

Chapter 15

Teaching All Students to Write During a Pandemic: Best Practices for Writing Instruction

Tracey S. Hodges

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7490-8711>

University of Alabama, USA

ABSTRACT

Writing instruction in K-12 classrooms can be challenging under the best of circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, writing instruction became even more challenging, with teachers shifting to online, distance, and virtual learning in an instance. With the time investment and attention required to teach writing well, teachers were faced with new obstacles and questions. In addition to understanding best practices for writing instruction, the pandemic unveiled more access and instruction inequities. Specifically, teachers found that students would engage in lessons, activities, and remote instruction at differing levels, ranging from fully invested in the instruction to completely absent instruction. Therefore, this chapter synthesizes best practices for virtual writing instruction and provides recommendations for applying these best practices for various learner situations to alleviate some inequities.

INTRODUCTION

Writing instruction in K-12 classrooms can be challenging under the best of circumstances. During the COVID-19 pandemic, writing instruction became even more challenging with teachers shifting to online, distance, and virtual learning in an instance (Hodges et al., 2020). With the time investment and attention required to teach writing well, teachers were faced with new obstacles and questions such as “how do I support all students regardless of access to online learning?” and “how do I structure writing lessons in virtual settings?”. After this initial shift to new contexts, teachers are now prepared to implement best practices for online, virtual, and distance writing instruction for all students, but what are those best practices?

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In addition to understanding best practices for writing instruction, the COVID-19 pandemic unveiled more inequities in access and instruction. Specifically, teachers found that students would engage in lessons, activities, and remote instruction at differing levels, ranging from fully invested in the instruction to completely absent from the instruction (Hodges et al., 2020). For instance, students who were fully invested in the instruction participated in all remote learning options and completed all lesson activities and assignments. Students in the absent from instruction group did not participate, possibly because the household did not include resources to access virtual learning (e.g., computers, Internet access) or because the adults in the household were essential workers and unable to help facilitate schooling. Other degrees of engagement in instruction were also present (Hodges et al., 2020).

With these varying inequities, teachers face an improbable, though not impossible task: to provide high-quality, rigorous, and engaging writing instruction despite any potential barriers due to access, time, or safety. In uncertain and stressful times, teachers need best practices pertaining to virtual writing instruction, and guidance about how to use those best practices to meet student needs while accounting for inequities in resources or background knowledge. This chapter meets two objectives:

- (a) to synthesize best practices for virtual, remote, and distance learning pertaining specifically to writing instruction, and
- (b) to shed light on the challenges and opportunities for teaching writing instruction during COVID-19 with recommendations for applying the best practices to a variety of learner situations.

BACKGROUND

What is writing? Before discussing writing instruction, it is important to consider what constitutes writing in K-12 classrooms. According to Harris and colleagues (2013), there are four applications for writing. Students need to be able to write for a variety of purposes and genres, use the writing process, use writing as a way to learn and build knowledge, and write across disciplines. Moreover, in 2012, a panel of writing experts developed the National Recommendations for Writing Practice Guides, which specified four goals for writing instruction: (1) provide daily practice for writing; (2) teach the writing process and writing for a variety of purposes; (3) teach handwriting, sentence combining, grammar, and other tools for writing effectively; and (4) create an engaged community of writers (Graham et al., 2012). Taking these ideas together, it is clear that writing instruction includes many components but focuses on a process, products, types and genres, specific skills, and motivation.

Before considering virtual writing instruction, teachers need to understand what constitutes effective writing instruction, in general? In 2007, Graham and Perin identified the following 11 components of effective writing instruction for adolescent writers: (a) strategy instruction; (b) summarization; (c) peer assistance; (d) setting product goals; (e) word processing; (f) sentence combining; (g) inquiry; (h) prewriting activities; (i) teaching the process writing approach; (j) studying models; and (k) grammar instruction. In 2012, Graham and colleagues added explicit instruction, scaffolding student writing, integrating multiple modes of composing, and increasing the amount of time students write. Finally, both Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson (2004) and Graham, Kiuvara, and MacKay (2020) found writing-to-learn activities, instruction, and assessment improved overall writing instruction. From these meta-analysis and reviews, scholars have synthesized the characteristics of effective writing instruction,

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