



The Third Pillar: Direct Instruction

Many of us teachers, even those of us who have somehow managed to figure out how to write reasonably well, do not remember getting any real instruction in writing. We certainly remember getting assignments—write a research paper, analyze this novel, argue either side of this question—but we (usually) can't remember how, or if, we received instruction on how to do it.

Generally, that's because we did not. We were thrown into the pool, so to speak, and the folks throwing us in hoped we would learn to swim. And sometimes, we did (fortunately!) ... but because all we got was an *assignment* (e.g., "do this") and little or no *instruction* (e.g., "I'll show you how"), the experience did not usually leave us with many models of what writing instruction, as opposed to writing assigning, could look like.

Writing for Understanding recognizes that direct instruction is always helpful and often necessary. When planning a Writing for Understanding sequence for proficiency, teachers plan for direct instruction at every needed step of the way. Often, this involves scaffolding of some sort—assisting students as they learn so that they are able to be successful. The goal is for our students, no matter what their grade level, to be in the game. At any point in the instruction—reading a new text, having a conversation about meaning, searching for evidence, crafting a thesis statement—we want our students to say to themselves, "Hey, I get this—I can do this!"

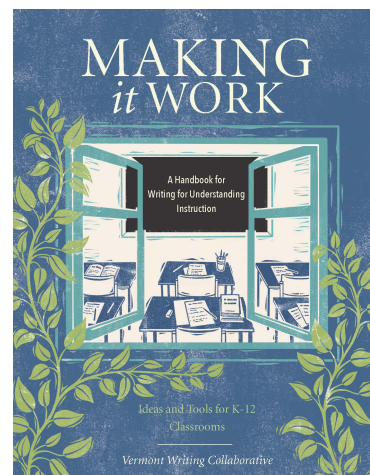
An important aspect of direct instruction is supplying writers with various forms of structure—thinking and writing clearly is impossible without structure. Since writing is really clear thinking made visible, it follows that giving students a structure for their writing, to make their thinking clear, is important—indeed, essential. In Writing for Understanding, direct instruction in structure happens at the macro level (think an essay), the midlevel (think a paragraph), and the micro level (think a sentence).

Direct instruction in the conventions of writing (i.e., spelling, commas, syntax, and the like) is also obviously important. Because the whole goal of Writing for Understanding is to help students make meaning, we find that conventions instruction is most effective in the context of students' actual writing.

Gradual release to independence

As valuable and necessary as direct instruction is, and as useful and needed as scaffolds are, we need to remember the final goal for our students: independently proficient writing. This means that, even as we guide students and help them through all the learning of a Writing for Understanding sequence, we have our "teacher eye" on the endgame: how will kids, eventually be able to do this kind of writing independently? How will they internalize the principles and habits of mind that we have taught them about writing so that they can transfer them to a new task? As a teacher, which aspects of instruction will I be able to release to them first—and which will take longer?

These questions have no absolute answers, but thinking about coaches here can be helpful. A basketball coach gives lots and lots of direct instruction, lets kids practice, gives feedback about their playing, often gives some additional instruction, then has them practice some more. The coach's goal is for kids to be able to transfer—to play a basketball game more or less on their own (knowing that a fifth-grade game is both similar to and different from the NBA). We have found that the more we think about proficient writing as a coach would—about the direct instruction needed now, with the goal of transfer to independence in mind—the more able we are to plan for gradual release to independence sensibly.



You can find ideas and tools for direct instruction in *Making it Work: A Handbook for Writing for Understanding Instruction*—available in our online bookstore.