Can we redeem the writing workshop approach? - with April Smith

Triple R Teaching Podcast #204

Anna Geiger:

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Thank you for joining me in the second of what's going to be quite a series about teaching writing.

We're really hearing from all different voices in this series. We started last week with Dr. Steve Graham, who is known for being one of the most prolific researchers in the area of teaching writing, and today we're going to talk with April Smith.

One thing I really think about a lot as I'm thinking about how to best approach teaching writing is the writing workshop approach, which is what I used as a balanced literacy teacher. There were many things I did that were wrong or insufficient, which we will address in today's episode, but I also know that some elements of writing workshop actually are supported by research, as you learned if you listened to last week's episode with Dr. Steve Graham.

Today, April Smith and I are going to talk about that and then some other things as well. But we're going to focus primarily on things we should improve upon in the writing workshop model if we're going to make sure that it's effective for students.

April is the author of *Simplify Your Writing Instruction* and creator of Simplify Writing, a structured writing program that teaches grammar, handwriting, and spelling in the context of authentic writing. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, April!

April Smith:

Hi Anna, thank you so much for having me, I appreciate it.

Anna Geiger:

Thanks for joining me to talk about writing.

Before we get into your approach to teaching writing and Simplify Writing, could you share a little bit about your experience in education and what you're doing now?

April Smith:

Sure, I started teaching in 2008 in a rural area of Arizona. I've been here ever since. I've primarily taught fourth through eighth grade, and then really started learning more about kindergarten through third grade when I started training teachers in writing instruction.

I was a district writing coach, and now I actually train districts across the country and private schools and charter schools. I also work with Simplify Writing, and I'm an author.

I'm just really obsessed with anything that has to do with writing or anything that has to do with supporting students with dyslexia and dysgraphia because I have a child who has both of those.

Anna Geiger:

Before we hit record, we were talking about how many teachers feel completely stuck when it comes to teaching writing. The traditional writing workshop approach, and by "traditional" I mean the one that most people think of when they think of writing workshop, became popular in the 90s and beyond. It was definitely something I learned about in college and embraced as a teacher.

But when I look back, I would say there were some definite things that needed improvement. I'd like to use today's conversation to talk a lot about what are some things we may need to improve on, even if we do want to continue a workshop model for teaching writing. What do we need to think about in terms of changes or improvements that we should make to the traditional approach?

Before we get too far, how would you define the traditional writing workshop approach or experience?

April Smith:

Well, the interesting thing about writer's workshop is I feel like everybody does it in a slightly different way.

Back when I first started teaching, the writer's workshop approach was really popular and everybody I knew was doing it slightly different.

Some were actually doing the more traditional approach, where they did the mini lesson and then they sent students off, and students were really working on their own writing at their own pace. It was a little chaotic.

Then there were others who were trying to control it a little bit more. They were making sure that they were assigning a prompt, but then these students were working on their own and then working ahead, and that was chaotic too.

Then there are people like me who really moved towards more scaffolding and really trying to make sure that we are still doing a mini lesson, but we are keeping students really on that same step so we could keep it a little less chaotic and more controlled.

I feel that traditional writers workshop includes a lot of freedom; we just felt like kids need to have freedom for creativity, and they need to have voice and choice. We know that's true, but we were just not giving enough scaffolding to make it actually work. Because of that, teachers were making a lot of modifications to that traditional model.

It looks different in every classroom, but there were definitely some elements of writer's workshop that we all struggled with.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and looking back to my own experience, I liked teaching writing workshop. I advocated for it for other teachers, but it's also true that there were days when it was maybe at one o'clock in the afternoon, it had been a long day with my first and second graders, and I just decided that we're not doing writing workshop today. I just didn't have it in me because I didn't have enough structure to know exactly how it was going to go.

It was exhausting, frankly, especially if I had kids that were feeling very needy that day, and everyone wanted to have a conference with me.

When I think about traditional writing workshop, I think about that structure of time, right? You have that mini lesson, you have the whole independent writing time where the teacher is conferring, often with individual students, and then that sharing time at the end, which to be honest, I often did not do even though I knew it was useful.

I think, and like you said, it's very similar in some ways to the whole balanced literacy idea. We all have different definitions, and we all carried it out in different ways, so it is very hard to define.

When I look at summaries of the research about teaching writing, many of those things align with the traditional writing workshop approach, so I would not say it's something we have to completely throw away.

What would you say are the qualities of writing workshop that are worth keeping?

April Smith:

A lot of what's in there is actually connected to the research.

We do need to provide explicit writing instruction, that's there.

The mini lesson is a great idea because really we need to stick with one key skill, and our lesson should be short to keep students engaged. That's not wrong either. We definitely do need to keep that direct instruction.

Students do need independent writing time.

They do need feedback, but it should look a little bit different.

Instead of us struggling to try to provide writing conferences all day, every day, to get all 30 kids in, if you have a large class, we should be focusing more on supporting the students.

Whether it's through scaffolding, which in K-2, we should really be working with *all* the students while they're writing. We really shouldn't be trying to confer with students independently while those other students, especially kindergarten and first graders, are trying to write independently. Because then we're missing out on giving those students who need it that quick, actionable feedback right then and there.

But in the older grades, we have the opportunity to work with students on filling in gaps and identifying what they're struggling with, and filling in those gaps in small groups.

What I think we should really get rid of, and this is my unpopular opinion, is that conferring time, because feedback should happen way more than just once a week when we can fit in our students. It should be happening while they're writing, it should be happening while we're teaching, it should be happening between the students as peer feedback. It should be happening way more often than that.

I think the conferring time is the part of writer's workshop that teachers really, really struggled with.

Anna Geiger:

True, and also your point of once a week. Literally, that's the way it ended up because when you're meeting with individuals, the idea of the writing workshop approach is you're supposed to figure out exactly what one thing you could teach them in this moment that's going to improve their writing tomorrow. Versus what can you teach them that will help them be a better writer now?

I remember telling people, don't worry about this piece of writing, worry about what you can teach them for the future. But then when do you ever get the feedback for improving the piece right in front of them?

I think it was a lot of pressure because if you weren't yourself a strong writer, you wouldn't know exactly what to pick out and sometimes those writing workshop approaches didn't have a lot of structure for the teacher, but we'll get to that.

How does your approach that you've kind of hinted at a little bit now... How does your Simplify Writing approach compare to the traditional approaches we've just laid it out?

April Smith:

Yes, we do include direct, explicit lessons. The research says we need that. It makes sense that we need that. Our students aren't going to learn without direct writing instruction.

The difference here is that we structure it more. We want our students to have independent writing time still, but we want it to be heavily supported.

In kindergarten and first grade, that's going to look like more scaffolding. When we're working with them, it's not going to look like we teach a writing lesson, they go have their independent writing time, and we pull back one kid at a time to confer. It doesn't look like that.

We will be sitting with them teaching writing in a very controlled way. Let's say we're working on one sentence stem and they're filling in one word. I'm modeling it, then they discuss what they want their word to be, and then they're writing it, and we're walking around giving feedback. That could be feedback on your pencil grip or your letter formation.

Those are those quick things that especially our kindergarten and first graders need. They need quick feedback.

Maybe they're not forming a specific letter properly. There are all sorts of things. Or maybe they're just stuck. They can't even think of what to write. Or maybe they're a student who has dysgraphia and they just need extra support.

We are not sending the students back to independently write. We are utilizing all that time to have them together with us to really work on that skill.

Our program gives a little more independence as the students get older, and that gives us time to identify some learning gaps and work with them in small groups. We rely heavily on pre-assessment and then keeping track of what skills in writing our students have really mastered throughout the year.

Really instead of having them come back to confer with us once a week or once a month and having to figure out what in their writing that they need help with, we are pre-assessing and then assessing at the end of each unit to keep track so that we *know* what they need help with. That way we can plan and structure that extra support.

We keep some of those elements of writer's workshop that meet the research, like direct explicit instruction and student independent writing time. But we're putting in a lot more scaffolding and we're also making sure that we have room to support students who need extra scaffolding and modifications.

Anna Geiger:

Nowadays, some people have some different approaches to teaching writing which do not require a period of writing because they, from my understanding, advocate for writing that's connected to what you're doing the rest of the day. It applies the knowledge you've learned in different subjects.

In your book, you state that you believe that this period of writing time is a non-negotiable because that's really important. That would be different than what we're hearing from others. Can you talk more about that?

April Smith:

We *do* want to integrate with other subject areas, but that isn't going to look like, let's say, writing a reflection about a science concept at the end. This looks like us teaching the writing within those topics.

For example, in Simplify Writing, we do a community helper unit, which is a standard that we see in many states for kindergarten. We're bringing in the social studies, and we're talking about community helpers. We're writing about them in a way where they can then transfer that to when we're talking about it in our social studies time or reading about community helpers.

All of this is going to be connected. Writing is always going to be connected to our subject areas, but we still have to teach it.

Now does it need to be an hour-long writing block? No, it could be 30 minutes.

It could be you saying, "Okay, we're teaching science right now. I want my students to be able to write a reflection during their lab. What we're going to do is we're going to look at the lab, and I'm going to model how to write the sentence. I'm going to use the sentence stem because they're young, and we're going to do that together. Then next time we do the lab, I'm going to model it again, and then eventually they'll be able to write that reflection sentence when they do their labs."

We still have to directly teach the writing, and if you have a writing block that is 30-35 minutes, that's a great way to say, "This is the time where we're going to sit down and work on our writing skills. We're going to bring in reading. We're going to write about reading. We're going to write about science. We're going to write about social studies. We are going to bring those topics in."

Then when we teach those subjects, we're going to bring writing in and use that application of the writing.

But if we only have writing application, which is what a lot of ELA programs provide for the writing portion, then our students are missing out on getting that skill instruction, and their writing skills are suffering. We're seeing that year after year with students. They're not taking that time to directly teach them how to write.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so when I look at the *Writing Revolution* approach, and I'll be interviewing the author Judy Hochman for that soon, I do think that it does have the explicit instruction piece in there. But could be easy for a teacher just to assign, versus take the time. They do walk you through how to do that.

I would definitely say though, and you and I have talked about this, that in many ELA programs, particularly for middle grades, there will be a bunch of pages about grammar, and then they'll have a writing assignment, and then grammar, and then a writing assignment. Then what do the teachers have except to say, "Well, now you're going to write this paragraph," but it doesn't break down how paragraphs work or how to write sentences. Yeah, I'm really not sure...

I'm interviewing Steve Graham next week. His interview might air before yours, I'm not sure, but I want to talk to him about how research tells us that kids need more writing time, but can it be broken up and still be as effective, or do we need this block? That's definitely something to think about. I think having that block doesn't preclude you from writing about topics in other subjects, as you mentioned.

You talked about the importance of starting with assessment, and I think that's a really tricky one. In your book, *Simplify Your Writing Instruction*, you talk about collecting assessments, samples of student writing, and your book is for third to eighth grade.

What kind of pre-assessment are we collecting across the grades? Do we do this in the primary? How do we use it to help plan our instruction?

April Smith:

Yeah, so with K-1, it's going to be really basic. It's like when you have kindergartners or first graders coming in, and you're giving them a phonics screener or any sort of assessment that is just trying to see where they're at, what they're going to struggle with, and maybe even group them based off of what skills that they need. It's not any different really. We're really looking at the foundations in those grade levels.

For kindergarten, it might just be something like oral storytelling skills because most of those students aren't ready to actually start to write. Do they know their letters? If they do know their letters, can they write them? What does their letter formation look like? These are all things that we look at.

When we get to the older grades, it gets more complex. We're not only looking for if they can write sentences and paragraphs, we're looking for punctuation, capitalization, and other conventions. We're looking for a lot of foundational skills still that we don't see on traditional rubrics.

A lot of times when teachers come to us and schools come to us, they assess based off of a rubric that usually has four or five broad categories. When they assess, they'll say, "Okay, I have this student and they have all ones. They just struggle with writing."

They don't have the exact information on *why* are they struggling? What are they struggling with?

What I provide is a broken down pre-assessment that focuses on foundational skills, conventions, and then the skill specific to the writing type.

We do these very informal writing pieces with students and then we evaluate them. With that checklist, instead of using a rubric, we're able to look at *exactly* what skills they're struggling with.

We're able to say, "Okay, I have a group of third graders and these six third graders really struggle with writing complete sentences." Or "These third graders struggle with punctuation." Or "These ones struggle with more advanced topics."

And so we're able to know, before we even get started, that our whole class struggles with this thing, so we're really going to have to focus on that this year.

Then we also have all the individual struggles that we see our students struggling with, so we go into this knowing what we need to provide extra support with.

This on its own is extremely helpful information because then we can focus here on filling in those gaps.

If we don't have a time to teach writing and to pull small groups, or with the younger students work one-on-one or in small groups with them as they are doing their independent writing as we're scaffolding it, then we're not going to fill in those gaps.

The Writing Revolution, which is a book that I absolutely love, operates off of the Hochman method, which does say we need explicit writing instruction. They do talk about helping students fill in those gaps and making sure that we're teaching them the skills that they need.

I think that really matches well with that pre-assessment piece, knowing what our students need when we're going into our instruction. I think pre-assessment is equally as important in writing as it is in reading.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and definitely we need to give those assessments, like the screening for reading, so we know what students are going to need extra support.

Teaching writing is just *so* hard. It's just so much more complicated than reading. With reading we can look and say, "You have these phonics skills? You don't have these? I know what to do!" Comprehension is a little trickier, but when it comes to writing though...

First of all, to be able to take those assessments and make decisions, that requires some knowledge on the part of the teacher. Then hopefully you might have some kind of scope and sequence for your writing instruction. How do those two things tie in together?

For example, if you look at it and you see, "Wow, my third graders write run-on sentences, but that wasn't something I was going to be talking about."

I mean, I'm sure it would be, but maybe it wasn't the initial thing you were going to be doing. How do you marry those two?

April Smith:

Yeah, so I think what we do is really unique because at Simplify Writing, we have everything completely open so that teachers can edit and modify it.

We've had some schools ask, can we just get books? Can we just get binders? We say no, because what we want to do is we want to provide that scope and sequence and *everything* that the teacher needs to model the writing and to support their writers.

It needs to be able to be modified, so if there is something that their students are struggling with...

Let's say you're working with fifth graders. They're supposed to have mastered writing a sentence, but we all know that they're writing run-on sentences. You're doing your regular lessons, but you're noticing that this is really a problem. You can pause and you can go and grab a resource from us, which we have in what we call our intervention library, on run-on sentences.

We train our teachers how to take that resource to teach students about run-on sentences. Then the next day when they're writing in the writing piece, they're either identifying, so circling, those run-on sentences, and they're writing new sentences. They're starting to write and identifying, is this a run-on sentence? Is it not?

We're taking that skill that we're teaching for grammar, which is run-on sentences, and preventing that and learning how to fix them. We're actually applying that to a writing that we're currently working on.

We have ways so that teachers have the resources they need, but it's still being taught directly in the writing piece.

This is essential because we know if we just give a grammar lesson, or we have a lesson on run-on sentences, and we don't actually have the students apply it to revising their writing or writing it in new sentences, then we're not going to have them actually master it. They're just going to forget it.

Anna Geiger:

When I taught with writing workshop I went back and forth. But the general understanding I had from the material that I was reading (I'm not saying it was research, but the professional books I was reading about teaching writing) was that I should really give them a lot of freedom and agency.

I would teach them where we're all going to write in this genre, but today we are thinking of topics. One person might take a couple days to pre-write, one person might be getting right into it. We were all at a different pace.

In your book, you talk about that, and you say that you prefer to keep everybody on the same pace, which makes sense to me. But what do you do when someone's working at a quicker pace than someone else? How does that work? I like the idea of how I'm teaching this mini lesson, and now we're *all* going to apply it today, versus he can't apply it because he's at a different stage of the writing process.

April Smith:

Yeah, when our students get ahead or behind, it creates a management problem, and that's where a lot of teachers get frustrated with writing instruction.

First of all, when you're planning your lessons, you want to make sure that whatever you're planning for that day, your students are able to finish it. You're not having them bite off more than they can chew. You're breaking it down into really small chunks, so whatever your lesson is that day, you have enough time for your students to all finish it.

Teachers know that their students are different levels, but they forget that they can modify what expectations they have for the output.

Let's say you have a group of second graders. You have five kids over here who could write multiple paragraphs. They are your high flyers. You know that they probably don't need very much support. Then you have a group over here and they can maybe write one sentence. Then you have the kids that are in between.

The question is, how do we all stay on one step if you're requiring them to write two paragraphs, and these kids can barely write a sentence, so it's going to take them a month? These kids can write it in five minutes, and then the kids in the middle can maybe finish it today or maybe tomorrow.

The answer to that is that we have to modify our expectations. If you have students who can only write a sentence, then your goal for them is really going to be, instead of two paragraphs, your goal is two to three sentences.

Now we're taking what I modeled, you're including the details from brainstorming, and you're writing a solid two to three sentences. That's what I would do with my students with dyslexia and dysgraphia who are struggling with that writing. They write two to three sentences, whereas this student over here, they can write two or three paragraphs.

Let's say that you tell all your students to write one paragraph. Well, the issue there is that those high flyers aren't going to write any more. They're going to finish the paragraph and be done. Then the struggling students aren't going to be able to get to that paragraph.

You shouldn't be assigning an exact amount of paragraphs or sentences. The students should be doing what they can do, and you should be aware of that because of your pre-assessment.

For the students who do write their two to three paragraphs, and they're still finished early because it's really easy for them, we always put something into place where they can get feedback and then revise their writing. Then instead of just rushing through it, because those students do tend to rush through it,

and we're okay with that because they wrote three paragraphs and it's pretty decent… But we're not pushing them to the next level.

What we do is we set up peer feedback. When you are done, you're going to meet with another partner who's done, and you're going to get feedback. If there's nobody who's done there, then you're going to work on revising.

We give you access to the computer for further research if they're in the older grades and it's something that is research-based. We want to continue to push those kids. We have to have things in place for those early finishers.

For the students who get stuck, we have to be there to support them, and we also have to modify what our expectations are for the amount they're going to be writing.

Anna Geiger:

I think we can also draw a distinction between the independent practice time and the guided practice, which comes before that, right? So if we're doing guided practice, like we're actually teaching them how to structure a paragraph, we're doing a lot of that with them. We're holding their hand, and then we are all completing the same amount of work, would you say?

April Smith:

Yeah, in kinder and first grade especially, most of what we're doing is guided practice. You want the students to be able to put their own ideas into it, but we're heavily scaffolding it.

For example, we could have a sentence about community helpers. Together as a class, we're writing, "The best community helper is…," and then the student on their own is writing "firefighter" or "nurse" or "teacher."

Then we are providing a word bank for most of those students, especially in kindergarten, because they're not ready. They haven't mastered the phonics skills to actually write most of those words, so we're using a word bank there.

They're not doing a lot on their own, but they're still writing, and that's what's important. They're learning that letter formation.

A lot of times we're doing a lot of pre-planning together. They're getting all of those foundations without us saying, "Okay, I'm going to write a sentence, you write a sentence, go over there. I'm going to meet with a student, good luck."

Especially in kindergarten and first grade, it's very heavily scaffolded.

Anna Geiger:

This was not on our list of questions, but I'm curious. There's a lot of focus now on teaching kids to write nonfiction, which I think is really good and important because that is mostly what you do as an adult. I think we need a lot of attention on that, but maybe we're leaving out narrative writing sometimes and poetry.

In your lessons for the Simplify Writing approach and program, would you do a unit on a particular genre, or are you more focused on sentence structure where you can put that in whatever genre you want? How do you wrestle with the mechanics of writing and then writing in genre? How does that look?

April Smith:

Well, all the mechanics fit really well into different genres. Some fit into all of them. Some fit into only some, like writing dialogue makes sense in narrative, for example.

Since most states require you to teach narrative, informational, and opinion, however they're calling it, it could be persuasive or argumentative. It's all a little bit different how it's worded, but those state standards require it, so we have to be teaching it.

We're teaching with a genre, but all those skills are a part of that writing piece and that genre.

Then we're bringing in, and this is even more important... We're not just teaching nonfiction, but bringing in those skills that our students need to be learning for science, or for social studies, and then writing about reading. That's a big one that we do at all grade levels. Our students write about reading.

The great thing about that is that if you're teaching that, and then you're using that ELA program where your students have to respond to questions in writing about their reading, then they're able to finally do it. Instead of them just applying their writing skills that they already have, they're learning new writing skills and learning to write about reading. Then during that reading time, they're able to do that writing.

Then you can keep scaffolding with everything that we provide, so writing transfers over to the other subject areas. If you have students who are writing in a lab, the organizer we have from our informational science units can be used in that lab. You're just infusing that writing into every subject area.

Then in writing, you're infusing the other subject areas into it. That's where you have those connections that research shows is really important.

What I think most of the books and the research are really trying to tell us, outside of the fact that there needs to be direct writing instruction, is that writing is really embedded in all of the subject areas. We write about those subject areas.

But it looks different in the different subject areas, so we have to directly teach our students that if we want them to be successful at writing in the other subject areas.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so kind of summarizing some of the things we've talked about in terms of the traditional approach versus what you do with your program. We'd say a weakness of traditional writing workshop might be a lack of guided practice. You kind of expect a lot of independent work right away. With your program, you do a lot of explicit, direct instruction, particularly in the primary grades, but further along as well.

Another challenge of a traditional approach might be that students are working all at different paces, so it's very hard to apply what's being taught. But in your approach, you use scaffolds and different expectations to keep everybody kind of working at the same pace within what they're able to do. But you also challenge and support as needed.

You also talked about how with the traditional approach, it's a lot of individual conferring, and so students may not be able to meet with a teacher very often. It might just be once a week. But with your approach there's more support.

How does that look? Is it the teacher just moving among the class, and are kids all sitting there with their hands raised? Then you know that it's ten kids with their hands raised. How does that support and feedback work during the writing block?

April Smith:

Yeah, so when you're giving your lesson, you're breaking it down into a really small piece, and you're modeling it, and then your students are doing exactly that same thing with that same organizer with their own ideas afterwards. Then you have less of those times where everybody's raising their hand needing help, right? That doesn't mean you don't have those students, and you'll have less of them, of course, as you continue to model and they become more confident.

In kindergarten and first grade, they're with you the whole time. You're not sending them back to work and then going over when they raise their hands. They're with you.

For me, I like to do it at the carpet. I like to use the traditional anchor chart paper or a whiteboard, whatever is easiest, and I'm modeling all my writing. Like I said in my example before, we're doing a sentence stem together, and then they fill in a word. While they're filling in the word, I'm walking around, and I'm really looking at what they're doing, and I'm making those corrections.

Now in the older grades, it looks a little bit different. In the older grades, I am doing a lesson. I'm making sure the model matches exactly what they're supposed to be doing. I'm getting them ready so that they have all the information they need to go back and complete that writing piece. They have my examples, they have discussions we've had, they have generated ideas. We've all done the work together so that we know they're going to be successful, and we're not going to have a bunch of hands raised.

Then while those students are working, then I'm able to pull small groups. Maybe I'm working with some students who need help with sentence structure or students who need help with spelling. You can focus really on anything in those small groups.

That's what I'm doing instead of conferring, but that doesn't mean my students aren't getting feedback. I'm providing feedback during our class discussions. We are going to discuss our writing before we start. That way we can all focus our ideas. We do a lot of peer discussion too.

Now we can make sure that when they've chosen a topic within our writing prompt, that they're on the right track. I've given them that feedback.

Then we can also make sure through the idea generation that they have all the ideas they need to get started, and also to make sure that they're not just copying my work, right? I don't want them to do that. I want them to use the structure of my work to learn, but I want them to have their own ideas.

It's really important to really front load everything, and that way you can have that time to work with students.
Those small groups make a huge difference. A lot of times I see students who have been below grade level...

I'll give my own son as an example because he's somebody that I work with a lot after school. I work in his classroom, and his teacher uses Simplify Writing, and we work together on these things. He has severe dysgraphia, and most of the teachers who get students with severe dysgraphia have no idea how to help. It is really, really hard for these students to write.

We work on skill-based things, just small lessons, for things like letter formation practice and pencil grip. Spelling's a big one for him because he has dyslexia, so we work on spelling rules that obviously relate to the phonics rules.

We have seen him grow! It started where he couldn't even write a word last year, and we've seen him grow to writing two complete paragraphs, and they're actually readable. Putting that work in, it works. It matters.

Now, I know not every teacher has parents at home that are going to work with their student, but we see this in the classrooms with schools that we work with. We have special education teachers who are

working with the classroom teachers, and they are working on these specific skills. They're using our intervention resources, and at all grade levels we're seeing students who normally would be left behind make growth. They are mastering skills that obviously aren't on grade level, but they're foundational and they need those skills in order to eventually be successful writers.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I think another thing to talk about in terms of your approach... The value in having a writing block, although I don't think it's absolutely necessary, but the value in having it is that for one thing, it happens, right? Because we can have great intentions, but when our other subjects go long, it can be very easy to drop the writing piece unless we're very firmly committed to it.

But also, you also point out that the writing about other subjects can happen during the writing block. I think that's important, because when I taught writing workshop, I thought of it as its own entity over here. I did not understand why writing about reading was so important and writing about what you're learning is so important. They were two distinct things, like social studies was over here, reading time was over here, and writing time was over here.

But we can remember the importance of integrating those things within that protected period of time that students have writing practice.

April Smith:

Yeah, you're exactly right about that. I think the writing block has a negative connotation because we think about the traditional writer's workshop, and that being something that's really disengaged from the other subject areas.

But if you think about it, if you're giving direct writing instruction, whenever that is, that's your writing time.

Anna Geiger:

Right.

April Smith:

I think there's that confusion there where we're reading these books and they say to integrate, but if our integration is just us having students apply what they're learning, and there's no direct, explicit instruction, then we're not following what the research says. We're not following the Hochman method, we're not...

I'm excited to hear your interview, because *The Writing Revolution* is a great book, and it does say to have that direct, explicit instruction. I think sometimes people get confused with that integration piece. I'm really looking forward to that, because I'm hoping that will get explained a little more because integration means more than that you're relating the writing and the grammar.

When we teach things out of context, it does not work well for our students. When we're doing a writing block and it's just random grammar activities or random writing activities, it doesn't work! If we are really integrating with the subjects, it doesn't have to be a writing block, it just has to be a time where you're giving direct instruction. That could be in your ELA block, it could be in your science block, it could be in your social studies block.

We *have* to teach the writing or the students aren't going to learn.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so the takeaway is that students need explicit instruction from a knowledgeable teacher, and there are different ways to provide that. One way is within a writing block that differs from the traditional writing workshop in particular ways.

How can teachers learn more about Simplify Writing? Do you share your scope and sequence publicly, or is that just part of the paid program? What can people learn in terms of trying to carry this out?

April Smith:

Yeah, we do have our scope and sequence, listed by writing type, broken down into specific skills. We don't have that available publicly, but you can view the scope and sequence to see what writing types we do, and we can talk about what skills go within those if anybody wants to reach out to me. It's april@simplifywriting.com.

We have a website, simplywriting.com, it's really easy to find. We have lots of free training on there, not only for teachers, but also for administrators, coaches, and homeschoolers. We talk about what the research says and what it looks like in actual practical application. I think those trainings are really valuable for any teacher who still feels like they're not sure what it really looks like.

Also, and I'll share this with you so that you can put it in the show notes, we have some videos that show what it looks like in the classroom. Especially at the kinder and first grade level, what it looks like to really be scaffolding.

I know it's hard to really explain what it looks like, but watching the video will really show you that we are setting it up so that students have success. They're not just going off and trying something on their own and getting frustrated.

We're supporting all of our students, at all different levels. It's our students with learning disabilities, our English language learners, all of our students who have different needs, which is, of course, pretty much all of our students.

I'll share that. That is always the biggest help for our teachers when they're not sure what it should look like.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that would be fabulous. We'll make sure we get that in the show notes, and direct to your podcast, and your book, and all your other resources.

Thanks so much for joining me today!

April Smith:

Thank you so much for having me today, Anna. I really appreciate you talking with me about writing because I think it's so important for teachers to be considering what they need to do to make sure that their students are prepared.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode204. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.