs of all types, as well as a list of writing terms/techniques, followed by a chapter entitled *Understanding Text Structures*, which is a visual depiction of text organization possibilities, which are meant to help students imagine alternative ways of organizing what they mean (e.g., sequences of actions, comparisons and contrasts, problems and solutions, main idea/details, and so on).

A Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Research Basis

Practical basis. The thrust of *The Process of Writing* is to offer students a bird's-eye view of how many professional writers write. While the thought of writing as a *process* dates back to early Greek and Roman models of teaching rhetoric, our present

day approach, which includes, among other aspects, planning, drafting, revising, and editing/proofreading and reading drafts to others, harkens back to descriptive research done with 16 professional writers in the mid-1950s. Through interviews with well-known writers, Malcom Cowley, the editor of *The Paris Review Interviews: Writers at Work*, uncovered how professional authors write and rewrite. In fact, they rewrite at length and frequently read their work-in-progress to others[1]. (See Pritchard and Honeycutt for a fuller discussion). While the next section of this white paper will explore the theoretical and empirical research basis for using a process approach in *Writers Express*—that is, how the idea of planning school instruction along the lines of how real writers work came to be—practical reasons, beyond this, revolve around the new national and state standards. Throughout the country, writing is not to be taught using a process approach. One might even say that the past habit of simply assigning and correcting student writing sabotaged student success. If professional writers take their time and engage in many types of thinking and reflecting between first and final draft, how might students produce a well-written piece with little feedback; and worse, scant time to reread, reflect, receive feedback, and rewrite? Another practical reason for engaging in a process approach has to do with the value of collaboration. When students are engaged in process writing, they act both as students and teachers and exhibit a degree of self-reliance that simply is not possible in teacher centered environments (Graham, Bollinger, et al).

   Theoretical and empirical research basis. The idea of planning *school* instruction along the lines of how real writers work didn't come until the late 1960s. Specifically, in 1966 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Modern Language Association together invited teachers of primary and secondary schools and universities to come to Dartmouth College to rethink the teaching of English. This was, remember, in the sixties—a great time to generate ideas that broke with tradition. Post the Dartmouth Conference, educators would stress ways to not only pass on great culture from one generation to another, known as the "Transmission Model," but to empower learners to express *themselves* through language.

   In the college teaching field, Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow soon began to educate teachers about ways to empower students to find their own voices in writing. A big influence was Janet Emig's research from the early 70s in which she described the composing process of 12th graders through extensive case studies and qualitative interviews. Just as with professional writers, Emig found that students used a process approach, with implications that writing as a process could be taught. A few years later, Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Susan Sowers, and Mary Ellen Giacobbe demonstrated that a process approach to teaching writing could work with young children just as it could with other students. In other words, young children could be taught to plan, write, revise, edit and proofread. For several years after Graves' *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* was published, many teachers of language arts adopted a process approach.

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[1] The writers Crowley interviewed who read their work to others were, among others, Truman Capote and Georges Simenon.

During the 70s, Jim Gray, of the Bay Area Writing Project gathered elementary, middle, and high school teachers together to explore the way teachers were teaching students to write and compare it to what writing researchers—such as Elbow, Graves, Emig, and Calkins, were discovering: Writing requires *time*, and that this *time* is spent doing many different things propelled by various attitudes of mind. For example, most writers plan their work, think of their first attempts as drafts, often read what they have written to others in order to hear their own work read aloud and receive feedback, and revise based on what they glean from others' comments, as well as their own attempts to rewrite into order to say something *differently*—even if what they had written was technically what they meant. In other words, Gray and his colleagues discovered that the teaching of writing required something quite different than what various traditional approaches had utilized, which usually involved textbooks, worksheets, teaching grammar in isolation, and so on. Gray, along with Graves and Calkins, called this group's "new" approach a "process approach," as well, which is the name we use today.

This is not to say that a "process approach" looks now as it did originally, or that all process approaches look the same. With regard to process writing looking now as it did in its earliest days, it does not. Three very important changes emerged—one that considered disenfranchised students, as well as English Language Learners, and the role of direct instruction with these populations; another that considered writers' thought processes; and a third that challenged the notion that the process of writing is linear.

The first challenge to teaching writing as a process came not from rich and powerful people but from an urban teacher, Lisa Delpit, who was concerned about her disenfranchised inner city students. Delpit had been a master teacher in a magnet school, singled out for her success in teaching with a writing process approach. But one day it occurred to her that her poor minority students were not prospering with this approach. Delpit, in a book she wrote in 1995, *Other People's Children*, suggested that process approaches might work when children brought middle-class, school valued linguistic and cultural resources with them to the classroom, but they left children who were bringing different resources floundering in confusion. She writes that "in some instances adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them" (31).

Shortly before the publication of Delpit's book, Steve Graham, Gary Troia, and others from the special education field (e.g., Troia, Graham, and Harris) called for a closer look at every aspect of teaching writing in elementary schools. If we are serious about empowering all children to express themselves clearly and convincingly in writing, they argued, then we must pay careful attention to the component skills of good writing, and make sure all children learn them. Hence, the call for more direct instruction, for example specific lessons how to plan, revise and edit, as well as direct instruction in grammar and spelling.

A second challenge to process writing came from J. R. Brozick (as cited in Pritchard and Honeycutt). Brozick concluded that other variables beyond the act of

writing weave through writers' thought processes, such as the writer's consideration of the piece's purpose, the audience, the subject, and the type of writing being done.

A third challenge came Flower and Hayes. They encouraged teachers to remind students that the writing process is recursive. These two researchers questioned the linear look of the approach and concluded that actions inherent in any writing process (e.g., planning, drafting) are recursive. That is, one might begin with a plan, and even start drafting, only to change course and re-plan, draft again, and so on.

Even given these important changes, however, it is important to remember that all approaches to process writing don't look the same. Teachers implement various approaches and stress various aspects for a variety of reasons. The age of students can make a vast difference. Time available for writing can shape an approach. Students' backgrounds with respect to their prior reading and writing experiences matter. And the amount of explicit instruction across grades and classrooms certainly differs.

When explicit instruction is apparent, however, and students have time to practice routines, (Pritchard and Honeycutt) found that texts generally improve, even with uneven implementation. Several writing-process studies that included control groups and used quantitative and/or qualitative measures of 1st through 12th grade student products have generally found that "the impact of using the process approach on student achievement [has shown] mainly positive effects." Hillocks, for example, found that student inquiry, which engages students in developing ideas by reviewing concrete information and thinking through how their writing might be organized (prewriting), is highly effective. Using genre-specific models as a prewriting strategy has also been found to be useful (Graham and Perin). While the reason is yet unclear, Heather Lattimer suggests that models help set a writers' psychological stance toward the work. That is, before writing, the writer knows that s/he is writing "something," and until the writer knows what kind of writing is to be done, the author has no idea what to consider for inclusion. They expose students to good organization, paragraph structure, coherence, logic, exactness, and unity, as well (Eschholz).

Likewise, studies on process of revision have shown that it is much more than teachers simply asking students to "improve their papers," and is now considered "a process of discovering what one has to say and adapting the text to maximize the clarity of the message (Graves, "Writing"; Murray; Sommers).

Though this has been a short summary of how the authors of *Writers Express* have come to process-approach practices in the *Handbook*, it does capture the major recommendations and demonstrations that are a part of a process approach to writing and that are detailed in a recent U.S. Department of Education Educators Practice Guide (Graham, Bollinger, et al). In addition, *Writers Express* offers direct instruction in several specific micro-level writing strategies:

- Tapping into background knowledge
- Thinking about and choosing appropriate text structures and cue/signal words
- Taking time between drafting and revising
- Understanding that revision is a process

- Approaching editing and proofreading seriously.

In addition, students will find a good deal of direct instruction on the formation of various types of sentences and paragraphs, as noted earlier.

Today educators understand, and research has demonstrated, that writing and the writing process are best understood as complex phenomena that include not only procedural strategies for going through the writing process to generate text but also a multitude of other strategies to develop specific plans of action. Through a combination of direct instruction about writing as a process, explicit instruction, and guided practice in micro-level strategies in the context of real writing for real reasons, the users of *Writers Express* will be fully engaged in practices that are current *and* relevant as they learn to write and write to learn.

Section Two: The Forms of Writing

The Content

There are seven sub-sections in **The Forms of Writing** "Personal Writing," "Narrative Writing," "Explanatory Writing," "Persuasive Writing (Argument Writing)," "Writing About Literature," "Report Writing," and "Writing Plays and Poems." While many definitions of "form" exist, the authors of *Writers Express* use the term as the term "genre" is used: a type of writing that represents a category of composition characterized by a certain form, style, and subject matter. For example, stories, plays, and classroom reports are three different *forms* of composition.

The Forms of Writing begins with "Personal Writing." The authors of *Writers Express f*elt this was a good place to start. As mentioned earlier, because "writing is the closest we come to handling our ideas," writing in journals, learning logs, emails and blogs gets students in touch with themselves—what they know, what they think, and what they want to know and understand.

The second sub-section, "Narrative Writing," includes writing personal narratives, fantasies, realistic stories, and stories from history. These are all typical fourth and fifth grade narrative forms, and they are important for students' to experience writing for a variety of reasons. Students at this age tend to read a great deal of narrative, especially fantasy and realistic fiction, and by writing these sorts of narratives, they learn first-hand about the choices the authors they read have had to make.

In narrative writing, too, there is the issue of having total imaginative control. Expository and persuasive texts are based on others' creations first—in the form of texts, film, art, music—and move slowly toward the imagination (the writer's central idea, for example, in an essay or report). Acts of exposition and persuasion, therefore, begin with analysis of other's work and move *toward* the imagination, while all types of fiction *begin* with using the imagination. This is important because it puts the imagination to work without constraint, which is as important in the arts as it is in science. With respect to science, Orville and Wilbur Wright had to first imagine man flying; the astronauts who

guided Apollo 13 back into our atmosphere had to imagine a way into reentry; Galileo had to imagine how gravity worked as he gazed upon a falling apple.

"Explanatory Writing," sub-section 3, "Persuasive Writing (Argument Writing)," sub-section 4, and "Report Writing," sub-section 8, like narrative writing, are required standards in all of the individual state standards and the Common Core Standards, as well. Within these sub-sections, students learn to write explanatory essays as well as process, comparison/contrast, persuasive, and problem/solution essays. They also learn how to write persuasive letters and are given guidance on how to respond to both explanatory and persuasive prompts. In "Report Writing," they extend their knowledge of essay writing into longer texts that aim to teach their audience about a subject.

"Writing About Literature", subsection 5, re-introduces the book review but also introduces students to writing about literature and responding to literature prompts. The importance of this entire sub-section is that it gives students the chance to come to each book they read with the freedom to ask, "What is this book's effect on me?" and "How did it have this effect?" When students can ask these types of questions, slowly each novel will become an introduction and preparation for the next, and slowly students will find they are understanding the narrative form (Olmsted).

The 9th sub-section, "Writing Plays and Poems," walks students through each genre. In the chapter, *Writing Plays*, students are encouraged to think about their own lives—"events that made them laugh or cry" as a potential topic, or to use their imagination. It's useful to remember that writing a play is not easy. In a standard story, the storyteller is important. The narrator assembles the characters, reports what they do or think, arranges for transitions, and so on. But in a play, all this work must be done without the help of a storyteller. As the text in *Writers Express* explains, "It is the talking and actions of the characters that make the play move ahead." *Writing Poems* is the last "form" chapter in sub-section 9 and begins by helping students understand what makes a poem *poetry* and not *prose*. Many types of poems are identified, from free-verse poems to traditional poetry, such as the ballad and cinquain and playful poetry, too. Students receive instruction on writing a free-verse poem, followed by adding rhythm and rhyme, which adds to the delight of saying their free-verse poems out loud.

A Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Research Basis

Writers Express offers instruction in over twenty different forms of writing, from informal experiences such as writing in personal journals and learning logs to the more formal types of text such as the research paper, book review, or play. Since states and even ind*ividual school districts* require different forms, and since *Writers Express* is offered both nationally and internationally, it seems obvious that the full range of what upper elementary students might be asked to write needed to be made available in the *Handbook*.

But there are other practical and research-based reasons for encouraging the experience of writing in as many genres as possible in the early years of schooling. We begin with a few practical reasons and then turn to a number of research findings that support writing in many genres throughout the elementary years.

Practical Basis. Among the practical reasons for writing in many forms, we begin with the fact that part of schooling is learning to write, and children are asked to write all types of text: personal narratives, journal entries, stories, articles for their classroom newspapers, poems, classroom reports, research reports, formal letters, invitations, and individual and/or group slide presentations, just to name a few. Given that this is the case, students need to learn how to write all of them, and well. A related practical reason is that nearly 70 percent of salaried employees have some responsibility for writing (National Commission on Writing), and the ability to write *well* will matter in terms of job stability.

Writing well across many forms, or genres, is useful in another highly personal way, as well: Students educated in many forms can think of how their writing might be used. Just as we "can't speak or think or comprehend even our own experience except within the limits of our own power over words" (Frye 102), we can't write except within the limits of our power over forms. Ideas require vessels. When students are familiar with many forms, they can choose a way to get an idea across from all the forms they know. The same idea might become a research report, a poem, or a story. Alternatively, the love of a book might be directly channeled into writing a play—because the form is known. A student might contemplate writing a petition to provoke change (to be signed by her classmates) if the concept of "petition" is understood. And so on.

Lastly, when student writing is meant for others, as it is in most of the forms in *Writers Express*, students learn that they have an audience to which they must account. This deepens their appreciation of topic choice (who will want to read this?) and for the practices entailed in revision, editing, and proofreading.

Theoretical and empirical research basis. Beyond practical reasons for writing in many forms, there are reasons to write in many forms that have a research basis, not only for advancing writing skill but for supporting reading comprehension, as well. Below are three important research findings (Graham, Bollinger, et al; Graham and Perin.)

1. There is strong research-based evidence that students need to be taught to write for a variety of purposes.
2. Being required to write in many subject areas increases writing fluency.
3. Writing in many forms increases the awareness of text structure, which influences student writing and reading comprehension.

We will take each in turn.

There is strong, research-based evidence that students need to be taught to write for a variety of purposes. One of the practical reasons we mentioned for teaching students to write for a variety of purposes is that purpose is realized *through* form, and as such a form can't be chosen as a vehicle for a student's ideas unless the form is known. But each form has its own purpose, its intended audience, and specific characteristics that must be taught.

Fortunately, a meta-analysis of high quality studies on teaching a variety of forms demonstrated that teaching students about purpose, audience, and the characteristics of *specific* forms explicitly and systematically is strongly effective (Graham, Bollinger, et

al.; Graham and Perin). This means that students benefit from instruction that focuses on processes and strategies by form. For example, it is effective for students to be given models of what the end product should look like. It's also highly useful to engage students in activities that help them discover and evaluate ideas, as well as organize their findings in a way that readers of the text form would anticipate. That is, readers expect that a persuasive essay will include supportive evidence (and counter evidence); a story will have characters and a plot.

Being required to write in many subject areas increases writing fluency. Fluent text production is important because writing is a complex, thoughtful act. Cognitive processes, from conceptualizing ideas to forming words on a page (written or word-processed), compete for limited resources within our working memory (Lachman, Lachman and Butterfield; McCutchen, "Knowledge"). Inefficient processes at one level—for example having to search for the spelling a word—can consume resources that might otherwise be devoted to higher-level processes such as planning or revising. Additionally, Deborah McCutchen points out in her chapter, "Cognitive Factors in the Development of Children's Writing" that text production fluency is important not only in its own right, but also because of its implications for working memory resources:

> Working memory demands imposed by text-production (transcription and text generation) early in writing acquisition may contribute to the rarity of planning and revising in young children's writing, and increase children's reliance on strategies such as knowledge telling. (122-123)

There are many ways to develop fluency, but one of the best ways is to write a lot. Personal writing in journals and logs is especially liberating because it's free of constraints. Writers aren't stopped in their tracks with grammar, punctuation, or spelling concerns nudging at their consciousness. This momentary lack of concern for low-level details frees writers to explore and concentrate. The value of journal writing helps students find out what they think and mean. Through the very act of writing, they are developing their writing fluency.

In addition, the Common Core Writing Standards stretch the English Language Arts standards into the content areas. This practice also supports fluency. Teachers of science, the social sciences, technologies, and math in the early years are being encouraged to ask their students to write in their content domains, even though formal standards for these subjects don't begin until the sixth grade. Students are now asked to write about what they are learning—literature, science, and current events, for example— and to master academic forms such as informational and persuasive texts. Students now are being asked to formulate arguments and support those with reasoning and evidence based on what they are reading. This type of writing is new for many teachers and students in the elementary and middle grades. Below is a note on the first page of the writing standards for all grades, K-5, which relates to what we have noted, above:

> To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students need to learn to use writing as a way of offering

and supporting opinions, demonstrating understanding
of the subjects they are studying, and conveying real and
imagined experiences and events. They learn to
appreciate that a key purpose of writing is to
communicate clearly to an external, sometimes
unfamiliar audience, and they begin to adapt the form
and content of their writing to accomplish a particular
task and purpose. They develop the capacity to build
knowledge on a subject through research projects and to
respond analytically to literary and informational
sources. *To meet these goals, students must devote
significant time and effort to writing, producing
numerous pieces over short and extended time frames
throughout the year.* (18, italics mine)

It has been the intention of the authors of *Writers Express* to afford students a
handbook with practical approaches to analytical, informational, and persuasive writing.
Consequently, within *Writers Express* students are guided through writing-across-the-
curriculum, from writing responses to literature and writing informally in journals to
writing formal essays and reports in the content areas. Over half of the *Handbook* is
devoted to this work.

*Writing in many forms increases the awareness of text structure, which influences
student writing and reading comprehension.* Years ago the *writer*, William Faulkner, said,
"Read. Read. Read. Read everything." Here is Faulkner's specific advice (Blotner):

Read, read, read. Read everything--trash, classics, good
and bad, and see how they do it. Just like a carpenter
who works as an apprentice and studies the master.
Read! You'll absorb it.

"See how they do it" seems to be the guiding principle behind so much of what is
written about using reading as road into better writing (Atwell; Beers and Probst; Calkins,
Ehrenworth, and Lehman; Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, Martin, *Reading*; Newkirk ; Prose).
But does writing work any magic on becoming a better reader? That is, is there a
connection between reading and writing when we look at the relationship in the opposite
direction? For example, does writing in a specific form facilitate students' *comprehension*
of text written in that form? Or, does writing about a content-oriented chapter help
readers comprehend the chapter by offering them a means to record, connect, analyze,
personalize, and manipulate key ideas?

In 2010, the Carnegie Corporation of New York asked these types questions,
which lead to the report, "Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve
Reading" (Graham and Hebert). For our purposes, the operative word in this title is
"evidence": in other words, empirical data. There was, at the time of this investigation
and up until today, significant concern about American students not meeting even basic
literacy standards (Biancarosa and Snow). The report from Carnegie provided gold-

standard evidence that writing, in fact, does have a significant impact on reading. Here are the authors' three questions, for which they found strong evidence toward the affirmative (13):

1. Does writing about material students read enhance their reading comprehension?
2. Does teaching writing strengthen students' reading skills?
3. Does increasing how much students write improve how well they read?

But, what *types* of writing activities produce the positive results the authors found? With regard to the first question, writing about what students read, the report found four significant writing practices:

- respond to a text in writing (writing personal reactions, analyzing and interpreting the text)
- write summaries of a text
- write notes about a text
- answer questions about a text in writing, or create and answer written questions about a text

The second question asked if teaching writing strengthens students reading skills. The authors found that it does, with the following practices highly recommended:

- teach the process of writing, text structures for writing, and paragraph or sentence construction skills (to improve reading comprehension)
- teach spelling and paragraph and sentence construction (to improve fluency)
- teach spelling skills (to improve word reading skills)

The last question, which asked if increasing student writing helps reading comprehension, also found support *if* teachers increase how often students produce their own texts.

With results such as these, educators should feel confident borrowing from Faulkner, and say freely and often—

Write. Write. Write. Write everything—journal entries as you read your textbooks, summarizations, too. Write outlines that reveal the skeleton of what you are about to write, and practice writing good paragraphs to understand where to look for main ideas as you read. In fact, read like a writer whenever you can!

Because of the greater focus these days on nonfiction, an additional note specifically about nonfiction is warranted. Educators have found that experience with writing many genres is vital for student understanding of nonfiction text organization and special features, such as headings, graphics, and font types (Bamford and Kristo; Donovan and Smolkin; Fountas and Pinnell; Stead). Bamford and Kristo make the point that children are awash in information these days, but for the 21st century "children will need to know, to evaluate, to discern, to infer, and especially, to marvel and to wonder at

the world so that they can act more intelligently" (15). Gathering information with the intent to write about a topic is one path toward this end.

 In summary, the *Writers Express'* Forms of Writing section fits comfortably within the gold-standard research findings reviewed. The instruction is aimed toward building a better foundation in the English language arts and content areas. The Forms section promotes writing personally in journals, logs, emails, and blogs, as well as using the writing process to create many academic forms: narrative, explanatory, persuasive, summary, book review, report, story, play, and poem.

Throughout the Forms section, models are always available, as well as explicit instruction throughout the writing process. In the Tools of Learning section, below, other suggestions from this white paper's research review captured in the Forms section will be found. For example there are chapters on reading and spelling, which capture explicit strategies detailed in additional research findings.

Section Three: The Tools of Learning

The Content

Like the other sections of *Writers Express*, The Tools of Learning, is divided into subsections. There are five: "Using Technology," "Reading and Spelling Skills," "Speaking, Viewing, and Listening Skills," Thinking Skills," and "Learning Skills."

The first sub-section, "Using Technology," is meant to help students negotiate the Internet in ways that will help them communicate successfully on line, evaluate what they read, and stay safe. "Reading and Spelling Skills" shares one major strategy, each, for reading fiction and nonfiction and understanding graphics, and takes students through a research-based approach to learning how to spell individual words. "Speaking, Viewing, and Listening Skills" offers a step-wise approach to giving speeches and shares tips for improving viewing and listening skills. The subsection, "Thinking Skills" concentrates on using graphic organizers to understand relationships between paragraphs in a text, using writing to think, and thinking clearly and creatively. "Learning Skills," the last subsection, details strategies on how to organize assignments, work in groups, and take good notes.

A Practical, Theoretical, and Empirical Research Basis

Practical basis. As with the forms of writing, the learning tools are taught in school districts across the country. So there is great value in providing students with ready access to ways of using technology, reading texts, and building reading, spelling, vocabulary, speaking, viewing, listening, thinking, and learning skills. Such is the intention of this entire section.

Beyond this obvious practical reason, there are public concerns over some of the topics covered. For example, as recently as last September, an article in the *New York Times* (Singer) warned parents about how technology companies are collecting vast amounts of data about students and that the time is ripe to think about privacy and safety

protections. Hence the *Handbook* chapter on using technology safely is crucial. Since all information gathered on the Internet is not equal, it is also important that students learn how to discern which information qualifies as the most up-to-date and accurate. Additionally, it's in the best interest of students to give them the most up-to-date strategies on how to read fiction and nonfiction texts, including graphics, and how to approach increasing their vocabulary and becoming better spellers.

The vocabulary-learning task is crucial, vast, and impossible for educators alone to teach. First, the influence of students' vocabulary knowledge on their comprehension of text has been demonstrated over time through a range of studies (Anderson and Nagy, "The Vocabulary"; Cunningham and Stanovich).

Second, research has shown that the vocabulary-learning task is huge (Anderson and Nagy, "The Vocabulary"). For example, the typical high school senior may well know about 40,000 words, meaning that the *average* student probably learns 2,000 to 3,000 new words each year. Therefore, third, given the size of vocabularies students need, readers can and must improve their vocabularies independently. Just as practical as it is to provide students with vocabulary-learning strategies, it is both beneficial and practical to give students strategies for learning how to spell with ease. When spelling knowledge is high, students find writing far easier, partially because they can concentrate of their ideas rather than on how to spell individual words they are writing. Not insignificant, too, is the fact that students who spell correctly have an advantage in terms of teachers' perceptions of their work.

Given that we live in the 21st century, critical and creative thinking skills are also crucial, hence they are significantly addressed in the *Handbook.* To think critically means we are willing to think about our own thinking *while* thinking in order to make our thinking better (Paul and Elder). It is the active, persistent, and careful consideration of beliefs or knowledge in light of evidence. The authors of *Writers Express* make the point that there is no magic formula to thinking clearly, hence critically. The process of thinking critically is all about student actions: use facts and opinions correctly, avoid fuzzy thinking, make good decisions, and solve problems. Of course, each of these suggestions requires basic thinking moves, and students are given a clear chart showing the kinds of "thinking moves" they can use as they think critically in light of their assignments and everyday life.

Creative thinking is the generation of *new* ideas. It brings together existing ideas into new configurations. It develops new possibilities for something that already exists ("Critical & Creative"). Given life in the 21st century, where data overwhelms students daily and where solutions to problems, not only in their own backyard but in the world, are for the finding, creative thinking sounds like a crucial idea to grasp. Traditionally, creative thinking has been associated with the Albert Einstein*s* of the universe—all those extraordinary individuals—however this is a myth. It is possible to be creative in our everyday lives because it's rooted in the imagination. Everyone has creative capacities, and because this is so, the chapter "Thinking Creatively" offers ways of bringing the imagination to life. Students are encouraged to think visually, brainstorm, use off-beat questions, use reverse thinking, use strategies like nutshelling and prediction, and, of

course, write, write, write.

Theoretical and empirical research basis. Much of "The Tools of Learning" section gives advice that educators have shared with students for decades (e.g., how students might plan a speech, how to work in groups), but there are a few chapters that have recent research-based foundations we felt we should review: "Reading Strategies for Fiction," "Reading Strategies for Nonfiction," "Building Vocabulary Skills"; and "Becoming a Better Speller." (Note: The theoretical and empirical basis for the reading have been combined.)

    Theoretical and empirical research-based strategies for reading fiction and nonfiction. While teaching reading is certainly about teaching word recognition skills and general comprehension strategies, there are vast differences in how we read nonfiction & fiction (See Duke and Roberts, for a review of the research). For example, we tend to read fiction from beginning to end, while nonfiction reading often takes on a selective approach.

    Also, genres have different elements/features and text structures. Fictional elements usually include characters, a setting, a problem/conflict, a solution/resolution, a point of view (e.g., 1st for 3rd person), and a theme. The structure is often realized through chronological order, though flashbacks are common. Nonfiction elements include labels, photographs, headings, captions, comparisons, cross sections, maps, various print types, close-ups, tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries. What's more, nonfiction structures are highly variable, including alternatives such as description, listing, cause and effect, comparison, problem and solution, main idea, and chronological order (Kissner; Myer; van Dijk and Kintsch).

    Writers Express teaches students several strategies for reading nonfiction before, during, and after reading:

Before

- thinking about text organization (Manz)
- predicting (Palincsar and Brown)
- brainstorming what you know (Ogle; Shanahan, *Ten Rules*)

During

- looking for key sentences in paragraphs (Kissner; Manz)
- identifying important facts and details (van Dyke and Kintsch; Kissner)
- taking notes (Bretzing and Kulhary; NICHD)
- monitoring comprehension (Baker and Beall; Bereiter and Bird, cited in Kamil; Pressley, "Metacognition")

After

- reflecting (Costa and Kallick; NICHD)
- summarizing (Rinehart, Stahl, and Erickson)
- writing about what was learned (Fulwiler; NICHD; Ogle; Langer and Applebee)

Before reading, students are encouraged to explore how the text is organized, what they imagine will be covered, and what they think they already know about the topic. These ideas are based firmly in a schema-theoretic view of reading, where the reader plays a very active role in reading (e.g., Anderson and Pearson). Comprehending a text, according this view (which is still held today [Pearson]), is considered to be an interactive process (Rumelhart; Stanovich) involving the reader's schemata (knowledge stored in memory) and the new information. In other words, the meaning of a text does not reside in the material itself but in the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text (Anderson and Pearson). This concept is especially important for teachers to understand because second language learners and/or disenfranchised learners often do not have the background knowledge that teachers often presuppose they have (Zhaohua).

During reading, skilled readers are active. They seek out main ideas and key facts that support them, and they understand that some facts are more important than others (van Dyke and Kintsch). Most monitor their comprehension, as well, and take notes, often putting ideas into their own words. Though this is the case, readers don't always develop these skills on their own—even though they may be able to decode fluently and accurately. Strategies can be taught, however, and studies demonstrate the positive effects (e.g., Palincsar and Brown; Pressley, "Metacognition").

After reading, skilled readers summarize, write about, and reflect on what has been learned—strategies shown to improve reading comprehension (Graham and Hebert; Fitzgerald and Shanahan; Shanahan, "Relations"). In fact, writing is often recommended as a tool for improving reading (Biancarosa and Snow), most likely because writing about a text helps students make connections between what they read, know, understand, and think (Carr).

Although research suggests that there are clear improvements in comprehension as a result of using many of these strategies (Kamil), research has also shown that readers frequently use several strategies at once. For example, it's not uncommon for readers to summarize while monitoring their comprehension and then use a fix-up strategy. While the strategies in *Writers Express* are listed under "before," "during" and "after" reading, the organization is not meant to be rigid. For example, readers predict throughout the reading process, not just *before* reading (Palincsar and Brown[2]). It is important to point out, too, that *Writers Express* explains and demonstrates these strategies, and students can refer to them over and over again. This is very, very important because there is a difference between knowing a strategy and actually using it. Scott Paris, Marjorie Lipson,

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[2] This study was the first to validate the usefulness in teaching coordinated strategies. See Block and Pressley for a discussion of this work.

and Karen Wixson explained that students need both the *skill* and the *will* to use strategies.

The strategies for reading fiction in *Writers Express* are also organized by time: before, during, and after reading. Readers aren't expected to use all of them, but to use the strategies that make sense in the moment. For example, if a teacher were to ask students to discuss the notion of character change, it would seem wise to use the "Character Development Chart." In addition, as with the nonfiction strategies, the strategies in this chapter are not meant to be prescriptive with regard to time of use.

Before

- Consider basic elements of fiction (Anderson and Pearson)
- Think about other elements (Anderson and Pearson)
- Preview the story or the novel (Stauffer)

During

- Read with purpose (Row and Smith)
- Read actively and record your thoughts (Graham and Hebert)

After

- Reflect by asking yourself some questions (Graham and Hebert)
- Create a plot diagram (Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Webb; Kissner)
- Fill out a character map (Dexter and Hughs; Kim et al)
- Fill in a fiction organizer (Kissner)
- Reread the story (Wilson)

Before reading, students are asked to bring to mind what they know about the basic elements of fiction, such as characters, settings, conflict, plot, and theme. They are also encouraged to remember to think about the narrator (1st or 3rd person), description, and dialogue. The reason for these "before reading" suggestions is that research has shown previewing a story can be very helpful if the story is difficult or complicated.

During reading, students should read with a purpose. As discussed in Row and Smith, students who read with a purpose tend to comprehend better, which may happen because they are attending to the material rather than just decoding words. This stance of "attending," in fact, results in students' reading actively. When reading a story, consequently, active readers often ask questions, such as *Who is the main character? What's the problem?*

Reading actively also involves using strategies or approaches to texts. In *Writers Express*, students are apprised of the many ways skilled readers are active—predicting upcoming events, for example, inferring (which involves combining known ideas/information with the narration, events, and dialogue on the page), monitoring their understanding, summarizing, and visualizing.

The vast amount of research on the relationship of reading to writing recommends that students evaluate stories in order to understand, for example, how the writer made the story come alive, and suggests revisiting favorite parts after reading (e.g., Langer and Flihan). Writing and reading are both meaning-making activities. When people write and read, the text is continually in a state of becoming (Graves and Hansen). In other words, reading and writing are both composing processes. When students approach reading and writing as similar processes, writers incorporate what they have learned about language, structure, and style from the text they encounter as readers (Squire).

After reading, students are shown how they might use several graphic organizers to think about the story, and they are encouraged to reread, as well. Graphic organizers are useful because they help students construct meaning. For example, the Character Development Chart in the *Handbook* (318) helps students think about the big idea, or theme, by recording how the main character changed over course of the story. A review of research on graphic organizers, in general, found that they improve students' reading comprehension, overall achievement, and thinking and learning skills, among other findings (Bromley, Irwin-De Vitis, and Modlo; Clark; Kim et al). Interestingly, graphic organizers seem to work no matter who introduces them, teachers or researchers.

Students are also encouraged to reread stories at times. Years ago, Jay Samuels developed a repeated reading procedure to increase reading fluency. He also suggested that students would find the text easier the second or third time around, so repeated reading can lead to improved comprehension. In fact, when students are reading at their instructional level, that IS the case (Wilson).

Theoretical and Empirical Research-based Strategies for Building Vocabulary Skills. The research on the *causal* relationship between vocabulary acquisition and success in the literate world from birth to adulthood can be found in many studies. Below are a few crucial findings:

Vocabulary knowledge in kindergarten and first grade is a significant predictor of reading comprehension in the middle and secondary grades (Cunningham and Stanovich; Scarborough).

Vocabulary knowledge contributes to young children's phonological awareness, which in turn contributes to their word recognition skills (Goswami; Nagy, "The Vocabulary").

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the best indicators of verbal ability (Sternberg).

Learning English vocabulary is one of the most crucial tasks for English Learners (Nation).

Lack of vocabulary can be a crucial factor underlying the school failure of many students (Graves, *Teaching*).

In addition to prefix, suffix, and root charts as well as a section on using vocabulary words correctly, six very important approaches to vocabulary development are tackled in this chapter: "Read and Check" (context strategy use), "Use a Dictionary,"

"Use a Thesaurus," "Keep a Personal Dictionary," "Learn about Word Parts," and "Watch for Word Families." There is also a useful "Tip," which explains how to connect with embedded vocabulary supports in digital text. In addition to providing definitions, digital supports often include synonyms, antonyms, images, and audio explanations—all powerful aids to second language learners and learners, in general, who need this type of help. Each and every one of these approaches is meant to build word consciousness (Anderson and Nagy, "The Vocabulary").

The most widely recommended word-learning activity is using context, which is the first strategy detailed in *Writers Express*. Context can give readers helpful clues about the meaning and structure of the new word, as well as how it is used. Using context clues aligns with the ELA Common Core Standards, as well. Telling students to use the context to gauge a word's meaning must go beyond simply asking them to reread sentences before and after the word, so in addition to this suggestion, students are instructed, specifically, to search for synonyms, antonyms, a definition, and words in a series. They are also reminded that some words have multiple meanings, or are used as idioms or figurative language (Graves; Baumann, Kame'enui, and Ash; Sternberg).

Learning word parts (prefixes, suffixes, and roots) and watching for word families (groups of words that are built from the same basic word) are related strategies for unlocking word meanings. Both are recommended by many educators (e.g., Graves, *Vocabulary*; Henry; Anderson and Nagy, "How Many"), and supported by research, as well (Baumann et al).

A word part is known as a morpheme. In any given word, a word part might be the word's root or its prefix or suffix. Root words are words from which many other words are formed. Knowing the meaning of one root can provide a bridge to the meaning of other words related in meaning (e.g., belief/disbelief), or words belonging to the same family (port [carry, bear, bring]: import, report, support, important, reporter, supportive, and so on).

Students using *Writers Express* are also taught how to use a dictionary and thesaurus (Blachowicz and Fisher; Graves, *Vocabulary*). Given the size of vocabularies students need, it is to students' advantage to become efficient and effective in using these tools.

Students also need instruction in using the thesaurus because the resource, though related, is used for a different purpose than a dictionary (Graves, *Vocabulary*). When using a dictionary, students know the word they're attempting to learn, whereas when using a thesaurus, students are looking for a word to use. As Graves explains, "Getting students to use a thesaurus is a step toward getting them to enlarge their active vocabularies as well as a step toward getting them interested in words. It's interesting that of all the various vocabularies we have—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—one's writing vocabulary is the smallest (Fry); and, the one that apparently needs most improvement: "The vocabulary we use strongly influences judgments of our competence" (Graves, *Vocabulary* 3). In order to expand the number of words we use, says Fry, "Cross out tired adjectives like "nice" and "good." Cross out tired figures of speech like "it rained cats and dogs." Drive students into the thesaurus (213).

Theoretical and empirical research-based strategies for becoming a better speller. Through descriptive studies of children's growing orthographic knowledge development (the way words are typically spelled in a given language), researchers have discovered that students' strategies move in logical ways, from simple concrete sound-letter matching ('m' represents /m/) to increasingly pattern- and meaning-driven approaches (Bear et al; Henderson and Beers; Moats; Temple, Nathan, and Temple). Pattern-driven strategies include students' developing awareness that sounds may be spelled with more than one letter, for example vowel teams (oa, ie) and digraphs (th, ch); while meaning-driven strategies include studying word families, which offer direct visual links (compose/composition).

While the authors of *Writers Express* have no way of knowing how the students who use the *Handbook* are being taught to spell, most spelling programs encourage some sort of method for spelling *practice* (Pollo, Kessler and Trieman; Trieman and Kessler). Because students in the 4th and 5th grades are at the stage in their spelling development where they are capable of using sound-letter matching, knowledge of English spelling patterns and knowledge of word family information (Bear, et al; Moats), the analytic study method suggested in the *Handbook* offers steps that encourage all three types of thinking. For example, students are encouraged to listen for syllables and then for individual sounds within syllables; to look for spelling patterns; and to consider word families, as well. Students are shown strategies to proofread for spelling and are encouraged to know the most consistently useful spelling rules (Henry).

Section Four: Proofreader's Guide

The Content

The Proofreader's Guide is divided into six sections: "Marking Punctuation," "Editing for Mechanics," "Checking Your Spelling," "Using the Right Word," "Understanding Sentences," and "Understanding Our Language."

"Marking Punctuation" includes all the information a student would have to know about punctuating sentences, from periods to parentheses. "Editing for Mechanics," is equally complete, offering rules from capitalization to abbreviations. "Checking Your Spelling," offers students a quick look at many of the most misspelled words in English (for this age-group), while "Using the Right Word," is equally sensitive to errors this age-group tends to make. (Just think, when should one use "already" vs. "all ready"? "Understanding Sentences" gives students insights on how to vary their sentence structures, which is so useful when attempting to write in a way that will engage one's audience, while "Understanding Our Language" helps students understand English parts of speech. This is especially important for English language learners because all languages don't have the *same* parts of speech.

A Practical Basis.

Practical Basis. There is not a writer, *anywhere*, who doesn't check a resource book of some kind often—sometimes weekly, sometimes daily, sometimes hourly. It is not said with tongue-in-cheek that the writer, Frank McCourt, writes of Lynne Truss, the author of

Eats, Shoots & Leaves, "If Lynne Truss were Catholic I'd nominate her for sainthood." All writers have troves of grammar, mechanics, and usage manuals. So it's fitting that young writers have the same. It is in this spirit that the authors of *Writers Express*, who are, after all, writing for real authors, include Section 4—a "Proofreader's Guide." For typical students, a guide spells "relief." For underprivileged youth, a guide spells "relief." For English language learners, a guide spells "relief," and probably a lot more: Languages differ on so many levels—usage, punctuation, grammar, figures of speech, the level of inference tolerated, and, as noted above, parts of speech!

Conclusion

Writers Express begins with the question, *Why Write?,* while the white paper you have just read has attempted to answer the question, *Why Writers Express?* If you go back to this paper's introduction, you'll notice we mentioned that the 21st century is an exciting time for young writers, thinkers, and learners, and that the authors of *Writers Express* hold the conviction their handbook will help students capture their intellectual and creative energies in meaningful ways. Recognizing that times, and students, have changed since the publication of the 2nd edition of *Writers Express* (2000), the authors have brought to bear, on every page, the most current thinking and gold-standard empirical research they could find. For example, the chapter on summarizing now reflects the vast amount of research on how skilled students summarize. The spelling chapter likewise includes word study strategies that reflect what's known about developmental differences in students' approaches to writing and learning word spellings.

While the *Handbook*'s process approach to writing has not changed to any significant degree, there are changes never-the-less. Current writing samples have been gathered in the Forms section, as well as new forms (e.g., the "short report" and additions to "writing poems"), and throughout the *Handbook*, technology has been interwoven seamlessly. Within the Tools of Learning section, strategies have been updated and added, as well, especially with regard to technology and creative thinking.

If writing is truly "a great way to express what you feel or imagine and what you learn," and if to do this students "write stories, essays, and reports," then *Writers Express* offers students the chance to capture their intellectual and creative energies in ways both significant and free of typical errors.

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