Writing to Strengthen Reading: Insights from Lindsay Kemeny

Practical Strategies for Supporting Striving Readers and Writers in Grades 3 and Beyond

This Q&A resource draws from Lindsay Kemeny's EPS Learning webinar, "Seven Mighty Moves for Better Writing." Questions have been developed around key themes from the presentation, and responses have been adapted from her remarks.

For students who struggle with reading, writing can present another formidable challenge. Putting ideas down on paper requires students to draw on spelling, sentence construction, vocabulary, background knowledge, and organizational skills, all while managing the demands of the writing process. Yet writing is a powerful tool for strengthening reading comprehension and is an essential aspect of literacy development.

In her EPS Learning webinar, "Seven Mighty Moves for Better Writing," educator and author Lindsay Kemeny shares research-based strategies for making writing instruction more explicit, effective, and manageable as a regular part of literacy instruction. Although Kemeny currently teaches young learners, she has also worked as a K-6 reading interventionist, and many of the principles she discusses have important implications for older students who experience literacy challenges.



Seven Mighty Moves for Better Writing

Author Lindsay Kemeny shares seven classroom-tested writing strategies to help students build stronger literacy and communication skills.

Watch the Webinar →

Q: Many students in grades 3 and above struggle with writing. What makes writing such a demanding task, and what should educators keep in mind?

Lindsay Kemeny: Writing is one of the most challenging things we ask students to do because so many different skills are involved.

Students need transcription skills, including spelling and handwriting, and they also need composition skills. They need knowledge of the topic, vocabulary, an understanding of sentence structure, and the ability to organize their ideas. Awareness of audience, executive functioning, emotional regulation, and working memory are all involved too.

Q: Educators often focus on paragraph and essay writing in the upper grades. Is there still a place for explicit sentence-level instruction?

Lindsay Kemeny: Absolutely. Sentence-level instruction is important for both writing and reading comprehension. When students learn to write more complex and varied sentences, they also become better equipped to understand complex sentences when reading.

But I want to push back on the idea that students must master sentence writing before they can work on paragraphs and longer compositions. Sentence-level and composition skills can be taught at the same time. They develop interactively.

One strategy I use is called *Find the Gist*. After reading a text, students identify who or what it is about and the most important information. Then we work together to combine those ideas into a meaningful sentence, using linking words to show the relationships between ideas.

"I do want to develop those sentence-level skills within the context of meaningful writing tasks."

Q: How can educators make writing instruction more effective for students who struggle to organize their thoughts and get started?

Lindsay Kemeny: One of the biggest shifts I've made is moving away from simply assigning writing and expecting students to know how to do it.

We have to explicitly teach and model the writing process. Students need to see how we plan, organize, draft, and revise. And we can't just model it once. We need to model strategies repeatedly and then gradually release those scaffolds.

I use a research-based strategy called POWER, which helps students remember the writing process: Plan, Organize, Write, Edit, and Revise (Englert et al., 1991).

Planning is especially important as students move into the upper grades and encounter more complex writing assignments. They may need to analyze a text, identify evidence, and organize several ideas before they start drafting.

But we also don't want students to become so focused on planning that they don't start writing. Teacher think-alouds can help. I model what I'm thinking as I plan and write so students can see how the process works.

"It doesn't have to be perfect. We're focused on progression."

Q: How can writing help students deepen their comprehension of text?

Lindsay Kemeny: One important approach is to connect writing directly to what students are reading.

For example, rather than giving students opinion-writing prompts about unrelated or superficial topics, I want them to respond to opinion questions that require them to dig into a text.

When we connect opinion writing to reading, students must think about what they've read, develop a position, and explain their reasoning.

This helps both their writing and their comprehension of the text.

"Let's give them prompts that require them to dig into a text."

Q: What role does oral language play in helping students become stronger writers, even in the upper grades?

Lindsay Kemeny: Oral language is foundational to writing. Students need opportunities to formulate and rehearse their ideas before putting them on paper.

I encourage students to speak their sentences or paragraphs before writing them. And that isn't just for young children. Even a sixth grader can benefit from saying what they're going to write before they begin. Speaking it out loud gives students an opportunity to work through their ideas and use spoken language before taking on the additional demands of writing.

"If you can't say it, you can't write it."

Q: When an older student struggles with both reading and writing, how should educators decide what to prioritize?

Lindsay Kemeny: It really depends on the student and what they need.

If you're an intervention teacher working with a student who still needs explicit phonics instruction, helping that student become a stronger decoder may be a primary focus.

But you can still embed spelling, handwriting, and other writing practice within that instruction.

You may not have time to teach the writing process during a reading intervention lesson, and that's okay. Students can receive instruction in composition during their classroom writing lessons while continuing to work on foundational skills in intervention.

A Closing Thought: Make Writing Instruction Explicit, Text-Connected, and Manageable

Across her seven mighty writing moves, Lindsay Kemeny reminds us that effective writing instruction requires more than giving students opportunities to write. Students across grades benefit from explicit instruction in the skills and strategies that lead to strong writing.

For educators working with striving readers and writers in grades 3 and above, this means recognizing that foundational skills and writing composition can develop together. Sentence instruction can happen in the context of paragraph writing. Writing in response to text can strengthen comprehension. And when teachers model and scaffold, they can help students become increasingly independent.

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