

Target Grade Level: All levels

Keys Concepts: Writing Process, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing

When I first began teaching in the 1990s, “Writing Process” or “The Writing Process” was familiar jargon in the language arts classroom. However, it wasn’t until I went through a California Writing Project Summer Invitational that I began to fully understand, internalize and embrace a process approach to teaching writing.

A few years later, when I started working as a teacher consultant in school districts throughout Southern California, the mere mention of “Writing Process” was sure to spark a heated debate. Teachers loved it or hated it. Some saw process writing as the only way to teach; others saw it as a waste of time and a “feel good” approach that didn’t accomplish anything. I quickly assessed that those who had a strong aversion to process writing simply didn’t understand it, and I enjoyed the challenge of showing them what process writing actually is.

Over the years, however, I have noticed that increasingly the teachers I encounter in workshops haven’t heard about-or have only briefly considered-writing process. As a MY Access!® writing coach and mentor this unfamiliarity with writing as a process concerns me, because My Access!® is, at its heart, a writing process-centered program. If teachers and students don’t understand what writing process is, they will not be able to fully utilize all aspects of the program.

Writing Process Briefly Defined

I have seen writing process executed and explained in many ways. At its worst, “The Writing Process” is a series of rigid and linear steps students march through when writing a piece: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing. When I first started teaching, this approach was all I understood. On some level I knew students had to rewrite in order to produce better writing, but my only solution was to literally force them to write three drafts of every piece. Inevitably, revision turned into recopying, and I rarely saw significant changes from draft 1 to draft 3 (except for the DRAFT 1 or DRAFT 2 label I demanded they write prominently at the top of the paper). Is it any wonder they hated writing?

In reality, writing process is a relatively simple concept and it is nothing revolutionary. In their book *Inside Out*, Dan Kirby and Tom Liner succinctly summarize writing process: “All teaching writing as a process tries to do is to bring writing in the classroom closer to what ‘real’ writers do when they write.” Teachers who embrace process are not only focused on the *product* the student produces, but on the *approach* the student takes to produce this piece of writing. Students are encouraged to play around with writing, and more importantly, to honor that writing is a messy process. Few of us can expect to write perfectly when we first sit down to compose (although ironically most of my students think they should be able to do so).

Perhaps writing process is difficult to explain because it is not a strategy nor is it a solution that can be outlined in a workbook. At the risk of waxing poetic, writing process

is better defined as a philosophy or a state of being my classroom reaches. When my writing classroom is functioning how I want it to (and believe me, I have had as many failures as successes), the way my students approach writing is dramatically different from the traditional, grudging approach many of them start the year with. I know they have internalized their own writing process when I hear them constantly talking about their writing, when they seek each other and me out for advice, when they consider their reader and audience, when they know their purpose for writing. When many of them—not just the top students’ feel compelled to share what they have written, and when, perhaps most excitingly, they react emotionally to each other’s writing. It is a peak teaching experience when a student makes his or her classmates cry or laugh hysterically with a piece of writing.

Writing Process and MY Access!®

Often, when teachers first start using MY Access!® they perceive IntelliMetric as a scoring engine designed to assess their students’ final writing product. Students key in an essay or story, submit once, receive a score. Sometimes teachers will have students do a little editing and submit again, but there is little growth between submission one and two. There isn’t necessarily anything wrong with this approach, because students are writing and receiving an assessment of that writing, so they will make some overall improvement. However, when teachers only use MY Access!® as a “grading machine,” they miss out on the strengths of the program. IntelliMetric should not be used simply to assess the final product—rather, it should be used as a tool to help students revise. When students submit and see their IntelliMetric™ scores, they have information and motivation to take another look at their piece. In other words, IntelliMetric™ can be used as a gauge to help students work through the process of writing. Without MY Access!® I feel like a broken record (or maybe I should say scratched CD) as I repeatedly tell students, “Don’t fall in love with your first draft.” I need them to see the intrinsic value of revision—that it will make their writing better. But quite frankly, in our grade-motivated schooling system, my opinion doesn’t always convince. With MY Access!®, students don’t have to wait for me to assess their writing. After submitting, the feedback they receive instantly tells them where they need to work more on their piece or if it’s ready to turn in to me.

That said, many of you are probably thinking, “This is great, but my students don’t know how to revise.” Exactly! Although MY Tutor will help them, our job is to step in as they are using MY Access!®, and to teach them strategies for making a piece of writing better. We need to teach what a thesis statement is, how to use dialogue effectively, how to write a complex sentence. The good news is that because the feedback will help students assess their own writing throughout the process of composition, we can spend more time developing strong lessons to guide them.

How Does a Process Approach Happen?

Idea 1: Discovering Your Personal Process

I start talking about writing from day one in my classroom. One of the very first activities we do is to engage in a conversation about how we write. In the early days of my career I taught “The Writing Process,” and I told students what their process was. My approach is significantly different now.

Step 1:

- I begin by sharing my own writing process by projecting the handout “[My Writing Process](#).” As I share, I admit that I struggle and become frustrated at times as a writer. I confess that I have trouble finishing pieces, and that I have a drawer full of story beginnings, and a few middles,...but very few endings.

Step 2:

- I ask students to think about a writing assignment they have had in the past-preferably one they struggled with. It needs to be something that required some thought and planning. Then, I ask them to list every single step they went through to complete this assignment. If they procrastinated, I ask them to be specific about how. How did they get their ideas? What did they do with their ideas once they had them? I give them 5-10 minutes to do this.

- After students have completed their lists, I assign groups of four to share. I ask them to make a list of words they keep hearing as each person shares (for example, thinking or rewriting). Students love this conversation, and so will you.

- When students are finished sharing, we talk as a whole class about what they noticed. What were the similarities and differences in their group? I ask them to share their lists, as I write the words they have in common on the board.

Step 3:

- Once I have a list on the board, I point to it and excitedly announce, “This is writing process.” I explain that every writer has a different way of getting a piece written, that some of us have better strategies than others for completing what we begin, and that this year I will help them to make the most of the way the write. I challenge them to experiment with new strategies so they can grow as writers.

- I pass out the “[Writing as a Process](#)” handout and ask students to share what they notice (Mainly, I’m looking for them to observe that the arrows point both ways). I explain that we will be defining and exploring these concepts this year; there is no right or wrong way to move through the chart. For example, a writer may initially skip prewriting only to return after composing several drafts that aren’t working out.

- To model writing process, I enlarge a poster of the “Writing as a Process” chart, and next to each stage I put the various prewriting, notes, drafts, etc. of a piece of my own

writing. For example, just to write this blog I have taken several notes on post-its, and I put these next to prewriting.

- These writing process lists become the first piece in their portfolio. Students refer to these lists as they work on their writing.

Idea 2: Creating a Writing Environment

- Students often arrive in our classrooms intimidated by writing. My first weeks (sometimes even months) of the school year are spent convincing students that they don't need to be afraid of writing. I want my students to see "bad writing" for what it is—an early draft. I promise over and over that I won't punish them for misspelled words or grammar errors in their early drafts. To do this, I turn off MY Editor and Spellchecker when students are writing early drafts.
- A great way to lower students' anxiety about writing is to share quotes by professional writers. I am constantly reading these to students, posting them on walls, reminding them that Roald Dahl revises his books 150 times—so how can they be finished after one draft. A wonderful resource is *Shoptalk: Learning to Write With Writers* by Donald Murray. "[How Real Writers Write](#)" will get you started!
- Another way to create a positive writing environment is to have students share, share, and share their writing. We do a lot of "quickwrites" in my classroom—these are short, focused writing periods. The only rule is that students write the entire time—whether they have something to say or not (and if not, they are to write "I have nothing to say" until they stumble upon something!). Students share these with partners, with the entire class, and when I hear something good I explain why I loved it and what the piece did for me as a reader. As I am walking around conferencing with students during writing time, I am constantly on the lookout for powerful writing. When I find it, I share it. Slowly, students begin writing for an audience—not just for a grade, because they know there is always the potential that their piece will be read. My goal is that as they begin writing for each other, the quality of their writing improves.
- We share writing from outside the classroom that we love. I ask students to bring in samples of writing from any source (even My Space) that moves them. We often begin or end class with these snippets, and I have a binder that students can put them in (you will need to set guidelines for appropriateness). This binder is well read, and students often flip through it before class starts. I do have to warn you that any middle school or high school binder will be filled with sappy poetry!

Idea 3: Teaching Through the Process

Ok, this section is a teaser, because my future blogs will break the process down, and explain how MY Access! can be used to assist in the teaching of each stage. We'll start with prewriting and work our way to publication, and my hope is that this will become a community effort. After all, we learn best from each other, and I know many of you have amazing ideas that you will want to share.

A Quick Conclusion (because by now you know I'm bad at them)

I'm passionate about teaching writing, even though it is by far the most frustrating thing I do. I have good days and bad days. One period will become a thriving writing environment while another limps along and students look like they would rather sit in the dentist's chair than spend another second with me. I don't expect all my students to love writing, but I do know that they all need to become proficient writers. And sadly, for a variety of reasons, many of our students are not. I certainly don't have all the answers for why this is, but I do know that it's not enough to just teach students a set of skills. Rather, they need to understand how writing works-why we write in the first place. They need to have a reason for writing so that they have an incentive to revise. The power of MY Access!® and why you are fortunate to use it-is that it can become a visual symbol that will help students internalize writing process. It's a powerful ally, and personally I need all the help I can get!

If you have comments for Stephanie, please submit them below. Share your thoughts on this topic in the [Teacher-to-Teacher](#) Discussion Forum.

Works Cited:

Kirby, Dan and Liner, Tom. *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing*. Second Edition. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1988.

Murray, Donald. *Shoptalk: Learning to Write With Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.

Contributed by: Stephanie Binckes. *Stephanie Binckes is a former high school English and ELD teacher. As a fellow of the California Writing Project, she has worked as a writing coach and mentor throughout her state. She wrote this article to help teachers re-envision MY Access!® as a powerful tool that can be used to support students throughout the composition process.*