

How can I improve my practice so that the writing produced by my students is clear and descriptive?

Diane Clark

## Biography



Diane Clark is in her sixteenth year of teaching and currently teaches a combined grade 6/7 class of 24 students at Lynndale Heights Public School in Simcoe, Ontario, in the Grand Erie District School Board.

This is Diane's second action research paper. Her first, completed in 2000, was written in response to the question, "What can be done in the classroom to ensure that girls feel increased confidence and self-esteem when doing math?" and was published at the web site [www.unipissing.ca/oar](http://www.unipissing.ca/oar) and in the publication, Passion in Professional Practice: Action Research in Grand Erie (Black and DeLong, 2001).

## Abstract

The writing produced by my junior level students has always been an area requiring much attention. Whether writing a narrative, responding to reading comprehension questions, or answering questions in core subjects such as social studies and science, it has been an on-going struggle to get the students to write with more description or information, or to clearly express their message. Through this action research I have gathered numerous tools that, when implemented regularly in the classroom, enable the students to produce writing that is clear and complete.

Modelling of concepts, immediate verbal feedback, using student work as examples, providing students with grammar, writing skills, and word study lessons, and immersing the students in the style of writing they are expected to write are all tools that research shows work effectively in a writing program. This action research paper was written after five months of research, reading, and implementation in my grade 6/7 classroom.

## Background

Language has been a passion of mine for as long as I can remember and I try, year after year, to instill in my students a genuine love of the written word. Making the students enthusiastic about their writing has certainly proved to be much easier than getting them to understand the importance of writing well. What I have noticed repeatedly in my classroom is that the students eagerly sit down to write creative stories or to respond on paper to what they have read, but their eagerness takes a big dive when asked to make changes or additions, or to re-read what they have written in order to see if their message is clearly stated. In general, the quality of student writing in my classroom has not been what I would like it to be. I felt that doing this action research project would provide me with insight about improving the quality of student writing with my grade 6/7 students. A good friend and colleague who teaches across the hall from me was also going to be doing action research in the area of improving student writing, so I was confident that together we would be able to see marked changes in our students' abilities and efforts with writing.

## Finding a Question

After giving the proposed action research some thought I was completely overwhelmed by the task of designing a question that would be the focus of the coming months of research and gathering of data in and out of the class-

room. My action research question was going to be, “How can I improve my practice so that the writing produced by my students is clear and descriptive”, but I knew that I would have to narrow the focus of my question if I was going to see specific results in the coming months. To get a better grasp of where my students were in terms of writing I devised a one page questionnaire in which the students were asked to make choices about the writing experience and to justify their choices. What follows is a summary of the data:

#### Student Questionnaire Results (as completed by 23 students)

CHOICES GIVEN TO STUDENTS	PERCENT WHO CHOSE “YES”
Writing a story that isn’t too long	57%
Writing a lengthy story	43%
Editing independently	17%
Editing with another person	83%
Writing the story by hand	26%
Writing the story on a computer (word processing program)	74%
Being allowed to write about any topic of choice	87%
Being told what topic to write about	13%
Sharing with others what has been written	63%
Keeping personal what has been written	35%

Though the results were not surprising, they helped me to see, in black and white, what some of the changes had to be in my writing program. What I found particularly eye-opening was the fact that so many (87%) of the students preferred to choose their own writing topics. I thought about this statistic for a long time and thought, at first, that letting the students write about topics of their choice would be the magical tool needed to see improved writing in my classroom. Then, after much more thought, I realized freedom of choice was not what the students needed. When told to write about a topic of their choice the majority of my students spend sometimes two or three periods trying to think of a topic; they ask me for help and they ask others for help, and eventually I have to give them a topic based on what I know they are interested in. So much for freedom of choice. Knowing my students, I knew that structure and guidance is what they needed in the first half of the year so that, hopefully, by the latter half they would be able to write more freely and at their own pace to produce more descriptive writing.

Next I made a list of all the different ways I involve my students with language and writing to see if I could see an obvious gap in my delivery of the curriculum or writing process. My list was lengthy because writing is central to almost everything we do in the classroom. I then thought about annual Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores and realized that the grade six writing scores were usually lower than the reading and math scores. Why? I believe we do a lot of writing in class - both scripted (content area writing) and creative writing (stories with narration and dialogue). Lori Barkans, a Junior Curriculum Consultant for the Grand Erie District School Board, brought to my attention on September 28, 2003, at our first action research meeting, that the types of writing asked of the students in the EQAO assessment each year (convincing letter written on demand, and a narrative with the topic given) are not necessarily what I stress in the classroom. This gave me something to think about, but I long ago came to the conclusion that the yearly EQAO assessment is not a definitive assessment of student accomplishment in my classroom; I know that I send my students to the next grade with a large variety of

types of writing under their belt. But...the EQAO assessment is still a reality for us so we have to look at ways to better prepare the students for the assessment.

### Reasons for Making Change in The Classroom

I began to question everything I do in my language arts program. Do I provide my students with the editing and proofreading tools to polish their work? Do I provide them with enough understanding of the English language through grammar and word study to enable them to write confidently? Do they enjoy writing or is it simply something I make them do? I spent time searching the Internet and reading professional books for some guidance about teaching writing to intermediate students and learned that “grammar instruction that is separate from writing instruction does not improve students’ writing competence” (Braddock and others, 1963; Hillocks, 1986). While this seems to be an opinion shared by many, I am not yet convinced that grammar lessons are pointless as a tool to improve student writing. I have seen increased confidence in writing abilities and have seen improved writing in my students after grammar specific lessons. When students edit each other’s work I often hear students tell each other that, “there aren’t enough adjectives in this sentence”, or “you need to go back and add punctuation to the end of every sentence”, or “sometimes your verbs don’t agree with your nouns and pronouns”. Exposure to grammar specific lessons definitely makes the students aware of what is needed in their writing.

Through my readings I also learned that “numerous studies (Mellon, 1969; O’Hare, 1973; Cooper, 1975; Shaughnessy, 1977; Hillocks, 1986; Strong, 1986) show that the use of sentence combining is an effective method for improving students’ writing.” My students’ writing is often laden with choppy, short sentences so I now was spending more time with the students talking about how to write lengthier, more descriptive sentences so that their writing flowed from one paragraph to another.

Getting together with colleagues to discuss writing in our classrooms took place midway through this action research paper (November 11, 2003). Lori Barkans, a Junior Consultant for the Grand Erie District School Board (GEDSB), organized a session where we sat down with two other teachers, Deana Gates (grade 6 in Simcoe, and my colleague), and Jeff Senior (grade 8 in Brantford) and we spent the afternoon sharing ideas and suggestions for writing activities in our classrooms. The session was invaluable. Hearing my frustrations echoed by the others was therapeutic, for it made me feel I was not alone in my quest for improved writing. Resources such as those written by Reggie Routman (*Conversations*, 2000), and the *First Steps Writing Resource Book* (1994) were referenced often in the discussion, and we shared with each other what we had found thus far in our readings and what changes we wanted to implement in our classrooms. We spoke about creative writing (narrative stories) as a curriculum expectation and were surprised that we were not able to find such a language expectation in the Ontario Curriculum (1997). Interestingly, “writing for various purposes in a range of contexts” is the overall expectations for grades 5 to 8; there is no mention of narrative stories specifically. This led to an interesting discussion about how, as educators, we often devote much writing time to stories and should be, instead, focusing on a multitude of other writing forms (letters, journals, poetry, lists, scripts, newspapers articles, commercials, etc.) While we have a somewhat scripted language curriculum in our province it is obviously open to interpretation as to what we teach our students in terms of writing.

### Implementing Change in the Classroom

The Writing: Resource Book of the First Steps program (1994) suggests specific lessons in which the students are given ample opportunity to add description to what they write, so I decided to focus on this aspect of their writing. Getting the students to add detail and precision to their writing is a slow process, one in which progress is seen in

tiny steps. I had been sounding like a broken record as I constantly reminded and asked the students to be descriptive and to explain their thoughts with appropriate words. I created a lesson in December of 2003 in which the students and I worked together on a writing activity in which they were expected to show their audience what they were writing about instead of just telling the information. Many examples had to be shown before I saw the light go on for most students, but once they got the hang of the exercise, they had fun and were successful in showing their ideas. Cassie, a weak writer, replaced the basic sentence “The dog was mean” with the more descriptive, “*I couldn’t get past the ferocious drooling pit bull.*” Taylor, another grade 7 student, replaced the same sentence with, “*The 200 pound rottweiler bared its giant fangs.*” When given the basic sentence, “The day was very hot,” Oliver decided that a better way to show the idea was to write, “*As we sat under the cool shade of the towering maple tree, we could hear the constant drip of condensation from the window air conditioner.*” I was thrilled with the creativity being shown by my students, and they seemed to understand the objective of the lesson. Later that morning, when students were continuing to write the drafts of their current stories, I could hear students proudly sharing their descriptive sentences with friends sitting nearby, and then giving others ideas to improve on their writing. It was the kind of writing class I was reading about in the books by Regie Routman, Nancy Atwell, and Lucy Caulkins, and I was amazed to see it happening in my own classroom.

Educators and authors Routman, Atwell, and Caulkins firmly promote “writer’s workshop”, but I find it difficult to understand how the true writer’s workshop can fit into my already overflowing day. The concept of letting the kids write only about the subjects that interest them and to work at their own pace is a scary one for me - I think a few highly independent kids would thrive with this but the majority of my students would flail in this lack of structure. I find that working with them, brainstorming together, writing a plan together, having common expectations for the students, and editing and proofreading together all keep my students focused.

I wanted to prove to myself that a structured approach to writing would net me improved quality of writing in my students, so I assigned a writing piece in which the students brainstormed ideas at length about a photo (in the Harris Burdick photo collection, by Chris Van Allsburg, 1996) and wrote a detailed plan for their story. They then were given class time to begin their draft, and were very enthusiastic about their stories. I made the drafts due on a specific day and together we edited (capitalization, periods, punctuation, spelling, quotation marks, etc.) and then students read their stories to a partner with the partner having to give at least three improvements, verbally. Then the partner looked at the story and was asked to make changes on paper, with a coloured pencil (run-on sentences, paragraph structure, etc.). This editing and proofreading class lasted more than 60 minutes!

When I read the finished final copies a few days later I was actually quite pleased with the end results of most of the stories. With a few exceptions, the stories were descriptive, included an effective blend of dialogue and narration, had interesting beginnings and conclusions, and were grammatically well written. I really enjoyed and was pleased by the story written by grade six student, Kaitlyn, a student who had recently tested below average in her communication skills. She had written a very good story. When I spoke to her about it the day after I read it I complimented her on writing an interesting and well-written story, and she told me, “It was fun. I really liked the picture and I lay in bed thinking about what might happen in my story. I didn’t even need help from my mom. It really helped to have someone else read my story and tell me what I had to improve on.” Kaitlyn’s comment about the use of verbal feedback gave me an “Aha!” moment. I knew from watching the students share and edit/proofread together that constructive criticism in the form of a verbal exchange can go a long way to help the writer see where improvements can be made. I now had another new tool to focus on in my quest to improve student writing in the classroom.

While I have used verbal feedback as a means of guiding students with their written work, I now knew that increasing the incidents of one-on-one feedback with my students would net improved results in whatever the

students were doing. When students completed a detailed plan before writing I now asked them to discuss it with me prior to their beginning the draft copies of their writing. By discussing their plan and asking key questions about their ideas, students were able to return to their desks and add additional information that would assist them in writing a more detailed and well planned story. Their level of confidence in what they were working on increased proportionately with the number of questions I asked and the number of suggestions I gave when we discussed their work. Somehow, the verbal feedback was more readily accepting than if I had collected their work, written suggestions all over their work, and returned their work to them. The verbal discourse was working!

I now was implementing verbal feedback in all areas of the curriculum. I had the students read a newspaper article about the world's tallest free-standing structure in Taipei (January, 2004) and asked them to respond on paper to several questions about the article. Rather than just hand in their completed papers, I asked students to bring their papers to me and together we read their responses to the questions. Often just reading their responses out loud to me prompted them to make additions or corrections, and if not, then my oral questions about their understanding of the article led them to see that vital information was lacking in their written responses. We continued this process for almost 90 minutes and students were not considered done their work until all ten questions on their sheet contained all possible correct information. Sometimes a student and I met more than ten times for a discussion of their responses and each time the student would return to his desk with a better understanding of what had to be added to make a response complete. That lesson alone was a real eye-opener for both me and the students. Immediate verbal feedback was definitely the factor that led to all of the students being successful with this reading comprehension activity. Had I simply collected, marked the papers, and returned them the next day then the success rate of the written responses would definitely not have been what it was with the verbal feedback. I was onto something.

While my area of focus for the action research was writing, I was using verbal feedback in my math classes, with much success. Students were now expected to bring math problems and answers to me throughout the class so that we could talk about their accuracy. Any error had to be immediately corrected by the student at his desk and then returned to me for a check mark. Again, the immediate verbal feedback assisted the students in walking away from math class with a sense of accomplishment and success; neither would have been achieved had we taken up the work as a class the next day.

In her book *Conversations* (2000), author Regie Routman states that in order to foster quality writing, "we need to model our expectations, offer support, allow time to practice, and provide feedback." When I read this line I realized that Routman had summed up in one sentence what took me a long time to learn, especially the importance of modelling. The more I use modelling as a central part of my lessons the more I realize its impact on the quality of the work produced by the students. The success rate is proportional to how long I take to work through a model with the students, and I have learned to wait until I see the "Aha!" light go on for everyone in my class before I set them free to work independently.

Shortly after reading this section of Routman's book I developed a writing lesson (February, 2004) in which the students were to write an expository. Finding a pertinent topic that would interest all of the students was a challenge until I overheard some females in my class talking about how they wished boys were not a part of the class. On the same day, a colleague shared with me an article about a school in Hamilton, Ontario, that is piloting a project in which intermediate students were given a choice at the start of the year: be in a class with both genders or be in a single-gender class. I now had what I needed to begin the lesson. Students were asked to read the magazine article (*Owl Magazine*, September, 2003) and then we brainstormed and listed the pros and cons of single gender classes. Our class discussion lasted more than 40 minutes but the excitement in the students' voices was infectious. Our list grew and grew. The next day we talked about how our opinion could be expressed on paper and I showed

them the model for an expository on an overhead acetate, and from there I wrote on the board what they wanted me to write. We read and reread what they had written collectively until they were pleased with the end results. They now knew what a finished expository should look like, and were ready to write one of their own. Not one student asked for assistance when they got started at working independently. Spending about 90 minutes brainstorming, planning, and writing an expository with them gave them the necessary tools to tackle such a piece of writing on their own. Students freely approached me to look at their plans before writing the draft of their expositions and the verbal feedback exchange helped to clarify any sections that needed focus. Two weeks later, I decided to have the students write another expository and, once again, the topic was relevant to their lives: Should downloading of music be considered illegal? We followed the same steps as with our first expository, but now the students knew the expectations beforehand, so we were able to shorten the amount of time spent on each step, and they were able to complete their expositories with minimum assistance and guidance from their teacher. The combination of verbal feedback and modelling was really producing results with my students. Many students who received C+ or B- on the first expository were now receiving evaluations of B or B+; a marked improvement in their expression of opinion was being seen.

Further to “modelling our expectations” (Routman, 2000) I began to use student writing (with permission from the student, of course) to generate class discussion about what a rough or final copy of any writing should look like. Putting student writing on overhead acetates is an effective visual tool; the students can see the finished product and can make visual markings on the work with markers. Criticism is constructive and the students can see the many steps needed to proofread and edit their own work. I found that the editing sessions that followed the lessons where we “tore apart” someone’s writing were the most productive. Again, I noticed that once students see what is expected of them they are able to work independently with confidence. Further to this, when my grade six students were faced with the writing components of the EQAO assessment in May of 2004 they approached the writing with confidence. One writing task was to write an adventure story; the students meticulously completed their story plans with exacting detail. When writing their draft of the story the next day they wrote and wrote and wrote, with most students requiring almost all of the allotted 50 minutes. This in itself was an obvious change for most of the students who, at the beginning of the year, could write a plan and a draft in less than half an hour, producing short, non-descriptive writing. Now, eight months later, they were taking care with their writing, were using classroom resources such as a dictionary and thesaurus for varied vocabulary, and were writing stories that had defined features such as beginning, middle, and conclusion. What impressed me the most was the independent assurance with which the grade six students were completing their EQAO writing.

## Findings

After several months of focusing on my question, “How can I improve my practice so that the writing produced by my students is clear and descriptive,” I have learned that the following tools need to be implemented regularly in my writing program:

- model the writing for the students; model the process, model writing a plan, model my expectations, model writing the draft and show students how the final version should look,
- use verbal feedback to guide the students with their writing; ask the questions so that they have to come up with the answers and come to understand the process,
- use student writing as an example to explain the processes of writing, proofreading, and editing,
- immerse the students in examples of the type of writing they will be producing; let them explore and share before tackling their own writing,

- provide the students with the necessary tools to be efficient writers; focus lessons on grammar, writing skills, and word study; gear lessons specifically to a skill such as adding adjectives to nouns to produce descriptive narratives.

## Conclusion

Being involved in this action research project has given me the incentive to focus on student writing in a way that I would probably not have done otherwise. Improving student writing has always been a concern of mine and I have searched out and read resources about student writing when time allowed, such as in the summer. This action research project allowed me the luxury of being able to focus on writing through group discussions with others sharing the same concerns, through professional readings, through one-on-one discussions with GEDSB consultants, and through release time from my classroom, allowing me the time to research and write this report.

In answering my focus question, “How can I improve my practice so that the writing produced by my students is clear and descriptive.” I have validated tools I was already using in my writing program and learned about tools that I now regularly implement with my students. My findings have provided me with the confidence to tackle any writing activity with my students and the knowledge that the writing that will be produced will be more clear and more descriptive than in previous years. I will be teaching grade four next year and am confident that all that I have learned through this action research project can be used effectively with that age group, or any grade.

The action research process will be an on-going one for I will continue to read professional articles and books about writing with students long after this report is written. Student writing is so cross-curricular in my classroom that I am always on the quest to find activities and tools to make the writing process easier and more effective for my students and for me.

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