

The Importance of Writing Knowledge

Summary: While it's commonly accepted that students need to know the characteristics of good writing, it's less clear what kind of knowledge they need and what impact that knowledge has on their actual ability to write. In an article for the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, two university professors report on a study they did to detail the relationship between knowledge and writing skill.

Practical Applications

The authors focused on 2nd and 4th grade students and asked them to write a fiction story off a picture prompt, then scored it and also interviewed the students to get under their knowledge about writing. The aspects of writing knowledge they looked at were:

- Substantive processes (the steps of the writing process, such as taking notes to use while writing or creating a story map to plan it out)
- Production processes (the mechanics of good writing, such as writing neatly and spelling words correctly)
- Motivation (the role of effort in strong writing and ways to maintain effort in the face of challenges)
- Story Elements (the basic structural pieces of a story, such as beginning, middle and end)
- Irrelevant information (information offered by the students that didn't relate to the questions; unsurprisingly, this was found to have no impact on their writing skill)

What the authors found was that:

- Students' ability to talk about their knowledge of writing was indeed strongly related to their writing skill. In other words, if a student grasps the different aspects of good writing and being a good writer to the extent that they can respond to questions about it, that student will write better than a student who can't dialogue about writing very well.
- Student understanding of substantive processes, production processes, motivation and story elements were *all* related to writing ability, and all were roughly of equal importance - put together, the four aspects of writing knowledge explained between approximately 15% to 20% of the difference in writing skill between similar students in terms of story quality, story length and the diversity of vocabulary words used.
- When asked to describe the characteristics of good writing, students most often gave answers that focused on the production or mechanical processes (35% of the time) while only 15% or less focused on substantive processes, motivation or story elements.

Conclusion and Citation

In addition to teaching the content of writing (such as how to structure a paragraph), knowing and being able to speak about writing itself seems important for students as well. As the authors conclude, "the findings from this study provide support to educators who contend that acquisition of knowledge about writing should be an integral part of writing instruction."

Graham, S. & Olinghouse, N. "The Relationship between Discourse Knowledge and the Writing Performance of Elementary-Grade Students." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101.1 (2009), pp. 37-50. <http://tinyurl.com/3vmuldd> (subscription only).