Developing Gifted and Talented Writers

Todd Kettler
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Standing there on the embankment, staring into the current, I realized that—in spite of all the risks involved—a thing in motion will always be better than a thing at rest; that change will always be a nobler thing than permanence; that that which is static will degenerate and decay, turn to ash, while that which is in motion is able to last for all eternity.

Olga Tokarczuk
Flights (2018)
Translated from the Polish by Jennifer Croft

Why Writing?

• Seventy-five percent (75%) of U.S. students scored below the proficiency standard on the most recent NAEP writing assessment at both 8th and 12th grade levels.

• Almost half of the students taking the ACT score below the college-readiness level on writing.

Why Writing?

• A study in the University of California System found that the ability to compose an extended text was the best predictor of successful coursework during the freshman year.

• Better than GPA
  Better than SAT/ACT

Geiser & Studley (2001)

Why Writing?

• Developed writing talent can serve as a moderator to enhance academic success in other domains.

• Writing talent is becoming increasingly important in knowledge economy work.

• Writing is a domain of interest for some gifted students.

Writing and Cognition

Writing is a major cognitive challenge.

• It tests memory, language capacity, and thinking ability in a single act.

• Writing demands efficient retrieval of domain-specific knowledge from long-term memory.

• A high degree of verbal ability is required to generate cohesive texts expressing ideational content.

• Writing ability depends on the ability to think clearly.
Gifted and Talented Writing

Gifted education has been trending toward domain-specific talent development (e.g. developing exceptional writers).

Texas Policy and the Texas State Plan for the Education of the Gifted/Talented support programs to recognize and develop exceptional talent in an academic domain (e.g. writing).

Fewer than 25% of schools have curriculum or a continuum of experiences dedicated to developing exceptional writers.

Gifted and Talented Writing

Kathryn (Texas High School - 2014)
• 8th grade GT English teacher noticed her writing ability and interest and encourage her to enter the district’s creative writing competition.
• She did, and she won the short story category as an 8th grader.
• Her high school had an outstanding journalism program where she focused on writing creative non-fiction (part of the GT program options).
• The school also had a two-year creative writing sequence as part of the GT program options. She spent two years in the program and served on the editorial staff of the high school literary magazine.
• By her sophomore year in college she had a novel manuscript accepted for publication.

Gifted and Talented Writing

Alexa (New Jersey High School - 2014)
• Participated in high ability/gifted language arts programs in high school.
• Attended out-of-school programs to develop writing talents.
• By the time Alexa graduated high school, she had prose and poetry published in 6 different literary journals – including some dedicated to high school writers (2) and some that were open to all ages of writers (4).

What do we know about those with potential writing talent?

Developing Gifted and Talented Writers

Motivation and Interest in Writing

Research on elementary and secondary students as well as writers in MFA programs describe consistent motivation to write.

One young adult writer described her relation to writing as “… as spouse, a strange but innocuous stalker, the seductive call of ocean, a prey that must be circled carefully.”

They find writing fun and exciting.
They try to model the style and tone of the favorite writers.

Teachers and Opportunities

Exceptional writers in elementary school and high school describe one or more teachers as very important in their development as a writer.

They describe their parents as supportive and encouraging.
When possible, they attend out of school writing programs.
They frequently enter writing competitions.
Young writers might demonstrate...

- Use of paradox
- Use of parallel structure
- Use of rhythm
- Use of visual imagery
- Melodic combinations
- Figurative language (alliteration)
- Confidence w/ reverse structure
- Original adjectives and adverbs

Lexical Diversity

Lexical Diversity is a linguistic term that refers to the variety of words used in a text.

- Has been positively related to higher holistic writing scores in L1
- Has been positively related to higher holistic writing scores in L2

Lexical Sophistication

- Using words that are not frequently used by others in writing (originality)
- Has been positively related to higher holistic writing scores in L1 and L2

Features of Advanced Writing and Tools of Advanced Writers

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Vocabulary and Writing Talent

The development of extensive vocabulary is a fundamental tool to generate a level of deep analysis and comprehension in writing.

A 2008 study found a relationship between students' vocabulary skills and their final grades in high school English classes.

A 1993 study found that vocabulary proficiency (lexical diversity and sophistication) accounted for more than 50% of the variance in students essay scores.

Our Current Study

How are the following linguistic features related to holistic essay quality among high school students in Texas?

- Large Words (% of words with six or more letters – lexical richness)
- Analytic Thinking Words (number of words indicating advanced analysis)
- Unique Words (number of words used at least once in the essay)
- Total Words (overall length of the text)
**Procedures of Our Current Study**

Participants: 349 high school sophomores and juniors
- 57% Female
- Two medium-to-large districts both approximately 62% students of color.
  - District A – average ACT score 21.
  - District B – average ACT score 24

Third Party Participant: Knowsys Test Prep
- Trained scorers for the essays using SAT Writing Rubric (1-6)
- Provided de-identified essays and final scores

**Hypotheses of Our Current Study**

H1: Large word usage will predict holistic essay scores.
H2: Analytic thinking will predict holistic essay scores.
H3: Unique words used will predict holistic essay scores.
H4: Total word count will predict holistic essay scores.

**Results of Our Current Study**

In our model, the four variables collectively accounted for 32% of the variance in essay scores $F(4, 344) = 40.45, p < .001$.

In other words...
- Of all the factors that might cause some students to score higher and some to score lower, our four variables account for about one-third of the differences.
- Statistically, that level of influence does not happen by chance.

**Takeaways from Our Current Study**

Developing Advanced Writing Talent Includes:
1. Practice developing writing fluency in both timed and unrestricted writing.
2. Teach students to write/revise strategically—word choice matters in both original drafting and during revision.
3. Use technical tools with which students can generate unique word counts in their writing and track their progress and growth in productive vocabulary usage.

**Gifted Education to Intentionally Develop Writing Talent**

Developing Gifted and Talented Writers
GT Writing Program Goal

Students who participate in the gifted and talented writing program will develop skills in thinking, research, communication, and self-directed learning as evidenced by advanced written products and performances that reflect creativity and individuality and are advanced relative to students of similar age, experience, or environment.

Graduates of the GT Writing Program will have developed professional level writing in one or more specialty areas (e.g. poetry/prose, creative non-fiction).

Elements of a Gifted Writing Program

Specific Writing Instruction

- Practice writing strong sentences and combining sentences
- Teach writing structures (argumentative, narrative, expository, poetics)
- Provide specific feedback on target skills

Inviting and Selecting Participants

Above Average Verbal Ability
Interest in Writing
Commitment to Intentional Practice
Interest in New Media Writing
Avoid Testing and Formal Cutoffs

Baylor University Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development

Elements of a Gifted Writing Program

What Works for Developing Writing Skills?

- Dedicated and focused time for writing in school (writing blocks)
  - Kindergarten – at least 30 minutes a day
  - Beginning in 1st grade writing blocks should be an hour a day.
- Balanced Time:
  - 30 minutes a day on modeling writing techniques and skill instruction
  - 30 minutes a day on student writing practice

Institute of Education Science
What Works Clearinghouse (2012)

Elements of a Gifted Writing Program

Develop Productive Vocabulary

- Words students become comfortable using in written discourse.
- Create a culture where great words are celebrated and encouraged.
- The vocabulary curriculum needs to be systematic and intentional. Students rarely assimilate words from their reading into productive vocabulary.
Elements of a Gifted Writing Program

Dedicated Practice – Write a lot

• Research indicates that great writers have spent significantly more time practicing writing than average or even good writers.
• The average elementary student may spend 100 hours writing per year.
• Students in the GT writing program may spend 150 to 175 hours.
• The average secondary student may spend 150 hours writing per year.
• Students in the GT writing program (MS/HS) may spend 250 to 300 hours.

Curriculum as Course of Study

Alter the course of study to allow more time for writing instruction and practice—dedicated practice leads to developed talent.

• Use GT program structures (e.g. pullout) for additional writing instruction.
• At secondary levels create additional courses (e.g. electives) dedicated to advanced writing or new media writing (technology driven products).
• Creative writing courses, journalism or advanced journalism courses, independent studies and mentorship programs dedicated to writing.

Four Levels of Curriculum

Developing Gifted and Talented Writers

1. Curriculum as Course of Study
2. Curriculum as Standards
3. Curriculum as Learning Design
4. Curriculum as Authentic Engagement

Curriculum as Standards

Modify the standards in ways that reflect acceleration of standards as well as increased depth and complexity in the standards.

• Developing gifted writers will require modification to the typical curriculum standards for writing.
• Gifted writing students should encounter modes and genres of writing earlier than typical students.
• Gifted writing students should master grammar and poetics earlier and at greater depth and complexity than typical students.

Curriculum as Learning Design

Design learning experiences using valid models of gifted and talented curriculum to develop exceptional writing talent.

• Advanced Content (writing models, techniques, productive vocabulary)
• Complex Thinking (advanced argumentation and rhetoric, analytic approaches to compare and contrast, satire, humor, disciplinary writing techniques in science and social studies as well as narrative writing)
• Conceptual Understanding (concepts of audience, occasion, complex points of view, non-traditional narrative structures, creative deviations)
Curriculum as Authentic Engagement

Include multiple opportunities for authentic writing experiences in and beyond school.

- Students in the GT writing program regularly participate in writing contests.
- Create opportunities for after school writing clubs or use technology to create online communities for the students in the program.
- Summer enrichment and extension programs in writing.
- Focus on new media writing such as Blogs, digital storytelling, etc.

Teach All Three Phases of the Writing Process

Teach and Practice Sentence Combination

- More than 85 studies conducted during the last 55 years have demonstrated that sentence combining is an effective method for helping students produce more syntactically complex sentences.
- Students engaged in regular sentence combination practice improve the overall quality of compositions.
- Recent studies found sentence combining was determined to have a much more positive effect on writing than grammar instruction alone.

Some Specific Tools/Strategies

Teach and Practice Sentence Combination

Provide students two or more sentence stems, simple sentences that are related.

- Example: The customers line up. The line is along the counter.
- Example: The wizard possessed many powers. The wizard was crafty.
- Example: The team played hard. The team finally won the game.

When there are multiple ways to form the new combination sentence, discussions about which is the best combination is a productive way to teach students how to think about effective sentence structure.
Teach and Practice Sentence Combination

Variation: Include more than two sentence stems.
- The server poured coffee.
- The server served toast.
- The server smiled at the customers.
- The server wore a patriotic apron.
- The server in the patriotic apron poured coffee and served toast while she smiled at the customers.

Variation: Have students in dyads develop sentence stems that are fun and challenging for their peer dyads to combine.

Revising for Sentence Variety

The use of sentence variety is included in most writing rubrics.

There are three areas in which sentence variety is manifest in writing construction.
1. Sentence Structure
2. Sentence Opening
3. Sentence Length

Goal: Teach students to recognize sentence variety and address it during revising and editing phases of writing.

Four-Level of Sentence Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence Number</th>
<th>Number of Words</th>
<th>Sentence Type</th>
<th>Repetition in Opening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Revising for Sentence Variety

4 The paragraph includes varied sentence structure in the following ways: (a) variance in how each sentence opens, (b) variance in sentence length, (c) variance in sentence type.

3 The paragraph includes some varied sentence structure but does not include complete variance in each of the areas: sentence openings, sentence length, and sentence type. Perhaps the paragraph is too short to demonstrate full use of sentence variety.

2 The paragraph includes mostly sentences with simple construction and similarity in length. The sentences are limited to simple and compound constructions.

1 All of the sentences in the paragraph are simple constructions with no variance in length or opening structure.
Teach and Use Elaboration Strategies

Students often struggle to master elaboration when planning and composing their texts.

Teach students multiple elaboration strategies and have them practice using each type over the course of the curriculum.

Variety of Elaboration Strategies

- Anecdotes
- Examples
- Definitions
- Descriptions
- Details
- Dialogue
- Quotations from Experts
- Statistics
- Facts and Details
- Personal Appeal
- Logic
- Rhetorical Questioning
- Concession
- Response and Opinion
- Metaphor / Simile

The Goal of a GT Writing Program

Develop exceptional writers with positive affect toward writing.

Advanced level products and performances leading to professional level quality by the time they finish high school.

Foster curiosity and desire to use written discourse as a vehicle for democratic engagement in local and universal communities.

Comments and Questions

What barriers might need to be addressed in order to begin or extend a GT writing program?

What resources might be needed?

Who would easily buy-in?

Who might be resistant?

Todd Kettler, Ph.D.

Associate Professor in Educational Psychology
Baylor University School of Education
Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development
Todd_Kettler@Baylor.edu