

# Writing Improves Reading Comprehension

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**Abstract:** Reading and writing are both critical skills students need to be successful both in and out of the classroom. Researchers have devoted much attention to understanding predictors of reading success and effective instruction. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with information and research that supports using writing to improve reading comprehension. This article first examines the research as to why writing is such an important skill and how reading and writing correlate. It will examine different types of reading and writing instruction, and offer suggested approaches based on research findings. The article will conclude with a look into whether or not teachers are prepared to teach reading and writing the way research suggests it should be done.

## Introduction

Despite much effort, many elementary students are still struggling to read and write. The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that only 38 percent of twelfth grade students performed at or above the “proficient” level in reading. In younger students, only 33 percent of fourth graders and 32 percent of eighth graders performed at these levels. Due to this, an important policy question that must be answered is, how can schools strengthen students’ reading? One approach to be considered is to utilize effective writing instruction as a tool to improve students’ reading. Another aspect that must be considered is, are teachers prepared to effectively teach writing so that it supports reading comprehension?

## Why is Writing an Important Skill?

If policy makers and school administrators are going to emphasize writing instruction, they need to understand why they should value it. One reason is that writing enhances student performance in other subject areas, such as, science, social studies, and math (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Students understand and retain material read or presented in science, math, and social studies when they are asked to write about it. Increasing how much time is devoted to writing also improves reading skills and how well students read (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Writing about something can improve the comprehension of it by providing students a tool to record, connect, analyze, personalize, and manipulate main ideas in a text. Making writing an integral part of the curriculum maximizes student growth in the classroom. Yet, as important as writing is to our everyday lives, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012), writing is considered a neglected skill in American schools.

Those that do not learn how to effectively write can suffer limits to their academic, professional, and personal lives. Students who graduate from high school with weak writing skills are at a disadvantage in college and their professional lives. According to Graham (2018), while there are many factors that influence children’s ability to write, many children do not receive the writing instruction at school that they deserve or need.

## How Do Reading and Writing Correlate?

Writing is often recommended as a tool to improve reading. It is widely believed that writing about a topic improves comprehension, as it helps to make connections between what one reads, knows, understands, and thinks. Sawchuk (2023) suggests that students need varied opportunities to write and should be taught explicitly and systematically, the skills and structure to see the connections of reading, writing, and knowledge development. He describes four key reading and writing interlocks. The first is reading and writing are intimately connected. Research conducted by Steve Graham, and his research partners (2018) found that reading has a positive impact on writing and writing also has a positive impact on reading. The second is writing matters even at the earliest grades, when students are learning to read. Experts suggest that students be supported in writing as soon as they begin reading. The third is like reading, writing must be taught explicitly. Research suggests that students be guided on how to construct sentences and paragraphs. The fourth is writing can help students learn content and make sense of it.

Writing about something read can facilitate comprehension because writing provides students with a tool to record, connect, analyze, personalize, and manipulate key information in a text (Graham & Hebert, 2011). In addition, reading and writing can be used together to accomplish specific learning goals (e.g., reading a text to then write a paper about the content). The following table (Table 1) shows how reading and writing can correlate and work together to improve and enhance similar skills.

Table 1

*Reading and Writing Can Work Together to Obtain Similar Goals.*

Writing	Reading
States ideas explicitly	Read for details
Organize writing to be explicit, to make sense, to include reflection, manipulate text to put into own words	Use critical thinking to analyze, interpret, and evaluate material
Determine word choice	Introduces new vocabulary
Use proper sentence structure	Improved reading fluency
Persuade the audience	Must recognize the intended message
Phonics instruction	Improved word recognition
Response writing	Builds background knowledge
Formulate and phrase the main idea	Must identify the main idea
Provide support for the main idea	Find the support for the main idea
Use linking/transition words or phrases	Recognize the sequence of events
Shape inferences	Draw inferences
Arrange ideas in a logical, sequential order	Follow the organization of ideas
Support opinions with facts	Differentiate facts from opinions

## Reading and Writing Instruction

With research showing that writing scores in our schools are low, one would assume that writing would be the main focus in classrooms. However, instruction and

time spent on writing is limited. With new reforms being implemented in schools, teachers may have felt as though there was no time for writing instruction, as their main focus may be reading instruction. What is considered an exemplary writing program? According to Graham (2018), teachers should devote an hour a day to writing, and use a variety of instructional practices to promote students' writing success and growth, including evidence-based practices. In elementary students, this hour should include writing for different purposes, teaching the writing process, and teaching foundational skills. A lack of writing instruction in schools may promote the idea that writing is unimportant.

For students to achieve high levels of achievement, educators need to use the most effective instruction. Comprehension is a critical component of reading instruction, and comprehension is the end goal of every reader. In Graham and Herbert's analysis (2011), they found that writing as an additional means for enhancing students' reading comprehension by writing summaries, answering questions, note-taking, or using more extended writing activities, improved overall comprehension of text by typical as well as struggling readers.

Coker et. al. (2018), evaluated the effects that direct and indirect writing instruction and student writing practice have on reading achievement in students in first grade. Throughout their study, researchers focused on skills instruction, composing instruction, and opportunities for students to practice (consisting of correct/copy tasks, and generative writing practice). Their goal was to investigate the direct and indirect effects of two types of writing instruction (skills and composing) and student writing practice (correct/copy and generative writing). It was thought that the effects of skills and composing writing instruction would have a direct effect on reading achievement, but the research did not support the assumptions. The second hypothesis included the importance of student practice through correct/copy practice, and through generative writing practice. The path from composing instruction through generative writing practice was positive and significant. Teachers have minimal time in the classroom to achieve a multitude of results. Knowing which types of instruction would provide the greatest results within the time constraints given is invaluable to teachers that teach reading and writing.

Recent work by Graham (2018) identifies evidence-based practices in writing instruction. His work draws upon empirical intervention studies and qualitative investigations with exceptional literacy teachers. He found that effective writing instruction involves:

- (1) writing frequently for real and different purposes
- (2) supporting students as they write
- (3) teaching the needed writing skills, knowledge, and processes
- (4) creating a supportive and motivating writing environment
- (5) connecting writing, reading, and learning.

Graham also identifies three core recommendations on writing practices that improve reading comprehension: have students write about the texts they read; teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text; and increase how much time students write. This shows that teaching writing not only improves writing skills, but also enhances a student's ability to read a text accurately, fluently, and with comprehension. Finally, having students spend more time writing increases the student's ability to comprehend the writing of others.

## What Does Research Show?

Although there may be a variety of reasons school reforms are failing, educators may feel as though it may be due to a gap between research and practice. Meaning, there is a disparity between the findings of scientific research and of effective instruction and what teachers teach in the classroom. With low student proficiency levels in reading, many teachers seem to be utilizing practices that produce little to no positive effect on student growth.

Beginning no later than the 2024-2025 school year, each Ohio school district must use core curriculum and instructional materials in English Language Arts and use evidence-based reading programs that follow *The Science of Reading*. *The Science of Reading* is an interdisciplinary body of scientific research that informs us how students learn to read and write proficiently, explains why some students have difficulty learning to read and write, and supports the ideas that students learn best from explicit and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing. *The Science of Reading* research provides us with the information we need to gain a deeper understanding of how we learn to read, what skills are involved, how they work together, and which parts of the brain are responsible for reading development. There are a number of instructional approaches that have been found to increase reading comprehension through *The Science of Reading*, including teaching thinking strategies and enhancing written language performance. From this research, we can identify an evidence-based best practice approach for teaching foundational literacy skills called *Structured Literacy*.

How does writing fit into *The Science of Reading*? If students are doing work on phonemic awareness, they can put them on the page using letters. If students are learning how to decode, they can also encode (write the letters and words while they say the sounds out loud). Research on *The Science of Reading* suggests that students learn to write as soon as they begin to read (Sawchuck, 2023). Evidence also suggests that spelling and handwriting are connected to the ability to connect speech to print and to oral language development (Sawchuck, 2023). Writing can enhance foundational reading skills and student knowledge on how words and sentences work.

Despite great enthusiasm for structured literacy instruction, many educators are not trained in how to effectively implement the science of reading in their classrooms. An important step in seeing improved outcomes from following a structured literacy approach is that it must first be implemented. It must also be applied with fidelity and over time to see results.

Teachers may be hesitant to try a new approach for a number of reasons. One reason may be a lack of training. Teachers may also find the research to not be trustworthy or usable. Another reason may be that teachers do not find the research to match the realities of their classrooms and the unique needs of their students. Finally, teachers adapt to curriculum that is usable. Does the curriculum flow well with what they are already doing? Do they have the resources, support, and time to follow the guidance with complete fidelity?

## Teacher Preparedness

Whether or not teachers teach reading and writing instruction together, integrated, or taught as separate subjects vary greatly. Many teachers integrate the two, yet many also teach them as separate subjects. According to the AACTE (2002), instruction requires some integration of the two, but from a solid base of competence in both. It is not clear that teachers have adequate preparation to provide needed instruction in reading and writing. Although, in recent years greater attention has been given to teacher preparation for reading instruction.

To deliver proper writing instruction, a teacher must have proper knowledge of syntax and morphology as well as a foundation of knowledge in multiple writing genres. Teachers are likely to teach writing more effectively when they are knowledgeable about different genres and effective writing in those genres, the writing process, and effective strategies for teaching the writing process, and are able to develop knowledge, strategies, and skills in their students (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Yet, many teacher preparations do not prepare teachers to teach writing effectively (Graham & Heber, 2011). Teachers' confidence to teach writing is dependent on professional preparation, as well as the time and importance they give to writing instruction. It cannot be assumed that pre-service teachers have sufficient knowledge or enough experience to effectively teach writing.

If students are to receive the reading and writing instruction they need and deserve, there must be an explicit, agreed upon plan for how reading and writing is taught in the classroom. This goal does not mean that every teacher in every classroom has to do exactly the same thing, but it does mean that there should be some sort of continuity. There should be common goals, and connection to the purpose of writing outside of the classroom. Such a plan should include knowledge of reading and writing and development, developed with the input of teachers, and be supported by administration and policy makers (Graham & Hebert, 2011). While individual teachers do make a difference, high quality reading and writing instruction should not vary teacher to teacher, or year to year. This means that teachers and administrators, and administrators and policy makers need to have open communication and be on the same page when it comes to expected reading and writing curriculum and expectations.

The curriculum expected to be taught in the classrooms should be easily understood by classroom teachers for ease and effectiveness of classroom application. It would need to be practical for meeting teachers' needs in the classroom environment.

## Conclusion

The research concludes that there is evidence to support the importance of writing instruction for reading achievement. Engagement and instruction in either reading or writing, results in improvement in the other. Effects of various types of writing instruction on reading comprehension vary. For example, Graham and Hebert (2011) found that answering questions in writing produced small effects, whereas notetaking, summary writing, and more extended writing resulted in moderate effects. Graham also found that increasing how much students wrote and how much

writing instruction they received also had a significant effect on reading comprehension, and that sentence and spelling instruction had a moderate impact on improving word-reading skills.

Clearly, far more work needs to be done on acknowledging the effects reading and writing have on each when taught simultaneously as well as the teaching of reading and writing as separate subjects. Research has not effectively considered the specific features that make reading and writing similar, yet unique.

Although there is still much to learn about the reading and writing correlation, it is argued that the two should be integrated. Though, such instruction has been found to be uncommon and teacher preparedness is not adequate. If teachers are expected to integrate the areas of reading and writing together, there must be collaboration between policy makers and universities. In addition, society needs to view writing as a valuable and necessary skill so that expectations are high and writing is emphasized. If teachers acquire the needed knowledge, vision, and commitment, they are more likely to become more effective at teaching writing and devote more time to teaching it.

Reading and writing instruction is not adequate in many classrooms across the country. Changing this situation will require collaboration between teachers, administrators, and policy makers. However, it is important to mention that all changes related to better instruction, no matter how small, are a step in the right direction.

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### About the Author

Lisa Stokes is an 11-year veteran educator with experience teaching students grades PK-3rd grade. She possesses a B.A. in Early Childhood Education and is completing her M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Toledo. Currently, Lisa is a 3rd grade teacher in the Sylvania Schools District.