



Big Ideas for Growing Writers

There are big ideas in writing that extend across grade levels and genres and that focus on both the writing process and the written products. We have organized these big ideas around five reflective questions to help students internalize the multiple ideas they need to consider when writing.

1. WHY AM I WRITING?

A writer's **purpose** is the goal the writer wants to accomplish with the writing. Writing may serve personal goals, such as to process thoughts and feelings through journaling or to make sense of new information through note-taking. Writing may also serve external goals, some of which are shaped by academic requirements. An external goal may be to inform others of new ideas, to persuade others of viewpoints, to entertain others with intriguing narratives, to evoke a feeling in others through descriptive imagery, or to express an identity or an opinion to others. It is critical that writers understand the purpose of a writing situation during the planning process because the purpose informs many other choices the writer will make: whether their text requires evidence from other sources, the level of research they need to perform to present an informed perspective, how they will organize ideas, and the style and form they should use.

2. WHO ARE MY READERS?

The readers of a written text are the **audience**. They bring their own purpose and expectations to the text. An audience might read a text to learn information about a new concept, to examine differing opinions about a topic, or to get lost in a mesmerizing story. Each reader may bring unique feelings and opinions about a topic, different vocabularies, and varying amounts of background knowledge.

Strong writers seek to understand the needs of their audience by considering others' perspectives and by conducting research when needed. Writers use that knowledge to make decisions on how to approach the writing: they choose an appropriate genre and form for their written piece, provide necessary background knowledge, support claims with evidence from reputable sources, and adjust tone and word choice to facilitate credibility and understanding. When writers can anticipate the needs of their audience, they increase the effectiveness of their communication.

3. WHAT AM I WRITING?

When deciding what to write, writers must consider the task, the most suitable genre to address the task, and the final form of the written product. Thoughtful consideration will help ensure the final written product fulfills the expectations in the assigned or self-developed writing task.

The writing **task** is the situation or assignment that prompts the writing. Writing tasks often include the steps for creating a written product and the criteria for success. In many writing situations, a teacher assigns the writing task and includes specifications about the topic, purpose, audience, genre, and form. A teacher sometimes offers students a choice in selecting or developing the writing task based on students' interests in a subject, genre, or form. By understanding and clearly articulating the specific expectations or success criteria of the writing task, students will be able to make more informed writing decisions to accomplish their goals.

Genre is a framework for thinking about one's purpose for writing. Each genre's unique features have developed over time through socially agreed-upon conventions. In narratives, conflict is often the story's central driving force. In poetry, authors frequently use metaphors and imagery to draw attention to observations. In arguments, authors assert claims, provide evidence, and refute counterclaims. Experienced readers are familiar with genre features and have certain expectations when reading in specific genres. These expectations help the readers to make sense of texts. Experienced writers understand how to use these features to communicate more clearly with their audiences. However, genre conventions are not rigid rules requiring conformity to prescribed structures; they are flexible and contextual ways for thinking about content and organizing ideas. Modern professional writers often blend features of different genres in a single piece of writing to better serve the purpose of their writing.

Form—or format—is the type of text writers produce. By carefully considering purpose, audience, and task, writers can determine the most effective form to communicate ideas. In today's digital world, writers have more forms to choose from than ever before: blog, email, essay, infographic, podcast, multimodal presentation, video, and more. While writers may present their final product in one form, they might use multiple forms during the writing process. For example, writers could draft a script in an online document, record someone reading the script for a podcast, and develop an infographic to accompany the podcast.

Different forms have different conventions, and forms are rapidly evolving in the digital writing world. Identifying the form early in the writing process and researching its conventions help writers to define other aspects of the writing more clearly.

4. HOW AM I PRESENTING IDEAS IN MY WRITING?

Writers face a myriad of choices when they embark on a writing task. To help make authorial decisions more manageable for students, this section arranges choices about writing approaches and techniques around four overarching concepts: development, organization, style, and conventions.

Development refers to how writers support and elaborate on their ideas. Skilled writers develop their ideas to achieve depth and complexity. In narratives, approaches to development might include providing detailed and vivid descriptions of setting, narrating the internal thoughts of characters, and using flashbacks and foreshadowing. In informational texts, writers provide examples, explanations, and evidence from reputable sources to develop their ideas. Strong development is the foundation of any written product.

Organization is the way ideas are arranged in a piece of writing. Organizational structures (e.g., cause and effect, chronological order, compare-contrast, problem- to-solution) can differ widely depending on the intended purposes and genres of the writing, but their goal is the same: to help the reader piece together ideas in a smooth, coherent, and orderly manner. Organization refers to bigger components of a written piece (e.g., introduction, conclusion, flashback) as well as to how ideas are linked together within paragraphs and sentences. It can also refer to text features like headings and subheadings. Writers should consider the overall organizational structure during the planning phase because the structure can help writers to keep track of their ideas and help to identify ideas writers need to think about more deeply. During the writing process, however, writers may discover that their original structure isn't effectively conveying their ideas, and they may need to revise their writing with a new organizational strategy.

Style describes the ways writers express their ideas and themselves. They do this through tone (their attitude toward a topic) and voice (how they communicate their personality in the text). Writers create their style through intentional word choice and sentence structure, and they change their style to communicate their ideas precisely and effectively and to fit the context of the writing situation (e.g., purpose, audience, and task). For example, writers may use a formal tone and complex sentence structure when composing a literary analysis. For a science report, they may use passive voice and discipline-specific vocabulary. A casual tone and idioms from the writers' home language or dialect may be best for dialogue in a narrative or when writing to family, friends, or a member of their community. Writers may adjust their word choice to match their audience's background knowledge of the topic, or they may use literary devices like alliteration and metaphors when writing poetry. Style choices are largely dependent on purpose and genre.

Conventions are the agreed-upon norms for writing mechanics (e.g., grammar, usage, punctuation, capitalization, spelling). All languages and dialects have conventions, but the conventions outlined in English language arts standards are most closely associated with general academic English. Conventions help ensure that writers are clearly communicating their messages to an audience. A misspelled key word, a missing period, or an unclear antecedent of a pronoun may interfere with readers' understanding of the message. Conventions are not inflexible rules that writers must always follow, and usage changes over time.

Writers may choose to use grammar, punctuation, or spelling that breaks traditional conventions, honors conventions from diverse cultures, or generates wholly new conventions for stylistic effect. However, it is important that students have a strong understanding of the function of conventions so they know how to use them—and even exploit them—for an intended effect.

5. HOW AM I USING THE WRITING PROCESS?

Writing is both a product and a process. Too often a heavy emphasis is placed on the final written product even though the process of writing may have more instructional utility. The process is where learning and critical thinking take place. The more frequently students engage in and reflect on the writing process, the more likely they are to develop productive and efficient writing habits and mindsets that will support them throughout their school, career, and personal lives. The writing process is recursive and iterative, not linear; writers move between processes like planning, drafting, translating, reviewing, and revising to meet their self-generated goals. These goals may change as writers monitor their progress and self-evaluate their writing. The hallmarks of a skilled writer are the awareness of one's writing process (metacognition) and the flexibility to adjust the process as needed. This awareness and flexibility benefits many parts of the writing process: collaboration, self-regulation, planning, goal setting, transcription, revision, and self-evaluation.

Collaboration is a key component of writing, which is an intrinsically social activity. Writers may brainstorm ideas with partners and request feedback from others on drafts. However, sharing writing with others is a vulnerable experience. It can be difficult to accept critical feedback. Likewise, it can be unnerving to provide constructive feedback when doing so may hurt the writers' feelings. Quality collaboration requires the establishment of a positive culture in which everyone values the importance of writing, seeks growth as a writer, and supports each other in becoming stronger writers. Skilled writers are able to solicit purposeful feedback and to consider and integrate the feedback thoughtfully, which may involve deciding which elements of the feedback to incorporate. Writers should also strive to provide useful feedback for their peers in a constructive and sensitive manner.

Self-regulation is the process of using the mind to oversee tasks, shift attention, monitor progress, and manage emotions. This collection of skills helps writers to engage productively and efficiently in the writing process, and it can be used at any stage: when writers set goals for their writing; when they plan, self-evaluate, and revise their written pieces; and when they reflect on and make adjustments to their writing process. Writing is an extremely complex cognitive process. It can be daunting and frustrating, but self-regulation can help writers to manage their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors when they face challenges during the writing process. Writers can improve their self-regulation skills through practice and with intentional support from teachers and collaborators.

Skilled writers spend more time engaging in **planning** than in any other cognitive process when writing. Writers use the planning process to think more deeply about their topic, to anticipate the needs of their audience, and to make strategic

choices about organization, style, and form to achieve the intended purpose. Writers should allot ample time for planning in their writing process.

Writing is a goal-oriented process that involves many levels of **goal setting**. The purpose for writing serves as the overall goal. Writers also set smaller goals throughout the writing process to accomplish the many steps needed to fulfill the purpose. Writers may set goals like drafting an introduction by the end of the day or finding additional research to support their claims. Writers may also set goals about their process like learning how to better manage feelings of frustration or to empathize with an audience to meet their needs. Setting achievable goals during the writing process not only helps to produce a written product on a given timeline but also builds writers' confidence, self-efficacy, and stamina. As writers progress in their writing development and their written product, they should review and refine their goals to meet their evolving needs. Peers, teachers, and other members of the writing community can support writers with setting, monitoring, and adjusting goals—and celebrating when writers achieve their goals.

Transcription is the act of converting spoken language into written words. This process includes the skills of spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding. Transcription may be an automatic process for mature writers, but it must be explicitly taught to young writers. Emerging writers who are not yet fluent with transcription skills exert significant effort to transfer their thoughts to the page or screen. Some writers might experience ongoing challenges with transcription skills and, as a result, use strategies to compensate for these challenges. For example, writers may use grips or other tools to make writing with a pen or pencil easier. Other writers may express their thoughts orally and use dictation technology to capture the language, which can then be revised on a computer screen. Some writers might simply have transcription preferences (e.g., preferring writing by hand to typing). Flexibility with transcription strategies during the writing process can facilitate the transfer of thoughts to paper or screen.

Revision is the process of revisiting the ideas in a piece of writing with a fresh perspective, and it is integral to the writing process. Writers often begin putting words on a page or screen before the idea for their writing is fully formed. During the writing process, writers make connections and form new ideas. Writers then revise their written pieces to represent their clearest thinking and to better communicate that thinking to the audience. A revision to an idea may require the simple rewording of a sentence, or it may require the research and development of a more relevant idea. The revision process can be messy, especially in early drafts; however, it is an ongoing and iterative process. As the saying goes, writing is never done; it's only due. As writers revisit and revise their writing, they are both improving the final written product and deepening their understanding of the topic. In this way, writing facilitates learning.

Skilled writers are also able to use **self-evaluation**—the examination of their own writing processes and products—to determine areas of strength and areas that

need improvement. During self-evaluation, writers can reflect on the part of their writing process that took the most time and consider changes they might implement in their next writing experience. Self-evaluation can also help writers understand which ideas in their writing are explained well and which ideas need more development. Engaging in regular self-evaluation enables writers to identify changes they can make independently and to identify elements they should seek feedback on. While self-evaluation is a critical component of growth as a writer, it is also quite challenging for young writers to practice. They may not yet have developed the metacognition skills to reflect on their learning, or they may get caught up in negative self-criticism. Teachers have an essential role in explicitly teaching and modeling productive self-evaluation strategies and practices.



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APR24 | WELTSK7259