Strategies for teaching writing in the early grades - with Amy Siracusano

Triple R Teaching Podcast #206

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. We're continuing today with our series all about teaching writing. I'm interviewing Amy Siracusano, a wonderful person that I've been blessed to know both online and in person. She presents at many different conferences about teaching writing and she's also a national literacy consultant. We start by looking at the Not So Simple View of Writing and then dive into specific ways to apply this to teaching writing, primarily in the early grades. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Amy!

Amy Siracusano:

Hi, how are you, Anna?

Anna Geiger:

Good, glad to have you here. We're going to talk today about writing, which is a question I get all the time from teachers trying to figure out what the research says and how to apply that. But before we do, could you introduce yourself and walk us through your history in education up to what you're doing now?

Amy Siracusano:

Sure, I'd be happy to; I'm glad to be here today. I started my career on Long Island originally actually as a paraprofessional in a first grade classroom. Back then in the mid-90s it was really hard to find a job. Then I wound up landing a fourth grade teaching position out on Eastern Long Island. That's really where my writing journey began.

To be honest with you, about 25 years ago, I knew nothing about teaching writing. I used to think getting a *Mailbox* magazine in the mail and looking at the different activities was teaching writing. So I'm glad we're talking about this topic today.

But yes, I started my career out on Eastern Long Island, stayed there for a few years, and got some training in writing from Lucy Calkins herself. We'll talk about that, I'm sure.

Then my husband and I got married, and we moved to Southern Maryland, which is really where my science of reading journey began with Dr. Carol Tolman, getting trained in LETRS, edition one, way back in the day. Then going through edition two with her again, a couple of years later, and learning a little bit more about the terminology.

I was really overwhelmed. I didn't learn any of it in my master's program at Dowling College on Long Island, which is no longer in business (It makes you wonder why). So that's kind of how I came to be here in Southern Maryland.

I held a lot of different roles, Title 1 teacher, IEP chairperson, I was a vice principal for a while, a dean of students, I worked at the board of ed, I did some adjuncting, which I'm still doing today. I'm actually working for Brooklyn College at CUNY, doing some coursework in the advanced science of reading certificate program.

Yes, it's been a journey. It started out really in whole language, not knowing a lot about teaching reading and writing, and I'm still learning every single day, but it's been a 25-year marathon.

Anna Geiger:

Slow and steady.

So I can definitely relate to the *Mailbox* magazine. That was my favorite thing to get in the mail when I was teaching back in the early 2000s, a little bit past your first years. I actually got one of my writing ideas published in there, and boy was that exciting! It was in their little things from teachers.

I was very much a writing workshop teacher and I think we can certainly get into talking about elements of that that are supported by research, but one thing we know that students need is explicit, direct instruction, and that may be what's been missing for a lot of years. We'll get into that.

Let's start by talking about the real basics of writing. I went over a presentation that you gave that was posted on Youtube, and I could share that in the show notes, but you gave a presentation about the Not So Simple View of Writing. Maybe you could give us a little overview of what that is, and then we'll get into some details.

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, I'd be happy to. So Virginia Berninger, who actually lives here in the state of Maryland, where I live, is the lead researcher on both the Simple View of Writing as well as the Not So Simple View of Writing, which is the current model.

Both models are developed the same, and they are not anywhere near what the Simple View of Reading looks like. They do not have a multiplication sign. They are not built as an equation like that.

They are built in such that there is a triangle at the center in the core of both models, which really leans into working memory. They call it now, in the Not So Simple View of Writing, cognitive flow. That's really leaning into human beings, but we're talking about children here. In a child's long-term memory, what do they have stored as knowledge about a topic that they're writing about? Then as they're writing, leaning into that revision piece in that short-term memory.

So even as you and I are speaking, we know that writing really leans on the shoulders of oral language. Even as we're speaking, I'm thinking through the visual of that model and I'm pulling from my long-term memory and I'm reviewing, revising. I always say the image of the graphic is really a triangle that they developed.

I've recently come to think of this, metaphorically speaking, as a volcano. We want to keep that working flow, cognitive flow, working memory really dormant, really calm, pulling from our knowledge to be able to express ourselves and thinking that writing really leans on the shoulders of oral language.

At the top of that triangle, if you can imagine, and I'm sure you'll be able to link in an image on your page for people who are listening to this, is text generation. This is words, sentences, and discourse. Sometimes people might consider this as written expression. The words that children are going to choose, whether they're writing narrative or expository, are going to be vastly different, right? In expository, they're going to lean into those domain-specific vocabulary words. And again, that's going to require a lot of that cognitive flow or that long-term memory.

If they don't know a lot about the topic they're writing about when they're writing expository type pieces, then they're really going to struggle with that. They're not going to be able to lean into that knowledge.

Whereas in narrative, we're going to expect students to be a little bit more descriptive, maybe figurative language comes into play much more often. Again, as long as they have this knowledge in their oral language.

Really, if you think about it, text generation comes from those rich read-alouds that we're doing in K, 1, and 2 and how we're making these connections for children. How those things will enhance a story as they're writing it or a text.

At the lower left-hand corner is transcription skills. These are things that are what I would refer to as foundational writing skills, like we think about the lower portion of Scarborough's Rope. These are the things that are about getting your ideas on paper. It's about the print, it's automaticity of transcription, it is keyboarding for kids who have to type responses. It includes spelling and spatial organization.

Then at the lower right-hand corner of this triangle is executive functions. Now, when we think about executive functions, frontal lobe, as well as working memory, frontal lobe. Think about that volcano again, keeping that dormant, and *all* the things that are going on as we are trying to get kids to put pen to paper.

It's an extremely complex process, and we can see why writing takes many, many years to really develop. It doesn't happen overnight, nor will it happen if we wait until third grade to start teaching it.

Anna Geiger:

Can you help me understand what you mean by keeping that dormant?

Amy Siracusano:

In classrooms, I travel around a lot and I was in the classroom for a really long time. I've seen kids rip their paper, throw it across the room, rub the sides of their head, put their head down, and say, “I can't! I have nothing to write about! I don't know what to say!”

Spelling gets in the way: “How do I spell this? How do I spell this?” I see kids following teachers around the room like a bunch of ducklings crossing the road, right? There's a line down the hall.

All of these things are kind of getting in the way of skilled writers. When I think about a dormant volcano, I think about calm. Things are kind of at bay, rather than something on the outside of this model causing an eruption, causing a disruption in a child's writing process, if we want to think about it through that lens, and getting their ideas out on paper, whatever that might look like.

Anna Geiger:

So why do you think it's important for teachers to understand the Simple View of Writing?

Amy Siracusano:

Well, for me, as we mentioned earlier, looking at *Mailbox*, which was one of my favorite magazines as well, I remember giving my kids in fourth grade the question on the board. I assigned them a writing task: "Write about the day you were a pencil."

I'll never forget it. For the majority of my kids, they fell apart. They couldn't do it. They weren't creative writers. I was expecting my kids to do things that they weren't prepared to do, that they hadn't been explicitly taught how to do, and that they were not successful to do.

What I was doing a lot of when I was in the classroom back then, 25 years ago, was assigning writing, not *teaching* writing. I thought just because my kids could read text, that they could write well. It would just kind of transfer. It's almost like thinking back to whole language. If we put a book on our head enough, or in front of us enough, we're going to learn it through osmosis.

The writing process is not about that, right? What the Simple View and then the Not So Simple View of Writing did for me as an educator has really helped me to understand the intricacies of getting kids to be able to be successful writers.

Again, no matter what that looks like at a kindergarten level, at a third grade level, fifth grade, high school level. If they are not explicitly taught and not just explicitly taught one time, but taught to learn these things to master in automaticity, then we're going to have a problem.

I'll just give you one other example before I know you're going to have another question for me. I was in Hawaii almost the whole month of September, doing a lot of work there in the area of writing, doing exactly what we're talking about today. My 11th grade daughter texted me and said, "Mom, I don't know this thing: independent and dependent clauses. I'm in my AP Comp and Rhetoric class. Why didn't anybody teach me about complex sentences and independent and dependent clauses? I'm learning about that today!"

To me, it hit me so hard, because why is she learning about this come 11th grade, when it's so necessary for us to have a clear scope and sequence in elementary school to build success there, so that they can continue to grow and not have to backtrack later on.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, very interesting.

Thinking about students who struggle with reading versus students who struggle with writing. I'm going back to my days in the primary grades here. In first and second grade, if they're struggling with reading, they're trying, but they're just not getting it right. But if they're struggling with writing, then what happens? They don't start, and they just sit there.

I can think of one particular child, and I am really regretful that I really was not patient with him, because I did not understand all the things that were involved in writing, and that I had to take steps to scaffold this experience for him because he just could not access it from where I was. Like you said, I was doing a lot of assigning. I did have a more open writing workshop model as well, and that was more putting a lot of work on him. "What are you going to write about? How are you going to start it?" versus walking him through writing together. I did not do nearly enough of that.

I think if I would have understood all the complexities involved in being successful as a writer, I would have understood that I had to do a lot more to prepare him to do that.

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, and writing is a scary thing for us as educators, right? It's very subjective. It's a vulnerable state that we have to put ourselves into. We have to have a lot of knowledge about breaking these things down for kids, and a lot of us don't get this kind of coursework in our programs.

Anna Geiger:

Or it's just an add-on. I'm sympathetic, I mean you're a professor so you understand this more, but back when I was a student they only had so many hours to give us instruction in teaching literacy. I think the writing was like a couple weeks add-on to a class, and not nearly enough. We really need a whole class on that, in part because we need the things your daughter needs. We weren't taught that stuff either so even as adults we may not be fully conscious of the complexities of syntax, which we need to understand so we can break it down for kids.

Now we know that it's called the Not So Simple View because it is not simple, but it is important for teachers to understand.

Before we get into specifics about the transcription skills that you talked about, let's talk more about executive functions and why they play such an important role in the writing process.

Amy Siracusano:

Between the Simple View and the Not So Simple View of Writing was the biggest area where there was the most shift, or the most change, in the two models. In the original model developed by Berninger and her colleagues, they use the terminology "conscious attention" for executive functioning, meaning the kids had to pay attention to what they were doing. We know these kids who start writing about one topic and then they go to another and go off. We know, and it drives us crazy as educators, right?

So they changed the language to "supervisory attention". Now, who's the supervisor of that attention? We are. We have to keep a pulse on what's going on.

The other thing that they added, which didn't exist prior, was goal setting. So goal setting was added, a critical component, not a ton of goals, right? One goal.

Recently, I saw a third grade student's writing. We were doing some "norming for scoring" with some educators I'm working with. The third grade teacher said, "Amy, I can't read this. I can't make out what it says." And I looked at it and there was not one space between one word in this entire page. Now I was able to decipher most of it. There were many of us who had eyes on it. And for that student in third grade, first of all, how did they get there? At this point?

The goal for that student might be, "I leave finger spaces at the end of every word." That could be the goal for three, four weeks, check back in with them, something simple like that.

The other big shift in executive functions was the original model said "strategies for self-regulation" and they changed it to "strategies for self-monitoring and regulating". Self-monitoring: how am I checking in with all of these things I have to keep track of?

Think about it when we go to write, we have to keep track of margins, lines, spacing, the size of our letters, spelling, the ideas we're holding in our head, reviewing, revising, indenting, punctuation, capital letters, underlining, it goes on and on, right?

It's important to develop things like checklists for kids to keep a pulse on what's happening and to teach them how to kind of automatize in their head the things that they need to keep track of as they're going

through this process because writing is a production task. It takes our knowledge in everything else, listening, speaking, reading, and then taking all of that, putting it together, and getting it on paper and keeping it in a way that makes sense to the reader who's going to take a look at it. So those executive functions are so critical in writing because of that production piece. It's a lot for kids to keep track of.

We educators, because we write, we forget because it's automatized for us. It's like driving a car. You're not going to put a kindergartener behind the wheel and say, "Just go. You got it. No problem." No! You're going to give them practice. Slow and steady in a parking lot first. It's the same thing.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, it's really good to remember the production piece of this: writing is harder. It's supposed to be harder, and so we have to expect that we've got to give a lot more modeling and support than we might need to for decoding, because the task is so complex.

We've talked about the importance of automaticity and basic skills. I talked to Shawn Datchuk, about handwriting, why that was so important for reading and writing. And there's also spelling. I have a lot of interviews about spelling.

Talk to us about the importance of automaticity and how we can build that. How does that work? Like, we say, well, we have to be automatic in this before we move on to this? Are we developing it all at the same time? How does that work?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, so it's interesting. Recently, I've been doing a lot of thinking about this word "automaticity". I had a student in one of my courses say, "Amy, could you please explain this word automaticity? Can you please break it down for me?"

I just thought, "Hey, you should know what automaticity is." But I'm making an assumption here, right?

So I've been thinking about this. We use these terms in education: accuracy, mastery, automaticity. We use this. We've heard it in fluency for a really long time. So here's how I've been thinking about this.

Accuracy is you get it right. You take a spelling test, you get 100%. I can do this correctly. Does it mean I'm going to be accurate the next time I do it or when I do it in a writing task or when I do it on another type of assessment? Maybe, maybe not. But I got it right. I got "accurate". Right? That's what we're looking for is accuracy.

Mastery is like when we put training wheels on a bike and the child rides to the end of the driveway or even takes the training wheels off of a bike and gets to the end of the driveway or the end of a walkway. They did it. They say, "I mastered riding a bike. I got this." But sometimes they need a little bit of help because they get to the end and they have to turn around. Well, the child gets off the bike, picks it up and turns it around. Have you ever seen that?

So these are kids, when we think about writing, where they can do it, but they still need a little reminder. They need a checklist. They need a little more practice so that they don't have to think about it. That's where the teacher comes in. They've got it most of the time, right? They can say, "Yes, I can do this."

Automaticity takes accuracy and mastery and puts it together to say, "I got this 100 % of the time. I don't have to think about it. It is so automatic. It just happens naturally without me having to be cognizant of it."

That's the kid that gets to the end of the driveway on that bicycle, whether it's on training wheels or the training wheels are off, and turns that bike around no matter how sharp, doesn't fall down, and gets back to where they started.

That's how I've been thinking about automaticity. It is the act of the unconscious ability to be successful in a task. When we think about writing and all of the things that are involved to get kids to do something well - they have to be automatic in not only transcription skills, but in their knowledge - what they're pulling from to write about - and then making sure that they are paying attention, staying on task, reviewing and revising, thinking about their goal setting, monitoring everything.

That all comes together to produce a successful piece. Again, looking very differently for a kindergartener versus a fifth grader versus an 11th grader.

Anna Geiger:

When we think about our beginning writers, what do you feel are the most important areas to develop that automaticity? What comes first?

Amy Siracusano:

Handwriting, hands down, hands down. Letter name, letter sound, fluency, accuracy, automaticity. Because handwriting is an integration of the orthographic codes: what do these letters look like? The phonological codes: what are these letters spelling? What's the sound that this letter makes? Then putting those together with the graphomotor codes, getting to be able to write these letters down on paper.

Let me give you an example of this and why I think this is so critical. Not too long ago, in the classroom - and it's really hard for us educators when we're at the front of the room to know everything that's happening all over the room, right? The teacher is giving a dictation test, first grade.

In the back of the room, there's a child. I don't recall what the word was they were spelling, so I'm going to make it up. So the word was “mat,” let's say. And the child in the back of the room is subvocalizing very quietly going “M-A-T.” And so the child starts writing the letter on the paper, does well, gets to A. It was the second letter that they got stuck on. Now the child is saying A over and over again and looking around the room to find the letter.

The child knew how to spell that word, what the child didn't know in order to get that production piece on paper was the formation of that letter. He was unsure of that letter.

If handwriting is not automatized, writing is not going to happen. That is a critical component.

Anna Geiger:

Do you have suggestions for teachers for specific ways to teach handwriting or to move toward that automaticity?

Amy Siracusano:

What I know comes from the research and actually from a lot of conversations with William Van Cleave, a dear colleague and friend who's no longer with us.

What I would say is 5 to 10 minutes of daily practice. We know it takes approximately two years to automatize a handwriting type, whether it be manuscript or cursive.

It also takes trained knowledge on behalf of the teachers. A lot of us don't have training, have never been to training, in how to teach handwriting. We need a program to use so that the program is giving us enough practice so that it's not a "one and done" letter introduction and then practice activity. And we want to have a program that's going to address a left-handed writer versus a right-handed writer. That's important in both manuscript and cursive.

We want to be consistent in our language. We also know from Berninger's work, she did a lot of talking about when kids are practicing forming a letter to say the name of the letter as they're forming it. William used to say you could alternate saying the name of the letter with saying the sound that the letter spells to help cement this into long-term memory.

This really does help to solidify that reading brain, that phonological and that orthographic processor. There's real power in that. But I would say teachers need training in teaching handwriting. It should be a course, a required course.

Anna Geiger:

Any recommendations for places where teachers can go to get that information if they did not receive training or don't know where to get the training?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, good thoughts. Zaner-Bloser has some free professional development videos available online. There's a lot of OT sites - your occupational therapists - and I would lean into the OTs in the building to see what they would recommend in terms of getting information and training on that. Those are two places that I know of that I would lean into for that kind of work.

Anna Geiger:

Teachers are hearing, okay, so writing's complicated. I need to help them focus on what they're doing. I need to make sure they're automatic in their handwriting. But how do I even get started with writing instruction?

We can go back to talking about your experience with Lucy Calkin's writing workshop. Maybe we can start there. What did you learn about that? Did you apply that? Were there any things looking back that you would change?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, great question. I did learn a lot of things from Lucy Calkins, and I'm going to keep bringing up William here because anytime I talk about writing, I just feel like he sits on my shoulders. He was a real confidant and a real mentor for me in this area. What I learned from Lucy Calkins is how to teach skilled writers craft.

Anna Geiger:

Yes.

Amy Siracusano:

Which is a really important component of being a skilled writer. What I didn't learn from Lucy Calkins and the writing project and writing workshop is how to teach foundational writing skills. We already talked about transcription.

The other piece to this is in that text generation at the top of the model, which is sentence level development, which again starts with oral language.

I would assign my kids writing tasks and their sentences were all over the place, unless they were a really strong reader or their oral language was really strong. Then it would transfer into, most of the time, they're writing.

But that instruction, starting in kindergarten with basic sentence level development, sentence level expansion, sentence combining and generation, which we know are highly supported activities or from research. We need to do work in sentence level development, not big lessons. This is something that I really learned through William, which was the piece that was lacking from the writing project.

Again, I knew how to teach my kids craft. I knew how to get them to take ideas from lots of sources and combine them and synthesize them and think through something at a very complex level. But I didn't know how to break down those first steps.

When we think about developing sentences, first I would start with oral language. I would start with pictures, getting kids to ask and answer questions orally, and then getting them to lean into understanding the basic sentence, going into compound/complex sentences throughout elementary school.

Now, when I was in school, and you may have had the same experience, what I remember about language instruction or sentence level instruction was: identify, identify, identify, identify, circle, circle, underline, underline. I never really learned any of these terms.

The first time I heard “subordinating conjunction” was probably 10 or 12 years ago. Have I used it in my writing? Do I write using it? Absolutely. Wouldn't know that term if you handed it to me on a silver platter. That was a big aha for me and a realization that, oh my gosh, 15 years prior, I didn't teach my kids this. I was doing DOL, the workbooks that you could buy.

Anna Geiger:

Daily Oral Language, yes, I did those too.

Amy Siracusano:

You'd have your five DOLs for Monday, your Tuesday, Wednesday, etc. I thought I was doing a great job, but it never transferred into practice. It was about that moment in time, and it stayed in that moment in time. The kids didn't learn the terminology and they didn't transfer any of that knowledge to practice.

My thinking has really shifted. What I've started doing is in instruction, spending 10 minutes a day, every day, on a particular skill or standard over one to two weeks of time.

Kids are getting frequent, distributed practice over several days rather than doing a “one and done” 30 to 40 minute lesson, which is what we see in a lot of programs that are out there. They do a “one and done.”

Anna Geiger:

I appreciate you breaking it down like that. I think though someone could hear that and say, “Okay, I need to do 10 minutes of grammar worksheets every day for two weeks.” Can you maybe specifically say what this would look like for a particular skill and how it's embedded, versus just an isolated activity?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, so let's say first grade. Kids coming into my class have learned about the simple sentence. Simple sentence is really misleading. The definition: has a subject, a predicate, starts with a capital letter, ends with punctuation, and is a complete thought. It doesn't necessarily mean it's simple or easy, but that's the label.

So first graders come in and they're writing really basic sentences: The dog walks. The bear claws. Really simple sentences. So I want to do something like sentence expansion – a great activity supported by research. I might spend some time introducing some question words: where, when, what kind, how many, why, how - slowly over time.

So day one might be a recap of what a sentence is. 10 minutes. Giving them an example. It's an “I do”, gradual release.

Day two, we come back. Remind them about the anchor chart, remind them what a sentence is. Now I'm going to introduce one of the question words. We need to fancy this sentence up. We need to make it better. Let's add where. I'm really leaning into prepositional phrases, without having to call it that. I’m maybe using an image to generate a sentence and then saying where? Where is the chicken? Where is the cat? Something related to content, if I'm doing some sort of content. And getting them to orally add where.

Then, day three we come back, maybe we take that where and I teach them how to rearrange it. Can I put it somewhere else in the sentence?

Day four, maybe you do it at your table. Here's a new picture, come up with your sentence, add your where.

Day five, rearrange it. Now we come back the next week, maybe I add a when, a what kind, and I slowly over time introduce these question words.

I can also relate it back to my reading comprehension or my reading block and say, “Did the author have a where in this sentence? Let's add that to our anchor chart. Maybe we can borrow some of this author's language the next time you all write.”

That's what I'm talking about: explicit systematic instruction, not in a one and done setting, not in a worksheet. A small amount of time in identification and getting kids to be able to apply skills using the gradual release model.

I've seen a lot of success with this. I really have. The impact has been huge. And I try to make it as hands-on as possible. I might use index cards to break up words in the sentence. I might use sentence strips. They can cut the sentence strips up and move things around, make it very manipulative-heavy, just like we do in mathematics when we're teaching an initial concept.

Anna Geiger:

So when you say you've seen success with it, how would you define that success?

Amy Siracusano:

Right now I'm working in a school and I've been working with them since last year. They started to use this approach and what we're seeing is the impact and the carryover into their extended writing tasks. They're taking what they're learning in these brief language lessons over time, thinking about their standards and the things that they need to teach, and we're seeing the transfer into extended writing tasks, whether it be a response to reading-type question, or whether it be an assigned writing task that might fall under one of the different genres that they're required to teach.

Anna Geiger:

What would you say is the big difference between "Here's a lesson, practice it on the worksheet" versus what you were describing, and what's causing the difference in outcome?

Amy Siracusano:

When they work on a worksheet, it's about the worksheet. It's not them. It's about them marking it up and following directions. That's all it is. When they get to take their ideas and come up with their own words and have ownership over what they're doing, it gives them choice. It gives them an ability to express themselves in small pieces, building knowledge over time.

It's almost like that mental velcro that a lot of people talk about. You have to know something to learn something. They learn a little chunk, they attach it to a new chunk, they attach it to a new chunk. So they're building their knowledge over time and always thinking about application of skill, a gradual release. You're going to do the work, not the worksheet.

The same thing didn't work in mathematics. When I was in school, mathematics was 50 problems, 50 addition, multiplication, subtraction, division problems on a page. That was our work.

Today, it's hands-on. It's making sure they understand the application of these skills and how it transfers over time to building new skills. It's much more hands-on, it's much more manipulative-based, interactive-based, more conversational-based, and building this language over time.

Once kids can add a where and a when and what kind, and they understand this, then you can slap those labels onto it.

I recently said in a workshop that nobody goes home, maybe 1% of population, nobody goes home and sits around the dinner table and talks about an adjective and a prepositional phrase. These are not words that we use in general conversation. These are Tier 3 vocabulary words specific to a subject or a content.

We think by doing one activity, one worksheet, or a DOL underlining the noun over five days is going to get them to understand what the function of a noun is in a sentence and it just doesn't work that way.

Anna Geiger:

In my book, I talk about these very things like how to respond to reading, doing these types of activities. I walk through things like sentence expansion, sentence building, and sentence combining. And, like you said, the great thing about this is it can tie right into what you're learning in other subject areas, so you can get double the value out of it.

I think we've laid out for people how that works: how you can just put this in about 10 minutes a day of this explicit language instruction.

What about the extended writing that you were talking about? I think that's another question that people have. They understand we have to break this down into how to write a sentence, how to combine sentences, and how to add to sentences. But do I still assign these large projects that take students through the writing process, similar to a writing workshop model? Where does that come in?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, so I think we still have to do extended writing tasks. What people don't realize is the writing process came out of a study that was done where researchers mapped the mental processes of experienced writers at work. Those experienced writers were college-age students. They were not kindergarten students. These writers had strong transcription skills.

There is absolutely a time and a place for these extended writing tasks as long as we're paying attention to executive function. As long as we're paying attention to things like checklists, making sure that, for some students, they're going to need an individualized checklist, because the expectation of what they're ready for might look different than for student Z, another student in the classroom.

When we think about doing extended writing tasks - I'll use third grade, for example. If I'm doing my language standards, let's say that I'm getting ready to do a unit on narrative writing. One of the tasks that I'm going to assign to students is to write about either a real or a made-up experience that you had that's going to become a story. I'm going to walk them through how to plan that out. I'm going to make sure they understand a story mountain. I'm going to make sure they understand character setting, events, all of that sort of thing.

I want to make sure that I teach them in my language lessons prior to doing that extended writing task, the things that I'm going to expect. For third graders, that would include dialogue to help to be able to develop a character - characters, thoughts, feelings and actions. I might spend a couple of weeks prior to this narrative unit, 10 minutes a day, teaching them how to punctuate dialogue, which is really hard.

Now when I get it into my extended writing piece, I say, “You're going to use what you know from your language lessons about developing a character with dialogue and punctuating it. Now we're going to do this.” That would require some modeling.

I know this might be a little hard to imagine, but I always use the story mountain graphic. Everybody's familiar with that.

What I have students do the first time they write a narrative piece is map out the events at the beginning of the story, the middle of the story, and the end of the story. I just look for three events: one, two, three.

Underneath the mountain, I have them put the character’s emotion. What's the emotion? I'm looking for a change. It's not happy, happy, happy. It's got to be a change because otherwise it's not a story. Stories don't stay with the same emotion.

The other thing I do is draw a line underneath the mountain for the setting to show them the setting might change. Where are you in the beginning, the middle, the end?

Then when I teach kids to write - really this starts in second grade/third grade - I don't teach them to start writing at the beginning of the story. I teach them to start writing in the middle of the story. The most exciting part of the story.

Because what I've seen students do - this is just based on my personal experience - they write, write, write, write, write about the beginning of the story. They get to the most exciting part.

Anna Geiger:

It's really fast.

Amy Siracusano:

You're laughing. Yep. And it's done. Right. They finish. So why not get them started with the middle of the story, the most exciting part, and then they can go back and either write what happened at the beginning and then what happens at the end? I've seen a lot of success in that.

Absolutely we have to teach kids to write extended writing pieces, but we've got to break it down for them. We've got to stop assigning things and again, chunk it, chunk it, chunk it - slowly.

It doesn't have to be a lot of time. Everything takes time and we want kids in upper grades to be able to write for an extended period of time. But I don't want them writing, I'm trying to think of the word, horrible pieces or awful pieces or pieces rigged with tons of mistakes where all I'm going to have to do is go back and fix all of these mistakes with you. If I fix them, you're not going to learn how to do it on your own.

Anna Geiger:

You know, I was asking you before about how would you define success, and you were saying that they were applying these things in their writing. If someone would have asked me, because I started teaching in third, fourth, and fifth grade, and then a combination, and I taught first and second, and I did writing workshop with all of them. If someone would have asked me, "What's success in your writing workshop?"

It would have been something like, "They get right to work. They write for the period. They're excited about it. They write a long story."

That's probably what I would have said, even though I've always considered myself a pretty strong writer in terms of how to organize writing. That wasn't really what I was thinking about. It was a very balanced literacy view of writing. The goal is that we just love it.

I remember one student, a very sweet little boy, who really did love to write and wanted to show me his writing, and I could not make any sense of it at all. He loved it. He wrote the whole time. He really struggled with handwriting, so that was an issue, but also the ideas were all over the place.

I didn't know what to do with that. Because there was so much going on, I didn't know where to start because I hadn't laid the foundation for him. There was no expectation for him to understand: this is what my teacher wants to see, this is how I can plan my writing, this is how I can show that I followed my plan.

So yes, I think I think you know in some of the research summaries I've seen from Steve Graham and others, here's things like taking kids through the writing process is supported by research, having kids do a lot of writing time is supported by research, but so much of us have been lacking with the explicit instruction piece.

Which brings me back to thinking about kindergarten. You talked about third grade, which is a really good example, but I think people have a hard time rewinding. Where does it begin? When do I start

assigning these longer pieces? Even if that's a paragraph or a few sentences on their own. How do I get to that?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes. Well, you could use that same story mountain in first grade, only the sentences are, "It was my birthday. I had a party. It was a wonderful day, or I had a great day. I opened presents." Beginning, middle, end, three sentences, same kind of thing. Then getting kids to think about, "Where were you?" "I had a party at my house." There's your expansion. There's your where.

With kindergartners, it's the same thing, but here's the thing. A lot of people are doing what we used to think of as writer's workshop in kindergarten right at the beginning of the year. Is it serving a purpose if they don't have the necessary decoding skills, and the necessary transcription skills, and the oral language? What is that time serving when they're doing things in a notebook? Is it just because we can say, we're doing our writing block of our ELA time?

Being very intentional about what we're doing and why we're doing it is critical. There's nothing wrong with doing a shared writing experience in kindergarten. I really think using lots of images and pictures can help build vocabulary and oral language with kids, using a lot of questions and responding to questions, getting kids to generate questions, and not requiring them to do things before they're ready.

That's not to say I want to keep notebooks and pens away from kindergartners and not allow them to express themselves. No, I just think we need to be intentional and thoughtful about the time that we're spending on different tasks and how we're getting kids to get there instead of wasting a lot of time just to say, like you said, what is writing workshop? What would define success? And I would agree with you. We would say the same thing.

Kindergarten teachers would say the same thing you just said for the upper elementary school kids during a writing workshop time. They wrote for 30 to 40 minutes. They did everything I asked them to do. They drew their picture. They colored their picture.

I just think there's a time and a place for everything and we just need to be systematic about that. When you look at the writing standards in most states across the United States, you see things like drawing, dictating, and writing. Well, writing is going to be the last thing that comes.

In the beginning, drawing and dictating, that's important. Oral language, oral language, oral language. I can't emphasize it enough. If we don't have it, they're going to have a hard time putting that oral language or that thought, that center of my triangle, my volcano, into practice once they have the necessary decoding, encoding, and transcription skills to get it down on paper.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, so I think those early teachers - kindergarten, maybe early first grade - can accept or be comfortable with the idea that teaching writing is not just having kids produce a lot of writing on paper.

It's me modeling how to do this. It's us orally forming sentences. It's saying the sentence to your partner. It's adding on to a sentence orally. It's watching me write it. It's helping me write it. It's knowing that those are building the foundation so that they'll be able to independently, with support, do some kind of writing on paper and not to feel like they're shirking their responsibility, that they're doing something important. It's laying the foundation.

Amy Siracusano:

Yes. Just to add, Dr. Lucy Hart Paulson - a lot of people know her as the author of early childhood LETRS - also wrote a book called *The Bells Book*, which currently isn't in production, but she's hopefully, fingers crossed, writing a second edition. Lucy talks about an approach to teaching writing called Picture Story/Word Story. She taught it to me prior to LETRS. She came to our district and talked about it.

It gives kindergartners, even first graders early on, an access point for writing. In the process of modeling this Picture Story/Word Story, you basically draw a picture, and you say a sentence. That's your story, "I play catch with my dog", or "I sit with my cat", something like that. You model for them one level above where the highest student is in your class.

Here's how the levels would go. You can think about Ehri's phases of word reading in this kind of context. At the highest level, that consolidated phase, is teacher writing. This is what it would look like if you're a teacher.

The next level below it is, "I'm going to stretch my words out so that I can spell beginning, middle, ending sound."

Next level would be beginning and ending sound.

Next level would be beginning sound.

And the last level would be kind of scribble writing, that initial start of what does writing look like? If I put marks on paper, this is a way for me to communicate.

I've modeled it now many times in classrooms. I've had kindergarten teachers tell me writing has always been a struggle in their classrooms because of the diverse learners they have. Anytime anybody puts this approach from Lucy [Hart Paulson] into practice, it's successful. I've never had a child fail.

Because what happens is the child can write at the access point that they're ready for. It ties back to decoding, it ties back to phonemic awareness, beginning sound, ending sound, vowel sound, stretching your sounds out, spelling it with the right letters or an approximation of the letters that will spell that sound. It's extremely powerful.

I did a YouTube video on it during COVID to support some educators but here's the thing. Somebody dinged me on how my handwriting was on one of my letters, so please don't fault me when you see the formation of one of my letters. I told you I'm not trained to teach it. We all have things to learn, but it's highly successful.

I would say that the one thing that some people have done - it was not modeled this way - is once you model the different access points, you hide the access points from the kids before they go to do it because you don't want them copying what you've done. But you might draw a line for every single word in the sentence, and they could do a sentence similar to yours.

But it's a beautiful thing and it's really a way for kindergarten teachers to track how kids are applying their sound-symbol knowledge, their handwriting over time, and then they can extend that as kids get better with writing individual sentences. They could say, "Could you add a sentence about how you felt? Could you add a sentence about where you were?" That sort of thing.

Anna Geiger:

This reminds me about an episode that I did with Sonia Cabell about scaffolding preschoolers' early writing. A lot of that can apply to kindergarten, when teachers understand this amount of representations of the word, what comes next, and challenging them to move forward.

Well, I definitely have to get the link for that video so I can put that in the show notes.

This was super helpful. We can talk about this all day, I can tell.

I really appreciate you breaking down the complexity of writing, talking about the role of executive functions and automaticity, and then what I really liked is the very specific things that teachers can do and how this can look in a school day because I think teachers really need that.

Do you have any recommended resources or books or anything else that you can share for teachers looking to learn more about this?

Amy Siracusano:

Yes, for sentence level instruction, William's book is still in print. His brother and sister-in-law are still running his website www.wvced.com. His book called *Writing Matters*, I highly, highly recommend that. A lot of people use *The Writing Revolution*. That's good for sentence level writing. William's book really breaks down all the parts of speech and parts of sentences really well with lots of suggestions for teachers, so I highly recommend that.

When it comes to writing extended tasks, that gets a little bit tricky. There's not a lot of things out there that are really, really well done. We just have to be careful and thoughtful about what we're doing and just know that teachers teach, not programs.

And if you're unsure how to do something, you need to seek out professional learning if it's not being provided to you. Don't be like me who had to wait 15 years into my educational career to learn some of these things.

The other thing is there is a book, the title is going to escape me. I think it's in its third edition. It's by Steve Graham and it's a compilation of the research in writing.

Anna Geiger:

Is it *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*?

Amy Siracusano:

That's it. Yes. It's a good one. Yes. Yes. It's phenomenal. It goes through that K-12 sequence, talking about all the different things that you might want to know.

Those are the two places I would start. I mean, we could get inundated with too many things, but *Writing Matters* by William Van Cleave and Steve Graham's latest edition would be perfect.

Anna Geiger:

Well, wonderful. Thank you so much, Amy. I really appreciate this conversation and for you taking the time.

Amy Siracusano:

Anna, I'm really grateful to be here and thank you so much for having me today.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode 206. 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.