The Writing Revolution - with Judith Hochman

Triple R Teaching Podcast #208

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. We're continuing our series all about teaching writing. Today I'm interviewing Judith Hochman. She is the creator of The Writing Revolution approach to teaching writing. It's also a nonprofit organization that helps educators in the U.S. and around the world. At the heart of The Writing Revolution approach is teaching writing starting at the sentence level and then gradually moving up to paragraphs and essays.

In this episode, we talk a lot about some of those very specific sentence level activities and how using this approach actually enhances students' understanding of what they're learning. You can implement The Writing Revolution strategies by adding them at the end of your social studies lesson, in the middle of your science lesson, or even in your math lesson. I hope that you see how useful these strategies are and that you start to implement some of them in your own teaching.

Be sure to check out the show notes where we'll share resources where you can learn more. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Judy.

Judith Hochman:

Thank you, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

I'm really excited today to talk to you about The Writing Revolution. Before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and talk us through your history in education?

Judith Hochman:

Well, not surprisingly, I started as a teacher and my history in education is that I moved from being a teacher to an administrator, first in a private school for learning and language disabled students and later to a superintendent of a K-12 school district here in New York. As I moved along in that role, I realized that writing is a formidable task, not just for students, but for teachers, because we really didn't learn too much about how to teach writing in our graduate studies.

That became a tremendous interest of mine. Then I founded an organization called The Writing Revolution which is a not-for-profit based here in New York, but is also throughout the country, that really is serving teachers.

Anna Geiger:

You've written two editions so far of your book with Natalie Wexler, *The Writing Revolution*, and the most recent edition just came out. Many people listening are probably already familiar with the book, but for those who are new, could you maybe walk us through some of the principles of The Writing Revolution?

Judith Hochman:

Of course. Yes. The first principle is the large majority of students need explicit instruction on how to write. They're not going to discover how to become fine writers on their own unless they're extremely gifted. That includes even good readers. The fact that you're an avid reader is not going to make you a competent writer. That was certainly true of myself.

The second one is that sentences are the building blocks of writing. Not enough focus has been given on sentences, I felt, prior to developing this method. We (I'm going from I to we because I had a terrific co-author, Natalie Wexler) felt very strongly that writing has to be embedded in the content that is being taught.

In the limited time we have for instruction and writing in schools, it should be in the service of what kids are learning and knowledge acquisition in general. That's the third one.

The content of what they're learning, the difficulty of the content and what students are learning, drives the rigor of the activities. For example, you can have the same strategy for a complicated issue about square roots or a scientific problem as you use with primary school students in talking about how to grow seeds when they're making little gardens in the classroom. It's the rigor of the content that makes the activities more or less difficult.

Then as they move on to longer writing, we believe that the most important phases in the writing process are planning and revising. They should not just sit down and write and they should not just leave a draft as is. These are tremendously important and I certainly never used them as a young teacher because giving what I believed were terrific assignments was not teaching anybody how to write. When I got that through my head, I realized that those two elements were not just missing with me, but pretty much every other teacher I knew. We wanted to give some attention to that.

[Another principle] involves grammar. Grammar is best taught within the content of the student's own writing, not as a separate lesson or assignment or series of assignments. Those are the six principles.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you for sharing those. I'd like to move on to some questions that I have. You write in your book that you believe that students are encouraged to write at length too soon. I don't disagree with you, but I'd love to know what you mean by that and why you see writing at length early as a mistake.

Judith Hochman:

I'm sure a lot of your listeners know about cognitive overload, when we just put too much on a student's plate and they can't sort out in their memory and in their behavior what it is they're supposed to be focusing on. When we ask young children who may still be learning letter formation, thinking about spelling, capitalization, punctuation, all of those things are formidable tasks for a young writer.

I've been in primary classrooms where the assignments involve paragraphs, and not just paragraphs, but opinion paragraphs that really require an awful lot of thinking on the student's part that have nothing to do with the tasks that need to be automatized, basically, before they're given those longer assignments.

Anna Geiger:

I think that is often expected early on before teaching the nuts and bolts of sentences, which is what your book is about, which leads to eventually writing those longer pieces.

I have another question, what does it mean to teach the mechanics of writing in isolation? What do you mean by that? And is that something to avoid?

Judith Hochman:

It's definitely something to avoid because you could be teaching them about nouns and verbs and move right up to participles - that doesn't really transfer to writing.

Now, in the method that we're using, we use terms like appositives, subordinating conjunctions, conjunctions. Even young children know those terms because they're used early on in context that they understand. Then when they get older, if they have the need to learn those terms, they have enough skills in their repertoire for that not to be such a load.

To teach them what they need to know grammatically within the context of their own writing, for us, is key because they get overloaded with stuff they really don't need and won't use.

Anna Geiger:

So instead of having this idea of circling conjunctions on a worksheet, explaining that we use these conjunctions for this reason, which one will you use and why?

Judith Hochman:

Exactly.

Anna Geiger:

Do you also encourage teaching of the basic parts of speech in context and how might you do that? Such as nouns or verbs?

Judith Hochman:

You know, unless a teacher is reading from a script, I think I've heard about a thousand ways to define a noun. I don't know if you've ever seen that cartoon where someone is saying something to their dog and the dog is hearing, “Blah, blah.” Are you really going to say “a person, place, or thing” to a little person of six years old and think that that's going to inform their writing in some way? The way we can teach a noun and a verb is to give them a noun and a subject and have them make a sentence out of the predicate.

Most of the activities in the method are comprehension checks. As they're learning these terms, they're learning the meaning of subject and predicate just by repairing fragments. There are ways to do it that are sensible and embedded in what they're learning. When you do it in isolation, there's very little evidence that shows transfer.

Anna Geiger:

Which is the whole point, right? I think so often we thought of parts of speech as this set of knowledge that we had to teach students. “This is how you identify different parts of speech” without seeing where we go with that. If we were just teaching kids to add and subtract, but not knowing how that would be used to solve math problems, what have we accomplished?

Judith Hochman:

Exactly, exactly.

Anna Geiger:

One thing that is different about your approach compared to many others, not all, but to many others, is that you advocate for just integrating writing into the subject areas and not having a separate writing block. Can people use this method if they do have a separate block or is there a reason not to have a separate block or is it just because of time?

Judith Hochman:

If a separate block is part of the school's schedule, there is absolutely no reason why you can't use these activities *if* whoever is in charge of the separate blocks works in coordination with the teacher who's giving writing assignments, because in the writing block too often the children can get a mixed message about writing.

The activities, once teachers learn how to use them, are really not a heavy lift for a writing lab and can be done for the writing lab teacher. If they go into a writing lab to write on topics such as “Why we need a longer recess” or even “Dress codes”, that serves no purpose. I mean, you may see some spillover for what they're being taught in class, but it really isn't helpful. If the writing block is supporting the activities that they're getting in a class that's using the method, that's powerful.

Anna Geiger:

The main purpose of The Writing Revolution is really to use writing to help learn what you're already being taught in other subjects. If we're doing a separate writing block and not writing about things we're learning, then you would say it's not serving its purpose.

Judith Hochman:

Right. The only time students learn topics that are not being taught in the classroom is when you're modeling a strategy. Teacher modeling is important. They may take a topic that's very familiar to the students and use that as their model to have them participate and show how it develops into a strategy that will later be in the content and then that should also be modeled with some participation as well.

Anna Geiger:

I appreciate you mentioning the importance of that model because The Writing Revolution is so clearly laid out in terms of activities, that I think a temptation might be: now we'll do this, and now we'll do this, and I'll just tell them to do it. Which was the whole problem we started with, right?

Judith Hochman:

Right.

Anna Geiger:

Do you see any of that going on with implementation of this method?

Judith Hochman:

You know, I'm going to say something that might sound a little strange. I see a lot of things going on with the implementation of the method that doesn't necessarily reach perfection or even close to it. However, I have to tell you, Anna, it's often better than what they were doing before. We're always working on ways through our resource library to put some guardrails up so that they're not making the mistakes that we see as trends.

Anna Geiger:

What would be some of those? Well, we will get to that a little bit later.

Let's talk first about sentence level work. I know you talk about helping kids identify fragments, because that's a big problem, and then turning fragments into sentences. You work on things like combining sentences, using those "because, but, so" conjunctions to complete sentences. There's a lot of sentence level work. Why is it so important to start with that?

Judith Hochman:

Well, as I said earlier, it really is the foundation of all writing and varying your sentences certainly adds interest to whatever the reader's reading.

However, there's an important point being: we try to focus on, with many of the activities, adding complexity to sentences. There's very compelling research that supports the notion that the better students *write* complex sentences the more they'll *understand* them when they encounter them in text.

I recently had an experience with a youngster who thought that when the teacher said (I was watching this in a classroom), "Frank Lloyd Wright, a visionary, an artist…", he thought it was Frank Lloyd Wright *and* a visionary *and* an artist.

When our kids learn to write appositives, which is a noun phrase that further explains the noun, that's never an issue. That's a small example, but an important one.

Anna Geiger:

Yes. I appreciate you saying that because that is something we may not think about very often, that when we're teaching them to write in this way, we're preparing them to comprehend complex text and that is how text becomes complex for kids when it adds all these phrases and clauses and it's a whole sentence that gets to be pretty big.

I think it can also help teachers to realize, "Oh, as I'm teaching my students how to write these complex sentences, I can keep this in mind when I'm finding challenging sentences in their reading to break apart with them." That might not be a natural thing.

Judith Hochman:

You're right. We have a list of frequently used subordinating conjunctions, which begin dependent clauses. Teaching them to begin sentences with subordinating conjunctions is a way of also tackling this complexity issue because as they move through the grades, whether it's in primary sources or literature, they encounter this a lot and you see the comprehension drop.

Anna Geiger:

I love that in the back of the book you have a scope and sequence that shows, in general, your sentence level activities at different grades and how they can become more complex as you move through. And we're talking very early, but of course with those early grades, we're talking a lot of oral language work. Could you take one of your activities and talk us through how it would look different in kindergarten versus third grade?

Judith Hochman:

In kindergarten, it might look like an oral activity. “Seeds need water because…” and you would hope they would say (and always try to anticipate the student responses) “…because they won't grow without it.” “Seeds need water, but if you give them too much water, they won't grow.” “Seeds need water, so we measure out the water carefully every other day.”

Now that can be done orally in a class. One of the things the organization does is teach a K-2 course where you can see.

Now if you're going up to third grade or fourth grade, instead of saying, “Why was Lincoln a great president?” You would say, “Lincoln was a great president because he signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” “Lincoln was a great president but many people thought he used habeas corpus in excess.” “Lincoln was a great president, so more books have been written about him than any other president in history.”

You can see it's the same, and I can take this right up to high school and beyond.

Anna Geiger:

How do teachers know when to turn this into more of a written activity by the students versus a purely oral one?

Judith Hochman:

There are things the teacher knows that no author of a book is ever going to know. A teacher is going to know the ability range in the class. The teacher is going to know things about her own pacing, whether she should move a little quicker because they get it a little faster, or move a little slower perhaps for a different group of students. There are, by the way, many suggestions for modifying that we offer in the book.

The turnover begins at the end of first grade and the beginning of second, but keeping it simple, keeping it without being a heavy burden on the cognitive processes.

Anna Geiger:

Which begins, of course, with a lot of modeling and guided practice, forming those sentences together.

Judith Hochman:

Absolutely.

Anna Geiger:

So it may be some time before students are ready to do it on their own, or maybe the teacher would say, we've gotten this far, I'm going to have this group of students work on writing independently and this group's going to come with my table and we're going to do it together.

Judith Hochman:

Absolutely.

Anna Geiger:

We've already talked a little bit about grammar. Is there anything else that you would share in terms of how to teach grammar concepts within The Writing Revolution approach?

Judith Hochman:

Well, sometime in third grade, since you just mentioned it recently, we do begin to teach appositives. And immediately, when they add appositives to their writing, the focus on the reader becomes very strong. They're giving the reader more information about who or what they're writing about.

Second of all, it introduces them to a strategy that you see very often in writing, but hear very rarely in oral language. That's important. Seeing a third grader use the term appositive or understand the term appositive, or when you say to them, "How about using an appositive in your topic sentence?" which is one of the three ways we tell students to write topic sentences, immediately it shows a level of sophistication that you don't normally see in young children. They're very excited about that. So are their parents usually.

Anna Geiger:

You're teaching them these concepts, but encouraging them to put them in their writing right away versus...

Do you think there's a place for parts of speech worksheets?

Judith Hochman:

I don't for the same reason that I have mentioned. Every minute in school is precious. You have interruptions and you have assemblies and you have snow days and vacations. And to utilize every minute is why we're focusing on expository and narrative writing. Because if we give them a firm foundation in expository and narrative writing, they can write creatively on their own with far more skill than they would if they didn't have that foundation. That's the writing that's needed, not just in school as

they move through the grades, but also in post-secondary academic settings, in the workplace, and in life. So that was our pumpkin.

Anna Geiger:

You differentiate between narrative and creative. Could you explain how you define those two?

Judith Hochman:

Well, the narrative is “Once upon a time…” and it could be a terrific story. Narrative, in our method, really is about we went on a field trip this week, explaining a scientific process, explaining how to solve a math problem, and more and more students are being asked to do this. We’re giving them an idea of how to write and teaching the transitions first, next, then, finally. At a very young age, having them be able to sequence what will become the very important details in their paragraphs later on. This is taken seriously by us. Narratives are very important.

Anna Geiger:

But maybe not so much fantasy writing.

Judith Hochman:

Right. Right, because look, let's face it, no one asked me ever to write a memoir, and I'm sure most people haven't been asked. And as far as stories, kids sometimes get so much pleasure out of writing them. But assuming they're going to go through school successfully, they're going to understand the material they're learning about successfully, because writing is a powerful learning tool. You want to be building their knowledge base. They're not building it when they write a story.

Anna Geiger:

Your perspective and the perspective of The Writing Revolution approach is that school time is limited. We can make the most of our writing instruction by integrating it with what's been read and learned. And let's make the most of our time by teaching these structures that will have the most bang for their buck all through life.

Judith Hochman:

Right. And within the expository writing, as they move along, they're taught varied text structures: cause and effect, problem solution, narrative is one of them, move to argument, claim, counterclaim. This is what they've got to learn because they're going to be writing arguments to a consumer complaint or whatever.

Anna Geiger:

Let's go back in time a bit. Do you call The Writing Revolution “the Hochman method”? Are they one and the same, or has the Hochman method turned into The Writing Revolution?

Judith Hochman:

No. The reason that it's called the Hochman method is it sort of grew organically on its own before there was The Writing Revolution. I certainly never called it the Hochman method. But in the schools that were using it initially, they would say, "I want you to do these Hochman worksheets." I was kind of shocked.

But when we had to title a book, we were not going to allow that book to be called that. I don't know if it answers your question, but yeah, we do get that question.

Anna Geiger:

When did it start? When did you start using these techniques? Maybe you can talk a little bit about just how that worked. Did you try something and then revise it? What led to this?

Judith Hochman:

I had an epiphany in a conference that I went to in New Jersey that was geared toward English language learners. There was a huge influx of immigrants at that time. I saw that one of the workshops had to do with writing. Deep in my heart, I knew I didn't have a clue about how to teach writing. As I said, my assignments, I thought, were terrific, but no one was improving in their writing.

So I went there and it was at that conference that my brain just did a turnaround because I realized that writing almost has to be taught as a foreign language with the fundamentals in a very granular way first. If we weren't teaching it that way, we were missing steps that were very important, not just for learning or language disabled children, but for all children.

So I went back to my day job from the conference and I started to experiment with different strategies. I was an administrator at the time, but I always, always wanted to teach a class. I asked other teachers, would they come in and watch this? Could they critique it? And it was very exciting to see what we were seeing.

Did we make some missteps? Yes. One of the things that I learned was how important note taking is, how critical it is. I believed in outlines very early on. They present repetition. They present information in a much more orderly manner. There are a million reasons to use outlines, but if they weren't taking notes on the outlines, they were writing a draft. I didn't want them to start with a draft. I wanted them to start with the simplest linear plan we could.

We began to focus more on writing notes. We began to give a system, knowing full well that later on they were going to have their own technique. But we had to start them with this. Even in the primary grade, we say, when you see dotted lines, you write just words and phrases, but they move on to the commonly used abbreviations and symbols. And then, you know, they're on their own.

Anna Geiger:

Do you remember what decade this was that you had this epiphany?

Judith Hochman:

Oh, probably before you were born. It was in the late seventies, early eighties.

Anna Geiger:

I was born.

Judith Hochman:

I began to take it to varied populations. After I was superintendent of a school, I began to go out on my own and take it to varied populations at varying places. They learned, I hope, a lot. I learned more. Each population taught me more.

Then I brought it to a school in Staten Island of 3,000 students. It was a title school in which many languages were spoken, certainly not an affluent community. The principal of the school had seen how students were writing in another school that I had been in and said (it was a school for learning disabled students), "My high school students can't write like this." I went there and it became a showcase school for writing in New York City with videos made and a lot of attention given to it.

Then in 2012, there was an article in the Atlantic magazine about the school. That was the beginning of it becoming on the radar educationally and much more than I can handle in terms of teaching. That was the beginning of the formation of The Writing Revolution, the organization.

Anna Geiger:

Can you talk to us a little about the organization? I know, of course, you have the book and I think you have training for teachers. What all is available for people who want to learn more?

Judith Hochman:

The basic course is [grades] 3-12. Many examples are given in the course that demonstrate how these strategies should be used. It's a 12-hour course, depending on where it's taught. Continuing education credit can be given for it.

It's just been adopted in Arkansas, it's in Louisiana, which just did very well in reading, if you noticed. We're basically all over the country. We've got a lot of schools in Australia. It just took off.

We've had a lot of requests to do it at the college level. They thought college students have difficulty, but we're not geared up for doing it beyond 12th grade at this point. We've scaled about as much as we want to right now. We teach a workshop on implementation.

The most effective way to do this is whole-school implementation. The kids aren't getting mixed messages, hearing, you know, things that may be confusing from them from one class to another and from one grade to another. But certainly individual teachers take it all the time.

We give a course for leadership because if the leader or the top administrators in the school don't understand what they're supposed to be evaluating and paying for, it's not going to succeed the way it should. We don't want this to be the new shiny object. They have to own it.

Then there is a group of schools that we have partnership with. It certainly benefits the school, but it benefits us as well. They're in historically marginalized districts. They've been tremendous for us.

Anna Geiger:

Yes, I had a conversation with Dr. Lorraine Hammond out in Australia. Oh, maybe it was last year. She talked about how this was a big part of their instruction, and how they combine it with vocabulary. I'm sure that was super exciting for you to see this going around the world.

Judith Hochman:

It's kind of unbelievable. I mean, a paper was just written in the University of Cyprus about introducing it.

Anna Geiger:

My goodness. Interesting.

Judith Hochman:

You know, it's been shocking.

Anna Geiger:

I like what you said a little bit ago, which I'd never thought about before, about this idea of teaching writing as if it's a foreign language. That is so interesting because we don't often do that, right? We just, at least I did as a teacher assume, "Well, if you can talk, you can write. If you can read, you can write. Just get it on paper."

Judith Hochman:

Anna, they write the way they talk. This is not the way we should write. It requires a level of accuracy and precision that is not required at all in oral language. That's what I guess made the lights go on in my mind. You have to teach this in an entirely different way to kids.

As we're teaching this, we've got to be explaining *why* to the teacher. We're teaching each one of these strategies. Why does this work? What are we looking for with this? Because that also was not something that I saw in any writing method that was around in the seventies and eighties. And at that time there was very little research on writing that was applicable to the classroom. There was much more on reading up until I would say fairly recently.

Anna Geiger:

And interesting too, you talked about the two most important [stages] according to your group. And that's definitely arguably true that planning and revising [are the most important] which are two things we don't do when we're talking, right? We just say it and we don't go back and fix it. So that's why we've got to really teach those very explicitly.

There's a lot more we could talk about, but I would just encourage people to get the second edition or the first I mean, they're both excellent, but the second edition gets a little more detailed. The book is not hard to read. It's actually a pretty quick read with a lot of examples, and then they can look into some other trainings from your group.

Before we close, though, I'd love it if you could share pitfalls or things to avoid, or just things to know. Such as, what do you *not* want to do? What do you want to make sure you avoid when you're implementing this approach?

Judith Hochman:

Teachers have to write recursively. You can't say, OK, we did subordinating conjunctions, check. Or we worked on outlines for paragraphs, check. Keep going back recursively until it really is embedded in a student's repertoire.

Don't discount summarizing. Summarizing is a very, very important skill to learn and apply to what they've learned. When students are asked to summarize, they're very often told to summarize something. There are steps to learning how to summarize.

These are things that we've learned over time.

Revision, very often ignored. It should be based on the sentence strategies and the outlining strategies that they've learned. Not to make this topic sentence juicier. That doesn't tell a student at all what to do. Start your topic sentence with a subordinating conjunction. We'll tell them how to write a topic sentence that's more interesting than, "I'm going to tell you about Abraham Lincoln."

Anna Geiger:

Don't be afraid to teach those basics and then, of course, review them over and over.

Then always that reminder that this book is not a list of assignments to give; it's a list of strategies to teach. Teaching involves modeling and practice with the students.

Judith Hochman:

Exactly. Well said.

Anna Geiger:

Anything else you'd like to share about The Writing Revolution or any future projects that you've got going on?

Judith Hochman:

We have a lot of future projects going on in our resource library. We continually are adding new videos, worksheets, exemplars, etc. We use topics throughout and you can get some of them through a QR code in the book.

Every month, like this month, there are a lot of activities that have to do with Black History Month. With each month, and the seasons, and whatever I think can be useful to teachers.

They're always working on something new and exciting. Our use of artificial intelligence is not focused on the students at all. It's focused on the teacher. As I addressed earlier, it's going to serve as guardrails for teachers who make what we feel are the frequently seen trends and errors. I think that'll be greatly appreciated by them. That's what we're working on.

Anna Geiger:

Very exciting. And thank you for taking some time out of your busy life to talk about this with me. I'm excited to share this with others so they can, if they're not already, read the book and at least start trying some of these strategies with their own students. I mean, an end goal would be to use this with your school, but you can make a huge change just in your own classroom.

Judith Hochman:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Thank you, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode208. 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.