

## How to Improve Writing in Your Classroom

This handout is designed to help you combat common issues that you may face when assigning written assignments in your classroom. To get the most out of this information, choose 2-3 ideas that you may implement per quarter, and purposefully build them into your unit and lesson plans.

### Generating Ideas

One common roadblock to writing is simple, the students don't know what to write about. Use the tips below to help your students generate ideas and topics for their next writing assignment:

- Orally share ideas in groups before having students write
  - Allowing your students to generate ideas in a group is an effective tool. Group brainstorming, and hearing what other students have to say, can help the student who is stuck to find the inspiration to come up with an idea. If multiple students are stuck on an idea, the group setting allows them to feel less alone, and makes them realize that coming up with an idea is hard for other students as well.
    - *Teacher-tip: Practice intentional grouping. Pair struggling students with those students who are more creative when it comes to determining a topic, and who you know will push students to come up with their own creative ideas.*
- Allow students to write collaboratively
  - Allow your students to work on an assignment in pairs, groups, or as a whole class. Similar to sharing ideas out loud, this method gets your students to better think about how to structure an essay and share their writing styles.
- Provide students with a sentence starter
  - A sentence starter or writing prompt guarantees that each student will have something to write about and will also help them get a jumpstart on their writing.
- Give your students a writing warm-up
  - Allow your students to “free write” for a few minutes and encourage them to ignore structure and grammar (for now). Free writing is an excellent tactic for getting the creative juices going.
    - *Teacher-tip: Some students will still say they have nothing to free-write. Tell students that they can write about anything they want, and that you are not going to read it. Sometimes, students are embarrassed of their writing and it hinders them from getting it down on paper. You can suggest that students write about the following if they are stuck: the funniest thing that happened this week, their dream vacation, their best friend, their pet, or their favorite food.*

## Structuring Responses

Sometimes, writing a formal response is hard for students. Use the tips below to get your students ready for a formal, organized response:

- Break down the assignment and provide visual aids
  - Instead of making students write a five-paragraph essay all at once, break each part of the essay into sections.
  - Provide students with a graphic organizer that shows each section and includes helpful hints for what to include in each section
    - *Teacher-tip: Some students will benefit from getting the graphic organizers on different days. Make sure you do not overwhelm the students with too many graphic organizers and helpful hints, slow and steady wins the race!*
- Provide models of good writing
  - Give your students an annotated example of what you are looking for in their writing that explains what was great about each section.
  - Perform a think-aloud in front of the class for each section or paragraph of the essay.
- Utilize mini-lessons
  - Instead of focusing on the essay as a whole, teach smaller lessons of the essay in separate mini-lessons (10-15 minutes). Mini-lessons can cover parts of the essay, such as introductions and body paragraphs, but also writing techniques, such as topic sentences and transitional phrases.
  - Immediately after the mini-lesson, have students practice writing the portion of the essay, or using the writing technique you just taught.
- Provide a writing toolkit for students
  - A writing toolkit can include anything that you think may help a struggling student improve their writing. Include resources like a list of transitional words or phrases, a list of words to avoid, a list of synonyms for commonly used words (i.e. 'good' or 'a lot'), and a grammar cheat sheet.
    - *Teacher-tip: Every student is different, and may need different items in their toolkit. Ask your Learning Specialist or co-teacher to help you create personalized writing toolkits for your students with IEPs.*

## Connecting Students to the Assignment

One reason students struggle with writing is simply because they are not interested or invested in it. Use the tips below to help build engagement in writing assignments you assign in your classroom:

- Give your students ownership over the topic
  - Either let your students choose from a list of approved topics, or give them the option to pick their own, pending teacher approval. Often, students who feel invested in a writing topic are more likely to write more and try harder than those who are not interested in the given topic.
- Give your students a greater purpose
  - Writing an essay for a grade isn't always enough to get some students engaged, especially if they're struggling with writing. Raise the stakes and give them a greater purpose by creating unique assignments. For example, have them write a blog post they have to

share with the class or have a contest where a few students in the class get to have their writing published and presented in the school newspaper, or at a parent teacher conference.

- Conference with your students
  - Whether in small groups or one-on-one, it's vital for teachers to pay attention to each student and identify where they are succeeding and where they are struggling. When students feel disengaged, it may be because they think they lack the skills to do well, or that they have not made any progress with their writing so far.
    - *Teacher-tip: Conferences are meant to be a personalized experience. Never go in to a conference blind, but instead be prepared to talk to each student about certain topics that will benefit her/him specifically.*