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# The effects of explicit writing instruction

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# The effects of explicit writing instruction

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the effects of explicit writing instruction. Twenty-four seventh graders, attending a low socio-economic middle school, are the participants in this study. Eight of the twenty-four students have a writing goal, which in turn allows the language arts class to be co-taught with a general education teacher and a special education teacher. The study focuses on the effects that writing instruction can have on student writing abilities and attitudes. The general education teacher, in a whole group setting, gave the majority of instruction. Within small groups, some students were able to get additional support from either the general education or special education teacher. The results indicated that with the use of explicit instruction of the writing process, the focus on immediate feedback, and the encouragement of cross-curricular writing, students experienced growth in regards to their writing. The writing abilities of the participants increased and their writing attitudes became more positive from the beginning of the school year to the end of the study.

THE EFFECTS OF EXPLICIT WRITING INSTRUCTION

A Graduate Action Research Paper

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Christine M. Clark

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This Action Research Paper by: Christine M. Clark

Titled: The Effects of Explicit Writing Instruction

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
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Abstract

This study explores the effects of explicit writing instruction. Twenty-four seventh graders, attending a low socio-economic middle school, are the participants in this study. Eight of the twenty-four students have a writing goal, which in turn allows the language arts class to be co-taught with a general education teacher and a special education teacher. The study focuses on the effects that writing instruction can have on student writing abilities and attitudes. The general education teacher, in a whole group setting, gave the majority of instruction. Within small groups, some students were able to get additional support from either the general education or special education teacher. The results indicated that with the use of explicit instruction of the writing process, the focus on immediate feedback, and the encouragement of cross-curricular writing, students experienced growth in regards to their writing. The writing abilities of the participants increased and their writing attitudes became more positive from the beginning of the school year to the end of the study.

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## INTRODUCTION

Questions regarding writing consumed my mind as soon as I found out my middle school teaching placement for the 2012-2013 school year. When the elementary students, I previously taught, were given writing assignments we saw minor changes in their writing. It was easy to just assume that is the type of writer they are. As soon as I was introduced and trained with The Write Tools strategies my philosophy changed. According to Greiner and Simmons (2012) Write Tools is “for all learners: the gifted and talented thinker who has dozens of ideas bouncing around his brain, the reluctant writer who has internalized the “I can’t write” message, and the many other students in between” (p. xi). One of the useful intentions of the tools, provided by the Write Tools creators, is to provide all students with structure in each step of the writing process. When focusing specifically on informative writing students have the opportunity to plan their writing by analyzing a prompt, brainstorming ideas, developing big ideas and supporting details, along with creating topic and conclusion sentences. After spending a good amount of time on planning, students take their plan and use it to draft their paragraph or essay. Revising and editing the first draft is required before publishing the final piece. Not every paper written needs to be taken through all of these steps, but when using the Write Tools suggestions, students have a specific format every time they write an informative piece.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Writing is a crucial skill for all students to acquire. The Northern Colorado Writers stated “If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. xi). Writing can be intimidating for some students. Many may have never experienced success from their writing

assignments. With some students, writing comes naturally, but they have a difficult time organizing all of their thoughts. As an educator, it seems easy to distinguish between decent writing and writing from a student who struggles to put a sentence or paragraph together. Educators face the challenge of what to do to help students who struggle with writing. The following questions have served as a guide for the research of the effects of explicit writing instruction.

- Question 1: When students are taught writing strategies, how is their writing affected?
- Question 2: How can educators encourage children to be more comfortable with writing?
- Question 3: What can we do to help students understand writing and find success?
- Question 4: What advantages are there to modeling and teaching students how to write?
- Question 5: What can educators do if students are resistant to the effort it takes to learn and apply writing strategies?

These answers will not be found by continually assigning writing projects to students in hopes that with practice they will get it. We need to be more proactive, more involved, and better role models.

### **Terms**

The following terms are defined to increase understanding of the content regarding the effects of writing instruction.

- The Writing Process: “The series of overlapping steps that most writers follow in composing texts.” (<http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/writingprocessterm.htm>)

According to Greiner and Simmon's Write Tools, the steps used for this study consist of planning,

drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

- Explicit Instruction: "Explicit instruction is systematic, direct, engaging, and success oriented—and has been shown to promote achievement for all students." Explicit instruction includes the following steps, I do, you do, we do, and they do. Educators need to model first, next practice with the students while guiding them, then give students the opportunity to practice with their peers, and finally allow them to work independently. (<http://explicitinstruction.org/>) The typical explicit instructional process used during this research consists of modeling by the teacher, guided practice that included the teacher and students, practice amongst students, and independent student practice. (I do, we do, they do, you do)
- Writing Strategies: "Good writing doesn't happen by accident. Successful writers use mental procedures to control the production of writing. We call these mental procedures writing strategies. Writing Strategies are deliberate, focused ways of thinking about writing. A writing strategy can take many forms. It can be a formal plan an educator wants students to follow or it can be something as simple as a trick used to remember how a word is spelled. Writers use strategies all the time to keep their writing going and to make it come out the way they intend." (<http://gse.buffalo.edu/org/writingstrategies/>)
- Informative Writing: "The goal of an informative essay is not to present your opinion, but "to inform or educate the audience on a given topic" (*The KU Handbook for Writers*, 2008, p. 102)." (<http://word-crafter.net/CompI/InformativeEssay.html>)

- Write Tools: Training and Coaching: Writing is not negotiable anymore. Every teacher in every content area and every student will be affected by the new Common Core Standards which emphasize nonfiction writing significantly more than ever before.” (<http://www.thewritetools.net/training-coaching/>) The Write Tools training provides guidance for teachers so that writing instructions can be implemented school-wide.
- Common Core State Standards: “The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so that teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them.” (<http://www.corestandards.org/>) The expectation is that these standards are taught and learned by every teacher and every student.

### **Significance of Review**

If I was not seeing writing improvements from my students without writing instruction, teaching them writing strategies shouldn't make their writing worse. “Previous research found that strategy instruction increased student writing production” (Hough, Hixson, Decker, and Bradley-Johnson, 2012, p. 172). When someone teaches a child how to feed themselves, one usually shows them how to perform the task. By modeling the behavior the child can visually see what to do to succeed. After practice and some guidance they can feed themselves independently.

If a teacher models how to write an informative essay, for example, the students watch the process used for success. With the steps modeled and practiced together, students have the opportunity to put their own thoughts into a structure that is familiar. This takes away the guesswork of what to do or how to form the paper. What if coming up with ideas is difficult?

By having the writing steps modeled, along with student practice, students will have a reference; something to recall when they are stuck within the writing process.

If we want students to understand something and ultimately make improvements with their writing, why not show them what can bring them success? To explore that question further my goal is to acquire more information about the effects students encounter when explicitly taught writing strategies.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **The Effects of Explicit Writing Instruction**

Explicit writing instruction requires an educator to model the intended instruction, practice with students while guiding them through the steps, allow students to work with their peers on the process, and finally give children the opportunity to work independently on a specific writing goal. Although not much research has been completed with the focus of explicit writing instruction, there are many resources that support the necessary components for successful writing, instruction being one of them. Writing affects all people. Everyone will need to write something someday. It is a topic that cannot be avoided and needs to be improved.

**Writing is crucial.** The writing abilities of children are proving to be lower than what colleges and the real world requires and needs. Joyce A.E. Russell (2011), a writer for The Washington Post, explores the low writing abilities within our society by interviewing executives, consultants, and business leaders. She discovered that, “Business leaders also felt that writing skills among graduates seem to have declined over the years” (paragraph 4). Some further reports of embarrassment within offices occurred because of the writing abilities of their colleagues. Knowing this, educators and students should not only have a goal to improve writing, but a reason for achieving that goal.

Students can experience difficulties with writing for several reasons, but it is crucial for them to improve their writing in order to experience success with their future endeavors. Most likely, it is hard for a kindergartener or even a seventh grader to understand how what they are currently learning can potentially affect their futures. With that being said, we cannot use that as an excuse.

Greiner and Simmons (2009) state:

Writing is an essential skill for all students. To demonstrate learning on a daily basis in the classroom; to succeed on high-stakes assessments; to meet the Common Core State Standards; to be college and career ready; and to become active, engaged members of society: these are all valid reasons why students must receive more focused instruction in writing. (p. xi)

What students learn about writing now, will shape their abilities and attitudes towards writing in their futures. Writing should be supported amongst all ages of children because good writing is crucial.

**Effective explicit writing instruction.** Explicit writing instruction can be effective for most students within whole group settings and can be retaught in small strategy based groups. Not all students are going to understand all whole group instruction all the time. Not all students have the same needs. Yes, maybe all students in one classroom need help with writing, but some may struggle with developing a sentence, where others struggle with spelling. According to Feng and Powers (2005) grammar mini-lessons were taught because that is what the students needed at that time in regards to their writing. “Outstanding writing teachers not only recognize the importance of "a little love and understanding," they also stress the importance of tailoring instruction to meet the individual needs of children experiencing difficulty learning to write,

including those with learning disabilities” (p.42). The immediate instruction, guidance, and feedback proves to help students not only short-term, but long-term as well. That should be our ultimate goal since writing is so crucial for their future success. The path to success for each student may look different, but it is our job, as educators, to provide the resources and instruction children need.

Effective explicit writing instruction should be expected in every classroom. Allington (2006) states, “The most powerful feature of schools, in terms of developing children as readers and writers, is the quality of classroom instruction” (p. 142). One way to provide explicit writing instruction is by using The Write Tools strategies created by Greiner and Simmons. The strategies were designed and aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The Write Tools routine provides students with the important steps needed to better their writing abilities required for their college experience and future careers.

Writing should be a routine just like other things in life. “Although some may think of the daily routines of life as being boring and mundane, student writers and teachers alike find our writing routines comforting and confidence building” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. xiii). Students learn The Write Tools steps from explicit instruction and then practice the routines over and over. The process allows for students to know what to expect when writing, which takes away the fear of the unknown. Students gain confidence as they practice each step and watch their improvement.

The Write Tools creators know that not every child is going to understand one type of explicit instruction. Students are not going to need help with the same writing skill, which is why they provided multiple resources for students at varying levels. “The Write Tools presents strategies in a three-tiered model, deliberately addressing different levels of writing proficiency

rather than grade levels. This model supports teachers in differentiating instruction to meet the needs of individual students” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. xiii). Students are going to move from level to level at different speeds. Educators need to support that and provide initial explicit instruction along with re-teaching of the steps.

### **Why Explicit Writing Instruction Should Be Used**

If our purpose as educators is to teach students what they need to know and what they need to be able to do for their future lives, we need to directly teach how to write. In order to help students find success with writing we need to be aware of student perceptions in regards to writing. By knowing their mindsets we as educators will know specifically how to help our students whether they are confident writers or struggling writers.

**To understand students’ perceptions of writing.** In a conversation with his friend Linus, Charlie Brown asks, "Do you know why English teachers go to college for four years?" Linus thinks for a minute and answers, "No" (Graham, Harris, and Larsen, 2001, p. 76). Pay close attention to Charlie Brown’s screaming response to his own question, "So they can make little kids write stupid essays on what they did all stupid summer!!!" (Graham et al.) Being an effective writing educator requires some listening. Charlie Brown’s teacher has a challenge ahead to not only interpret his reaction to writing, but to embrace his perception, and help him improve.

There are multiple students today with negative mindsets in regards to writing. Some have had bad experiences when writing papers, some never received writing instruction, and some are not confident in their writing abilities. All of these reasons result in a student who claims they do not like writing. Negative experiences can lead to negative opinions. Those negative opinions stop students from furthering their writing abilities.



“Students’ conceptions of writing processes and functions affect their attitudes to writing, which, in turn, influence their writing activities.” (Boscolo, Arfe, and Quarisa, 2007, p. 421)

It is important to be looking for ideas that will help students understand writing, have ownership over their work, and become passionate about a topic that could have previously been unpleasant. To be successful with this, an educator needs to gather information from the students about their writing perceptions. Students are given the chance to express their feelings, understandings, misunderstandings, and opinions about writing through their responses. It is far too easy to assume we know what students are thinking about writing. It is even easier to allow students to continue thinking about writing the way they have in the past. In order to stop that cycle, educators need to understand the perceptions within a classroom in regards to writing and use that information to support and instruct students.

Graham et al. (2001) reports:

As is often the case, Snoopy is sitting on top of his dog house, banging away on his typewriter, when Lucy asks to look at what he has written. She quickly renders her decision: "This isn't a sad story; this is a dumb story." Frowning, Snoopy looks back over his story and notes, "That's what makes it so sad. Just like Lucy's opinion of Snoopy's writing, teachers often view children with writing and learning difficulties negatively, setting low expectations for their performance and limiting their exchanges with them. (p. 80)

As an educator it can be frightening how much effect we can have on the mindsets of our students, but it can also be empowering. Knowing we have so much influence can be rewarding when used effectively.

It is easy to focus on students who struggle with their writing perceptions. What about

the students who have positive perceptions? Their enjoyment of the writing craft could come from past writing successes, constructive instruction and feedback, confidence, and other reasons. When having experiences like those, one will most likely enjoy or like to write. Positive affirmations can lead to a more constructive view of writing. There is a possibility for positive student writing mindsets when they take ownership over their learning. One would most likely work harder and enjoy their work more, when they have a say in what they are doing.

Being a positive role model and encouraging writing amongst students is not the only way to change students' perceptions about writing, but it is a step in the right direction. We can provide an environment that, with explicit writing strategies, students can participate in writing and possibly like doing it. If educators demonstrate a love of writing, students will notice. It is important to show children that writing will not always be easy and it will not always be difficult.

**To help struggling writers.** Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2011) believe that, educators should be able to guarantee that all students receive high levels of learning. If that is our goal we need to realize that not every student is the same. Even if they are classified as struggling with one thing or another, it shouldn't place them all in one category. Buffum et al. (2011) supports this philosophy by listing some assumptions we can make about students. They believe that not all students learn the same way, or at the same speed because, "some students lack prior skills and knowledge, some students lack academic behaviors, and some students have a home life that is counterproductive to academic success." These challenges raise the question, how can we help all students with writing?

Educators can lack the understanding of how to help struggling writers who come to a classroom with many different needs. Some students may find writing sentences difficult.

Others may need additional revising and editing support. There are also some students who are not necessarily struggling with writing, but they have a tough time organizing all of the information in their head.

With multiple writing needs, educators must set a purpose for their tasks, use a common language that all students are familiar with, utilize explicit writing instruction, while providing immediate and constructive feedback, along with expecting cross-curricular writing opportunities. Those steps alone will not drive success unless teachers are willing to better themselves as writers, educators, and overall people. Allington (2006) supports that thought by saying, “each teacher has a professional responsibility to continue to become more expert with every year of teaching” (p. 143).

### **Approaches for Using Explicit Writing Instruction**

Once we know how to support student writing, educators need to use specific approaches when providing explicit instruction. A purpose for writing needs to be clear for all students. With that in place students will know the reason for their writing and have the opportunity to take ownership over their work. A consistent approach with the use of common language and the writing process will help avoid student confusion. During the writing process, it is important to allow students to experiment and practice with technology, since that will be used in their futures. Students will find immediate feedback beneficial because they will know what is going well and what they can work on. With feedback and explicit instruction, students have the ability to apply what they know about writing to all curricular areas.

**Set a purpose.** By knowing the reason for completing a task, students will be more motivated and invested in their writing. They will know why they are doing something. The question, “Why do we have to learn this?” will not need to be asked. An educator should be able

to explain the reason for the learning. If that cannot be provided it is possible students may interpret the task that was assigned as something to pass the time or to keep them busy. Telling students exactly what standard they will be meeting when working on a writing assignment will be very beneficial to them. It takes the guesswork out of the reason behind the assignment. Better yet, combine setting the purpose of the task with modeling and practicing together. Students would be able to ask questions as their questions came up and see the task being performed prior to completing it on their own. They will know why they are doing the work and how to go about constructing their paper.

As educators one of our jobs is to develop instruction based on what students need to learn to be successful. We tend to know those facts, but fail to communicate that to our students. The students are the ones expected to master the Common Core State Standards at the end of their current school year. By not keeping the standards a secret, students get to work towards a common goal.

**Use a common language.** Imagine sitting in a foreign language classroom that you had to take because there was not another option. Prior to being placed in that class, you had not experienced success with other languages and are very unfamiliar with the terms being used in the class. Confusion and frustration would most likely set in. Now imagine you are in a language arts classroom because it is a required course. You have no idea what the teacher is talking about because he/she is using words that are unfamiliar to you. When given an assignment to write a persuasive essay with cited evidence that supports your claim, you are completely lost. The challenge does not become sorting out thoughts for the essay, but it starts with wondering what it is you are supposed to write about. Having a consistent, common

language that is used to describe writing terms and techniques could avoid technical confusion and allow for more focus to be on the development of ideas and the format of a written piece.

Students can benefit from educators instruction and feedback when there is a common language. The creators of The Write Tools, Greiner and Simmons (2012), support the use of common language, “This has been one of the missing links in writing instruction. All too often students move from classroom to classroom with talented teachers using different terminology for the same idea” (p. xv). When varying words are used for one concept, students will experience confusion and will not be able to show their understanding of a writing strategy completely. Multiple educators, in the lives of children, need to be supporting writing in a common way for them to experience writing success.

**Use the writing process.** By providing initial explicit instruction for necessary writing strategies, students’ writing needs are being addressed. Students can show what they know about writing and what support they need by completing a writing sample, a survey, etc. After gathering that information educators can plan where to start. One should not assume students know about the writing process. For example, the steps needed to take a writing piece to production needs to be explicitly taught. Students need to see the steps modeled in order to understand the thinking required for each step.

The Write Tools supports five steps for the writing process: planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The planning and drafting steps should consume more time than students may initially want to give to it; that is why modeling and practicing together is so important. The structure that The Write Tools provides is very systematic and can be used for all informative pieces, whether it is a paragraph or an essay that is being written. The planning process requires students to analyze the prompt by stating what the topic of their paper is, who

their intended audience is, and what key words are needed to know in order for complete understanding of the assignment. Their next step within the planning process is to brainstorm their big ideas using a web or list. Then, they need to pick and choose the most crucial big ideas from their brainstorm web or list that will be transferred to the next step. The planning stage is next. During this part students use a specific organizer to develop their big ideas further by including some supporting details. The final step in the planning process is to construct topic and conclusion sentences that can be used within their paper. After those ideas are developed and the planning step is complete, students may start their first draft. They should use the information from their plan to construct sentences and paragraphs accordingly.

When students are finished drafting they need to revise and edit their paper. Students need specific examples and must be given time to practice revising and editing, which can be challenging for students who struggle with sentence structure, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. By being aware of this, students can receive additional help with writing strategies in a small group setting by focusing on their specific need. When students use computers to type their draft, Microsoft Word provides feedback that is beneficial for students who struggle with revising and editing. Microsoft Word doesn't catch everything, but students get to use technology and practice word processing skills; skills that will be needed throughout their lives.

According to Graham et al. (2001)

Word processing, for example, provides at least 3 possible advantages for these students:

(1) revising can be done without tedious recopying, (2) the resulting paper can be presented in a wide range of professional-looking formats, and (3) typing provides an inherently easier means for producing text when fine motor difficulties are present.

(p. 74)

Students will complete their final piece by publishing their writing. This step can only occur after revising and editing their initial draft, but all papers do not need to be published. Some steps may intersect with one another, which is encouraged and should be modeled. Throughout all steps of the writing process explicit writing instruction is not suggested, but must be given to all writers.

**Use technology.** What happens to students who have great ideas, but physically struggle to write those ideas down on paper? Each time they are asked to write they become discouraged and decide to dislike writing. The confidence one may have had about their writing ideas will drop and writing becomes a chore instead of a display of their creativity. When viewing hand written assignments turned in by a student like this, an educator will struggle with understanding what it is the child really knows about writing. The first reaction will be that they are a struggling writer, which may not necessarily be the case. This type of learner needs more help and support with handwriting, which is visually obvious, but has great ideas hiding behind their pencil. Handwriting is important, but not when one is being assessed on writing structure and ideas. Using technology to produce written work would be beneficial to this type of student because as they are given the chance to express their ideas clearly, they gain confidence and get true writing practice.

Technology should not be limited to the use of Microsoft Word or other types of word processing programs. Students should be exposed to and given the chance to become familiar with using technology to research their ideas and explore other opinions. Greiner and Simmons (2012) believe children should, “use technology, including the internet; to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others” (p.xviii). Giving students the explicit

instruction and practice with technology can only benefit them. The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills are important and becoming more prevalent within our lives each day.

**Provide immediate and constructive feedback.** Providing immediate and constructive feedback will help struggling writers. Using rubrics, holding student-teacher conferences, and allowing for peers to work together are a few ways to provide immediate and constructive feedback. “Consistent, systematic, and accurate feedback is the most important tool for students’ individual growth in writing” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. 418).

Using rubrics is a great way to specifically state which areas students are finding success and which areas they could use further instruction and practice. Students can evaluate themselves on the Common Core State Standards that they need to master by the end of the school year. By being able to evaluate themselves based on the learning expectations, students are aware of the purpose of their paper. Knowing the reason for their work allows for their focus to be structured around the requirements for their learning. Students are then allowed the opportunity to take ownership over understanding the standards needed for academic success.

Having student-teacher conferences is another way to provide feedback to writers. Conversations about the Common Core State Standards can occur during this time and any misunderstandings can be addressed or at least noted. The misunderstandings can then be retaught in a small group setting. “A brief (five minutes or less) individual conference with a teacher should give the student a clear understanding of the expectations for improvement” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. 418). Having parents join in on conferences with the student and the educator could bring more insight and knowledge to the writing abilities and attitudes of the young writers. Support for a struggling writer is important to their success. When reacting to parent-teacher conferences and the documentation of the meetings, Greiner and Simmons



(2012) state, “Over the course of the school year, it develops into a tremendous record of individual student instruction and growth” (p. 418).

Students can receive important peer feedback by working together on a writing piece with a partner or a group, or having students evaluate the work of their classmates. Students will have something different to offer each other than what the educator can provide. Peer teaching and learning can be very powerful if done constructively. Practicing the expectations for peer work and feedback is necessary if educators truly want students to benefit from the experience.

Feedback is a great form of constructive communication to students about their writing. Educators need to be taught how to collect data so they know what feedback to provide. Formative assessments are quick and efficient ways to gather data on how students are doing on specific standards. The assessments could be as simple as an observation by the teacher to something more complex like a quiz or writing assignment. By having information from students, educators are responding to their writing needs, which will be different for each child. When specific feedback is provided, it can be less daunting than feeling like everything needs to be fixed at one time. When teachers allow for positive and constructive feedback, students will find more success with their writing.

As educators, not only should we reflect upon the learning of our students, but we should also reflect on our learning and instruction. Students need an opportunity to reflect on their progress and so do we. It is difficult to know if we have reached our goals without reflecting on our performance. Evaluate what is going well, what can get better, what one enjoys, and what one avoids. Having that insight and knowledge of oneself, allows for learning to occur. With a closed mindset, improvement can be minimal. With the feedback from peers and educators, along with student-teacher reflections, the understanding of the writing craft can improve.

**Encourage cross-curricular writing.** The final way to support all writers is by allowing them to write in all content area classes. Writing should not only occur in a language arts classroom. That may be where children receive explicit writing instruction, but all teachers need to be educated in writing and require students to apply that to their specific content area. “While not every teacher can be expected to do the job of a reading specialist, all teachers should be trained in certain essentials of literacy instruction, and all teachers should be expected to support students' overall literacy development.” (Heller, 2013) When students get to college they will be asked to write papers in most courses, not just language arts. We would be doing them a disservice if we do not offer writing opportunities in every content area.

It can be difficult for a social studies teacher or science teacher to read a student’s writing and decipher if they do not understand the information covered in class or if their writing abilities are limiting them from expressing their thoughts on paper. If students are not given explicit writing instruction and then provided the opportunity to practice throughout their entire day, it is going to be difficult for them to use the writing process in other content areas. Imagine the understanding students would experience if all content areas used a common writing language.

### **How to Measure Writing Success**

What is writing success? What determines success? Who decides if a student is successful with writing? According to Dictionary.com (2013) success is defined as, “the accomplishment of one's goals.” The interpretation and connection someone can make to writing success would be that a student experiences success when they achieve their personal writing goals and meet the Common Core State Standards. To evaluate or measure the Common Core State Standards may be more precise than evaluating feelings towards writing. A rubric

could be used to tell a student exactly how they are performing at each standard. The things that each student would need to improve on would be specific and clear.

Although personal goals could be aligned with the Common Core State Standards, some might be emotional or behavioral goals. If that is the case, those goals may be more difficult to measure, but could be approached in a few ways. Students could develop their own rubric for their personal goal success. They would essentially be in control of evaluating their performance because they would need to tap into their feelings about writing. If a writing behavior is a goal for student success, students and educators could work together to create a rubric that supports the intentions of individual students. Their behavior could be tied to their emotional response to writing, which can be visually observed by the teacher and internally felt by the student. Writing is complex and should not only have an academic focus for success. The academic focus is very important, but will come after the confidence and positive feelings are developed and fostered.

Students can reach their writing goals in many ways. In order to be successful, students and educators need to work together. Greiner and Simmons (2012) truly believe that student success is fostered by the classroom teacher (p. xv). It is the teachers who by modeling a love of writing, utilizing The Write Tools strategies, requiring a common language, setting a purpose for learning, and providing explicit instruction, can make a difference in how students write and feel about writing. By being aware that writing is crucial, understanding students' writing perceptions, and helping struggling writers, children will experience more success with meeting individual goals and with learning the Common Core State Standards.

## METHODS

### Overview of Study

The purpose of this Teacher Research (Hubbard & Power, 2003) study is to find out how student writing is affected by explicit writing instruction. This study specifically looks at why explicit writing instruction is important, why it should be used, how educators should apply it, and how to measure student-writing success. I was the lead teacher for this study. I explicitly taught the writing strategies to the students and evaluated their work. A special education teacher, Amy Kennell, and I collaboratively planned for lessons and activities. We both provided students with feedback throughout the writing process. Amy also worked intensely with the students who had independent writing plans. I supported her decisions on what approaches she used to instruct and guide them with their writing. Even with Amy's help and dedication, I take responsibility for the development of this study.

**Writing training.** In 2012 I received The Write Tools writing training required by my school district. At that time I was teaching in an elementary school. During the spring of 2012 my third graders and I experimented with some of the strategies I learned from the conference. The following 2012-2013 school year, I changed teaching positions and became a seventh grade language arts teacher. Three out of my five classes had a focus on writing. One class included a mix of general education students and special education students. Instead of having the special education students pulled out during class, a special education teacher was assigned to support them. Amy Kennell was that assigned teacher and that is when and where our relationship started. Amy had not had The Write Tools training prior to the 2012-2013 school year. The school district allowed for all middle school teachers to receive training in the fall of 2012. Amy and I attended the conference on different dates.

**Implementation of the training.** Being the first official year in our school district for the grades kindergarten through eighth grade to receive and implement The Write Tools training, I experimented with what my students knew in regards to The Write Tools strategies to know where to start with them. We started with sentences, moved to writing paragraphs, and then to essays. I didn't start with essays immediately because they are seventh graders, I wanted to start with the instruction that they needed. Next year I will do the same, but the in coming sixth graders will have had one complete year of The Write Tools instruction and practice, which means they will be exposed to the language and the strategies.

### **Study Setting/Participants**

Woodson Middle School is one of six middle schools in the city of Hankerson. Woodson sits in the middle of an older community of middle to lower middle class families. In the recent years a flood has hit portions of this neighborhood hard. The residential areas lie close to industrial areas. The Hankerville school district made some boundary changes for the 2012-2013 school year, which invited families from surrounding areas into Woodson.

During the 2012-2013 year 385 students in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade attend Woodson. This is the first year that Woodson is an independent middle school. Woodson used to serve as an elementary and middle combined, having students in 2<sup>nd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade attend.

Out of the 385 students in 2012-2013 at Woodson, 137 of them are 7<sup>th</sup> graders. In the 7<sup>th</sup> grade class there are 58 males and 79 females. Seventy-four percent of the 7<sup>th</sup> graders are white, 18% are African American, 4% are Hispanic, and 1% is American Indian.

**Room 212.** This study focused on 24 of the 137 students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. That is 20% of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade population. 17 students or 63% of them are white, 8 students or 30% of them are African American, and 2 students or 7% of them are Hispanic. Thirteen students or 48% are

females and 14 students or 52% are males. Of the 24 students, 8 students or 33% of the students have individualized education plan for writing.

The 50-minute class period that the 24 students 7<sup>th</sup> grades attend in room 212 is titled Language Arts. Our main focus is on writing instruction and practice since the students have a separate reading class built into their schedule. Amy Kennell, the 24 students, and myself are a purposeful sample (Glesne, 2006, p. 34) for this study. This class was specifically chosen because of the diverse learning abilities and needs in regards to writing.

### **Description of the Project**

Students were asked to write a paragraph at the beginning of the year. There was absolutely no teaching prior to the writing. Students knew that they had to write about their weekend and they were prompted to explain three things they did. When looking back at those paragraphs some of the students included a topic and conclusion sentence, many of which were weak. Their big ideas and supporting details could use some extra work, but they had the other two pieces. The majority of the students did not include a topic sentence or a conclusion, had big ideas, but did not support those ideas.

Immediately after the students completed their paragraphs we started to learn about how to construct informative paragraphs. I taught them what a paragraph is; along with the parts we are going to use to organize our thoughts. We planned and drafted a paragraph that needed to include a topic sentence, at least three big ideas with supporting details, along with a conclusion. At that time, we were not working on revising and editing written pieces yet because that would be taught and practiced prior to the third paragraph. So after the modeling of the writing process for a paragraph, after I practiced with the students, and after they practiced together, I asked them to write a paragraph that explained three things they liked about seventh grade at Woodson

Middle School. When I evaluated their writing I strictly looked for the format of a paragraph. Sixty-seven percent of the students included all aspects of the paragraph we were working on and needed to make minor changes or additions. The rest of the students either included those parts but had a lot to adjust or they forgot to add something in their paragraph.

After students were finished with the second paragraph and had received feedback from me, and while they were completing their third, I gave them their first paragraphs back again. They analyzed it and color-coded it according to the format of a paragraph. Students were surprised at how much they learned in less than two months. Some seventh graders even experienced frustration about the structure of their first paragraph, even though it was prior to writing instruction. That frustration proved that they knew the format and care about their writing.

With a little more than half of the students understanding the construction of an informative paragraph and a little less than half of them needing some more support, the third paragraph was written in small groups. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions to one another and compose their sentences together after making their plan. Eighty-nine percent of the students showed understanding of the writing process and format of a paragraph. Obviously, that was a large increase. It is hard to know who did what work in group projects, but I believe that change in our plan was purposeful in order to support students that needed further practice.

For the writing of the fourth informative paragraph, 79% of the students showed understanding of the format of writing one paragraph. The percentage declined from the group writing, but increased from the last individual paragraph.

While the writing of these paragraphs occurred, explicit instruction was being taught in regards to comparing the format of a paragraph to the format of constructing an essay. Each student kept a binder or folder in the classroom. We called them their toolboxes. In their toolboxes students kept all the notes and tools needed to guide them with the writing we were working on. They could use those tools for any writing piece as a reference.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that I developed for this study were:

- Question 1: When students are taught writing strategies, how is their writing affected?
- Question 2: How can educators encourage children to be more comfortable with writing?
- Question 3: What can we do to help students understand writing and find success?
- Question 4: What advantages are there to modeling and teaching students how to write?
- Question 5: What can educators do if students are resistant to the effort it takes to learn and apply writing strategies?

Question number five was added to my research after the students completed the first student survey. Twenty-four percent of my students claimed there wasn't anything about writing that they liked. With those students in mind, I wondered not only what explicit writing instruction would do to help them, but I also wanted to know if those students would still practice writing even if they don't like to. All of these questions served as my focus for my data collection and analysis of this study.



## Methods of Data Collection

This study, of the effects of explicit writing instruction, utilized four data sources that included student surveys, observations and conversations, quizzes, and student writing samples. With the use of all of these points of data, students' attitudes about writing, their understanding of the language being used, and their ability to apply what they've learned were analyzed.

I started my research with giving the students an assignment. They were asked to write an informative paragraph without prior explicit instruction. That assignment goes against what my intentions were for this research, but the paragraph was needed in order to see where the students were in relation to the format and structure of writing a paragraph. That writing piece needed to occur prior to any teaching so I would know what needed to be addressed. After the students wrote an informative paragraph, explicit writing instruction occurred. I modeled and we practiced the planning process needed prior to the construction of the writing of a paragraph. Students were given the opportunity to write another informative paragraph after instruction was given. A student survey also took place along with a quiz focusing on the terminology used during instruction and teacher feedback. This process continued using the same data sources, student surveys, observations and conversations, quizzes, and student writing samples.

**Surveys.** There were two surveys given throughout the first and second trimester. The first survey took place around the mid-term of the first trimester and was more in-depth. The second survey was completed at the end of the second trimester and was used as a follow up from the first survey. The surveys' intentions were to see how students felt about writing, find out what they were experiencing success with, and what they could have used more help with. Students did receive writing instruction and practice prior to taking the surveys this year. The initial survey can be found in Appendix A.

**Observations and conversations.** The observations for this study came from planned and unplanned conversations. In chapter 3, of The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher Researchers, Hubbard and Power (2003) share some ideas in regards teacher journal ideas. I was able to use their suggestions such as the use of the teacher journal, but adapted it to fit my research and personal preference. Through my journal I was able to observe students, analyze their needs, and adjust my instruction based on what I observed in conjunction with other data sources. As I was working with my students I verbally checked in with them to get an understanding of their opinions and feelings in regards to writing. By starting the year off with encouraging my students to express their real thoughts about writing, it allowed for unplanned conversations to occur. Some students were willing to share what they were thinking as needed instead of through a planned discussion or survey. When I planned a discussion, I would write down student responses on our interactive whiteboard, which allowed all students to visually see how their classmates were thinking, and feelings towards writing. The unplanned comments were recorded in a notebook shortly after the conversation took place. Almost all of the conversations I had with students occurred during class time in our room.

**Quizzes.** Students were asked to take quizzes covering the Common Core State Standards for seventh grade. Those expectations included terminology that will be used all year long such as the question what is a paragraph? That was common language that the students needed to know because it supports the standard to develop, organize, and write in a style appropriate to a specific task and audience. The goal of the quizzes was to let us know if they understood the words that I used with them. If they were struggling with their assignments there could be a possibility that there is a vocabulary barrier. Also, if students wanted to improve parts of their writing they could include what was covered on the quizzes to make their writing better.

An example of a quiz can be found in Appendix B. Students took notes on all concepts covered on the quizzes and they were given the chance to practice applying those concepts multiple times prior to taking the quizzes. A study guide was also provided a day or two before the quizzes were administered. Students were not allowed to use their notes for the quizzes, but they could use any resources found around the room if desired.

**Student informative paragraph writing samples.** In chapter 3, of The Art of Classroom Inquiry: A Handbook for Teacher Researchers, Hubbard and Power (2003) address the importance for teacher researchers to have student samples. For my study I collected student-writing samples. Students were asked to write an informative paragraph at the beginning of the year without any previous writing instruction. They were all given the prompt to write about three things they did over summer break. They were told not to write it like a narrative, but to include details of their three events. Then after some explicit instruction about what to include in an informative paragraph and how to format it, they wrote a second paragraph about three reasons they like seventh grade. After seeing the results from that paragraph, students then worked on a third paragraph in a small group. Their prompt consisted of choosing something that could improve the school and give three reasons for their choice. Their final informative paragraph written was an individual paragraph. This paragraph was similar to the writing focus for that trimester, which was persuasive writing. Students were asked to choose a topic that they wanted to persuade someone of and write three big ideas that supported their claim. Prior to that paragraph, students were mainly focusing on learning about and writing essays, instead of receiving explicit instruction on stand-alone paragraphs.

All paragraphs were assessed on the inclusion of the five crucial components of a paragraph. Those five parts consisted of a plan, a topic sentence, big ideas, supporting details,

and a conclusion sentence. The students needed to have a plan for their paragraph that included analyzing the prompt, brainstorm about their topic, a t-chart of big ideas and details, and a topic sentence organizer because the paragraphs needed to have a topic sentence that supported the topic. Next, they needed to have at least three big ideas with the use of transitions words for the second and third big idea sentences. Also, supporting details were required for all three big ideas and those details needed to help the reader visualize what the writer was trying to convey. Finally, each paragraph needed a conclusion sentence with a signal word if necessary. The paragraphs were not evaluated on revisions or edits made. The total score results for the paragraphs can be found in Appendix C. The rubric allowed me to simply focus on if the students understood the format and content of each paragraph. Other assessments and writing samples were used to address revising and editing needs.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

Using the constant comparative model (Hubbard and Power, 2003, p. 114-116 ), I was able to discover themes across the collected data that led to a better understanding of the impact that explicit writing instruction has on student writing attitudes and performances. I was able to find patterns within and across the data used for this research. To guide my research I asked the following questions, which also directed the analysis of the data.

- When students are taught writing strategies, how is their writing affected?
- How can educators encourage children to be more comfortable with writing?
- What can we do to help students understand writing and find success?
- What advantages are there to modeling and teaching students how to write?
- What can educators do if students are resistant to the effort it takes to learn and apply writing strategies?

By allowing these questions to guide the analysis of my data I was able to narrow my focus, which is why the constant comparative method (Hubbard and Power, 2003, p. 114-116 ) encourages the triangulation of data. The questions listed were used for guidance in the discovering of multiple themes that were established during this research. Those themes will be revealed and addressed in the following Results section.

### **Conclusion**

This study could be considered an interpretative qualitative study with some collaboration between the classroom teacher and the supporting special education teacher. Taking place in a seventh-grade language arts classroom, the study focused on the effects that explicit writing instruction has on students' writing. The study looked not only at students' writing abilities, but their attitudes in regards to writing as well. Four forms of data were used which included student surveys, observations and conversations, student writing samples, and quizzes. Data analysis for this study involved the constant comparative model. Through the data collection and analysis my hopes, for this research study, were to learn about the effects of explicitly teaching writing strategies on students. I have learned that when educators choose to model the writing process for the type of writing that's being worked on, they will see positive student performance and positive student attitudes. With modeling and practice I hope students find the relevance and possibly the joy in writing.

### **RESULTS**

As I traveled through my research and I was analyzing the data, I realized that many changes were needed based on my students' needs. When my co-teacher, Amy Kennell, and I noticed that the majority of our students understood the terminology addressed on the quizzes, we added more information to the next one. When we noticed that more than 30% of students

were struggling with forming a paragraph after writing the second paragraph, Amy and I discussed what steps to take. So, we decided to model the writing process again and allow them to construct an informative paragraph with a small group. By doing that, all students were able to learn from one another, this in turn increased the individual paragraph results for the paragraph that followed the partner writing. We aimed to be responsive to our students and in doing so additional data, such as a second survey was given. We were looking to get a recent understanding of where the students were in regards to their writing attitudes and writing performances.

### **Writing Attitudes**

At the beginning of the year we worked hard to create a positive learning environment to promote encouraging writing thoughts. Our motto became “Positive thoughts lead to positive actions”. One thing that really developed during this research that I did not expect to be so strong was my relationships with my writers. We built a warm and safe environment together, which allowed them to be very open with their opinions and ideas about writing. I respected them as learners, so I made sure they knew what we were doing and why we are doing it. They respected me in return by trying whatever it was we were doing. That relationship was helpful in finding deeper results from my students.

**Survey results.** In order to understand how students felt about writing I had the seventh graders complete two surveys. The questions on the surveys allowed me to see what students liked and disliked about writing, along with what they felt they were good at and what they felt they needed help with in regards to writing. The first survey occurred half way through the first trimester, after some explicit writing instruction. The second or follow-up survey was completed at the end of the second trimester. For the first question, in the initial survey, students were

asked to rate how they felt about writing on a scale of 1 to 5. See Appendix A to view the first survey.

- 60% of the students enjoy/like writing
- 16% of the students think writing is okay
- 24% of the students don't like to write
- When given this survey at the end of the second trimester 1 out of 23 students wrote they didn't like any type of writing. That is 4% of the class as compared to 24% towards the beginning of the year.

Students were then asked to identify types of writing they liked and types they disliked.

Students were able to list more than one type as a liked or disliked. The results from what students like were:

- 35% of the students liked narrative writing
- 30% of the students liked expository/informative writing
- 35% of the students liked writing without teacher directions
- When asked this question at the end of the second trimester 18 out of 23, which is 78% of the students listed that they liked something we had worked on in class or are currently working on in class. The majority of the students listed informative writing to be their favorites.

The results from what students disliked were:

- 22% of the students disliked narrative writing
- 17% of the students disliked expository/informative writing
- 32% of the students disliked writing without teacher directions
- 27% of the students disliked writing essays (multi-paragraphs-narrative/expository)

- 2% of the students do not disliked any writing
- When asked this question at the end of the second trimester 18 out of 23, which is 78% of the students listed that they disliked something we had worked on in class or are currently working on in class.

The final question on the survey asked students to tell what they thought they were good at with writing and what they could use more help with. The results for what students felt they were good at were:

- 10 out of the 13 responses, which was 77% included content we were covering in class. (Example: voice, topic and conclusion sentences, supporting details, etc.)
- When given this survey at the end of the second trimester 17 out of 23 students, which was 73% of them listed something that had been explicitly taught in class as an area of writing that they are good at.

The results for what students felt they needed help with were:

- 11 out of the 20, which was 55% included content we had not covered in class yet. (Example: multi-paragraphs, handwriting, etc.)
- When given this survey at the end of the second trimester 13 out of 23 students, which was 57% of the class listed things that have not yet been explicitly taught in class.

By having students complete the surveys, this data provided information on how students felt about writing, what they liked and disliked in regards to writing, along with what they felt their strengths are and what they could use more help with.

**Observation and conversation results.** The communication between my students and myself, about writing, proved to be calm, valuable, and honest. After setting a routine for our class, my students did not have a need to be anxious or unaware of what they were learning,



which in turn invited a calm disposition. I required my students to find value in our work together in the classroom. No one ever asked, “Why do we need to do this?” That question was not needed because they were informed of the standards we were working on achieving. Students were honest with me because they were not afraid to ask questions and they responded well to my feedback. I did not need to convince any of my students to work on their writing. It seems as though they took ownership over their work while applying what they know. “So, if I had to write a paragraph in social studies class, could I use the writing plan that we use in this class?” one student asked while we were reviewing the necessary plan and format for paragraph writing (Observation notes, 10-04-12). From the calm environment, trustworthiness, and valuable learning experiences, I observed very positive and trustworthy relationships develop between my students and myself, which then led to the development of their positive writing perceptions.

Writing attitudes were clearly revealed with the use of student observations and conversations, as well as through student surveys. The positive attitudes my students acquired about writing came from feeling comfortable with the writing process and being aware of the writing expectations set for them. Through some conversations and observations students expressed what they liked about writing now after some writing instruction occurred. For example, a student with an A in language arts was having a conversation with his mom and me during conferences. When asked what he thought about writing he said, “I never liked writing, but now I kinda do.” “What has changed? What do you like about writing now?” I asked. “I know how I’m supposed to write now. Before I didn’t know,” replied my student (Student conference, 10-9-12).

I also observed a student who experienced a positive change in his attitude toward writing. He did not do very well in his other classes, but scored a B in writing. He often does not exude high self-esteem or think very highly of school. I could tell with his second paragraph that he was interested in what he was writing and was willing to put forth the effort because I observed him working and asking questions instead of saying he was finished within the first five minutes of starting an assignment. Normally he would turn in the bare minimum and resist responding to my feedback (Observation notes, 10-7-12). This time was different because he allowed me to answer questions, give suggestions, and praise his efforts.

Our writing instruction impacted all students in our classroom. Specifically, the eight students with individual education plans who found some success with the structure of the informative writing process and changed their negative writing attitudes to positive ones. Many of the students commented on how they knew the next step in the writing process, which helps them know what to do.

**Writing perceptions.** An emerging theme from the observations and conversations, as well as student surveys, was that writing seemed not as intimidating when students knew how to construct their informative paragraphs. The knowledge of writing a paragraph came from explicit instruction and the chance to practice the writing process. Without explicit writing instruction students seemed to have less confidence, understanding, and desire to write because seeing success was not common with that mindset.

Student surveys helped determine that teaching students how to write minimized the amount of students who disliked writing. At the beginning of the year 24% of the students expressed they did not like to write. By the end of the second trimester 4% of the students, which was one student, still did not like to write. Twenty percent of the students decided that

after explicit instruction and practice they feel more comfortable with writing and like to write. This finding supports the questions I had about how educators can encourage children to be more comfortable with writing and what educators can do if students are resistant to the effort it takes to learn and apply writing strategies. The answer to the first question listed, based on the research, is we must teach students how to write and they will know what to do. There will be less confusion and frustration after explicit instruction. Educators need to show the students exactly what is needed for writing success and then give them an opportunity to try it out with each other and on their own. Some students will naturally be resistant to writing whether it is because of their past experiences, they are uninterested, or for other reasons. By continually showing students how they can find success through explicit instruction and consistently providing feedback, I found that they cared about their writing and put forth their best effort.

### **Writing Abilities**

In order to understand and analyze student writing abilities, I collected data from their paragraph writing samples and from the content vocabulary quizzes.

**Student informative paragraph writing sample results.** Students wrote four separate one-paragraph pieces that were used as data for this teacher research. The paragraphs were written at specific times throughout instruction to help guide future writing instruction. The results listed below show students who performed 80% or better on the overall format, structure, and content of the paragraphs. The same rubric was used to score all paragraphs. To view the rubric, see Appendix D.

- Paragraph 1 (individually written without prior explicit instruction): 43% of the students were proficient

- Paragraph 2 (individually written after explicit instruction): 67% of the students were proficient
- Paragraph 3 (written in small groups after explicit instruction): 92% of the students were proficient
- Paragraph 4 (individually written while explicit instruction focused on essay writing): 79% of the students were proficient

There was a gradual increase in the percent proficient from paragraph 1 to paragraph 2. More students were able to write an informative paragraph proficiently by including the correct format and content after receiving explicit writing instruction. When students were given the chance to support each other in the construction of the third paragraph, there proved to be a large increase of proficiency. The results from the final paragraph showed an increase in proficiency amongst the individually written paragraphs. However, there was a slight decline in proficiency from the completion of the group paragraph to the last individual paragraph. In order to view paragraph results refer to Appendix C.

**Quiz Results.** The goal of the quizzes was to determine if students understood the words I used in instruction and within our feedback conversations. By having this information and triangulating it with the other sets of data I wanted to be able to identify if the content vocabulary was or was not a barrier in each student's learning. On the first test, 40% of the students scored an 80% or better on the quiz. However, less than 50% of the students were able to correctly recognize and use the terminology that I use during class. With those results I reminded myself and my students that they are expected to know the terms and the expectations because they will be used all year long and hopefully into their eighth grade year.

After the first quiz the students took four more quizzes. My explicit instruction changed depending on what the students' quizzes and student work were displaying. The quizzes were not identical, but were similar in what they covered. Each quiz included the standards we had worked on and were working on at the current moment. I considered students who scored 80% or better on the quizzes as proficient with the understanding of the terminology used in instruction and feedback. Here is an overview of the students' performance on quizzes.

- Quiz 1: 40% of the students scored 80% or better
- Quiz 2: 92% of students scored 80% or better
- Quiz 3: 92% of students scored 80% or better
- Quiz 4: 92% of students scored 80% or better
- Quiz 5: 92% of students scored 80% or better

Taking these quizzes held students accountable for their learning and allowed me to see if they are struggling with the terminology or if their difficulties were with the writing process. The quiz results showed me that initially the terminology was new to the students with less than half of them proficient. The percentage of students who scored proficient or better on quizzes 2, 3, 4, and 5 was high. Only 8% of my students find the terminology, used with instruction and in feedback, to be a barrier. I noticed that the scores of the proficient students increased from the initial quiz, but did not increase or decrease as we continued to take the quizzes, even though new information was being added. The students stayed very consistent with their understanding of the terminology used in the classroom for instruction and feedback.

**Common language and writing performance.** There is a correlation between knowing the common language used in the classroom and student writing performance. Students who did not display an understanding of the terminology used in class struggled with the independent

practice of writing at the beginning of the year. By the end of the second trimester they proved they knew the language through the quiz data results. Even though they made progress with their writing they still needed some support with the construction of an informative paragraph. That theme was developed from comparing student quizzes to student work samples. It emphasizes the importance of the correlation between common language and performance. The question, about what advantages are there to modeling and teaching students how to write can be addressed through explicit instruction because students will continually see how to apply the language being used.

Students' informative paragraph writing performance increased as they received direct writing instruction and the opportunity to practice. That theme was developed from student work samples. The percentage of students who were proficient gradually increased each time they wrote a paragraph on their own. This addressed the initial question I raised about when students are taught writing strategies, how is their writing affected? Through this research I've learned that student writing, overall, is affected in a positive way when taught, modeled, and given the time to practice writing.

### **Conclusion**

From my research I was able to identify that the majority of students were familiar with and used the structures and tools that I had been teaching. From their participation and feedback, it seems as though students' writing self-confidence has increased. Overall, I have discovered that their writing attitudes and abilities have shown improvement with the use of explicit writing instruction.

## DISCUSSION

### Summary

During the course of this study, I explicitly taught informative writing to my students. By doing so, my students were given the opportunity to learn and apply what was discussed, in class, to their own writing. I focused on finding out how students' writing performance was affected after they were taught how to format and structure their writing, along with learning about writing strategies. With that explicit teaching in place, I also wanted to have a better understanding of what I can do to help students become more comfortable with writing by understanding how to write and to find success. Also, I knew that there could be students who were resistant to the effort that it takes to learn and apply writing strategies, so being aware of student attitudes was a necessity.

To get an understanding of my students' writing attitudes and performances I collected data using student surveys, observations and conversations, quizzes, and student writing samples. With the use of triangulation, I was able to not only look at each source separately, but by analyzing them together, it allowed for themes to be developed amongst multiple sources. Those findings included indications of how my students felt about writing and how they performed. When specifically looking at student attitudes, I used their surveys and observations to discover that writing was not as intimidating to them after I provided explicit instruction. Through the collection and analysis of the data, students showed an improvement in their writing attitudes. The thoughts students had about writing played a part in their writing performances. When analyzing their quizzes and student writing samples the development of more themes occurred. As explicit instruction took place, students' proficiency on quizzes and within their writing samples increased. Through observation I saw students' self-confidence rise as their

understanding of the content vocabulary become more familiar. I did not find a direct correlation between the increases of proficient quiz scores to proficient writing samples. The majority of students understood what words were being used for instruction and feedback which indicates that content language was not a barrier. Overall, the data supported that my students experienced a positive change in their thoughts about writing, along with an increase in proficiency with their writing performance.

### **Conclusions**

The findings from this study indicate that explicit writing instruction can positively support students' writing attitudes and abilities. Not only does this study support that idea, but other researchers and educators have come to that same conclusion. Writing is crucial for the future of our students because it is something that will be required of them in high school, college, and in their career. As addressed in the literature review, Joyce A.E. Russell (2011) wrote an article expressing the concern that business leaders have about the decline of writing ability their employees or future employees have (paragraph 4). Since writing is so important, it must be taught effectively in order for students to find success. The explicit instruction modeled in this study supports the work of Feng and Powers (2005) who wrote, "Outstanding writing teachers not only recognize the importance of "a little love and understanding," they also stress the importance of tailoring instruction to meet the individual needs of children experiencing difficulty learning to write, including those with learning disabilities" (p.42). To have effective instruction, a purpose for the writing must be communicated to the students, along with the use of common content language, and immediate feedback in regards to their writing samples. The process and findings of this study support high quality writing instruction and as Allington



(2012) wrote, “The most powerful feature of schools, in terms of developing children as readers and writers, is the quality of classroom instruction” (p. 142).

My research will continue to have an influence on my educational practice. I can tell the writing instruction is not only improving students’ performance, but it also encourages a safe environment that leads to increased self-confidence. The findings from the surveys, writing assignments, quizzes, and observations seemed to support increased student performance. The surveys and observations were an indication of increased writing self-confidence. I am encouraged to continue my work with explicit writing instruction as outlined in this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

I would recommend that all educators teach students how to write instead of simply assigning writing. “Insufficient writing skill is a major contributor to lack of school and college success” (Hough, T., Hixson, M., Decker, D. , & Bradley-Johnson, 2012, p. 163). Teaching writing allows written communication to occur between the teacher and the student. By explicitly teaching students how to write, while consistently using content vocabulary, students will be able to communicate their questions more effectively if everyone is speaking the same writing language. When teaching children how to write there is constantly something to teach, learn, and work on. “Although some may think of the daily routines of life as being boring and mundane, student writers and teachers alike find our writing routines comforting and confidence building” (Greiner and Simmons, 2012, p. xiii). With that in mind, if the teacher is modeling a love and understanding of writing, students will witness that and have the opportunity to be encouraged.

From my findings I have developed a plan for the future of my writing instruction. After modeling, teaching, and practicing, we will move from informative writing to narrative writing.

I would like to incorporate some of the researched ideas out there about social narratives. As Heffernan and Lewison (2003) state:

While Lee's students continued to write about the personal, they eventually blended the personal and the social into narrative texts to explore social themes generated through class conversations and events. Students came to use their writing to construct and call attention to problems in their common culture (p. 437).

I hope that the explicit writing instruction approach, like described in this study, will lead to richer narrative instruction and writing in my future teaching. I am thrilled to teach students the differences between narrative and informative writing. I am more excited to see them put the information they learn to practice. This writing research has impacted my instruction and relationship with students tremendously. By having that positive experience, I want it to influence my future work with writing and I hope others find the desire to make writing instruction a success for their students.

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**APPENDICES**

Appendix A

Student Survey #1

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 how do you feel about writing? (1 being you do not like writing, 5 being you really like writing)
2. Name types of writing you like.
3. Name types of writing you dislike.
4. What writing do you feel you are good at?
5. What writing do you feel you need more help with?

Appendix B

Writing Quiz

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Writing Quiz #3**

**SLE: Strengthen writing through revising.**

Define the following parts of speech.

1. noun \_\_\_\_\_
2. adjective \_\_\_\_\_
3. verb \_\_\_\_\_
4. adverb \_\_\_\_\_

List the five steps of the writing process in order.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

**SLE: Develop, organize, and write in a style appropriate to a specific task and audience.**

Name the two types of writing we have been working on.

\_\_\_\_\_

What is a paragraph?

\_\_\_\_\_

What is a multi-paragraph?

\_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C

Student Writing Sample Results

	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3	Sample 4
	individually written paragraph without previous instruction	individually written paragraph after explicit instruction	small group paragraph after explicit instruction	individually written paragraph while explicit instruction focused on 5 paragraph essays
	Needs Assistance 69% or below Average 70%-79% Proficient: 80%-89% Advanced 90%-100%			
A	56%	84%	76%	96%
B	84%	92%	80%	100%
C	84%	76%	92%	100%
D	92%	92%	100%	88%
E	70%	96%	80%	80%
F	92%	84%	80%	88%
G	76%	80%	88%	96%
H	84%	100%	96%	100%
I	76%	77%	80%	88%
J	67%	88%	88%	100%
K	88%	88%	100%	80%
L	60%	80%	88%	64%
M	64%	70%	88%	88%
N	96%	84%	96%	88%
O	76%	84%	88%	96%
P	80%	77%	88%	96%
Q	96%	100%	76%	100%
R	76%	76%	92%	88%
S	40%	76%	96%	76%
T	80%	80%	80%	60%
U	60%	70%	84%	60%
V	68%	88%	92%	100%
W	56%	76%	80%	44%
X	excused	80%	88%	80%
<b>Class Average</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>83%</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>86%</b>
<b>Total # Proficient</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Total % Proficient</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>79%</b>

\*students who moved out or in during the collection of data are not included

Appendix D

Informative Paragraph Writing Rubric

Standard: Develop, organize, and write in a style appropriate to a specific task and audience.

<b>Topic Sentence</b>	<b>Big Ideas</b>	<b>Supporting Details</b>	<b>Conclusion Sentence</b>	<b>Writing Process</b>
Includes a <b>simple</b> statement, <b>number</b> statement, <b>question</b> , or <b>situation/stance</b>	Has <b>at least 3 big ideas</b> that stayed on topic	Has supporting detail sentences to support <b>every</b> big idea	Includes a <b>simple</b> statement, <b>number</b> statement, <b>question</b> , or <b>situation/stance</b> that supports the topic	<b>Brainstorming and Planning</b> (web, t-chart, topic/conclusion organizer)
Supports the topic	Uses transition words	All tell me more sentences help the reader visualize	Includes a <b>signal word</b>	<b>Drafting and Publishing</b> (first and second paragraph)
Points worth: 5 Points earned: ____	Points worth: 5 Points earned: ____	Points worth: 5 Points earned: ____	Points worth: 5 Points earned: ____	Points worth: 5 Points earned: ____

You earned: + \_\_\_\_\_  
25