

# “WE DO” Writing

Maximizing Practice to Develop  
Independent Writers

BY LEAH MERMELSTEIN

# Advance Praise for “We Do” Writing

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**“I love three things about Leah’s adaptation**

of the GRR model: 1) It is true to the fundamental GRR goal of helping students exercise their agency as learners, 2) It demonstrates that each teacher educator who uses the GRR must make it their own, not mine, and 3) The addition of the immersion step is brilliant (I wish I had thought of it myself!).”

—P. David Pearson,  
Evelyn Lois Corey Emeritus Professor of Instructional Science  
Graduate School of Education  
University of California, Berkeley

**“I love this book.** So will any teacher who teaches writing or wants to become a better writing teacher. Interactive writing, writing out loud, and the writing process come alive. Your students will become more motivated and better writers.”

—Steve Graham, Warner Professor, Arizona State University

**“Leah helps teachers understand that language is at the center of the writing process;** the voice of the literacy learner is the heartbeat of the writing. Her guidance for the writing process is inclusive for all children. She clearly identifies the what, why, and how of the writing process and provides the freedom for the students to try this. This book will help all teachers guide students to become lifelong writers.”

—Adria F. Klein,  
Director of the Early Intervention Center at Saint Mary’s College of California, co-author of *Meaningful Reading Assessment*

**“Rarely do we see a book that so artfully blends research and practice**

in a way that allows teachers to take try-this-tomorrow steps. Leah has done exactly this for teachers of writing, paring down to the core of great, engaging, accessible instruction. Whether you have been teaching for 20 years or two months, there is something here you will want to try right away.”

—Colleen Cruz, author of *Risk, Fall, Rise*

**“Leah weaves together interactive writing, write aloud, and quick bursts of writing process**

with a laser-focus on the “We-Do” teaching moves. This resource offers a behind-the-scenes look into planning and differentiating collaborative instruction to guide writers in better understanding and applying language conventions and language composition.”

—Maria Walther, author of *The Ramped-Up Read Aloud*

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# Dear Educators,

As you read “We-Do” Writing, imagine me at your side. I am a former classroom teacher now making my living as a literacy consultant. I am also the mother of a daughter now entering second grade. Because of both of these things, I am living my beliefs of how children learn to write every moment of every day.

The one thing I want you to take from this book most of all is the realization that YOU matter. Your students need more of you. More support, more connection. And you can provide that when you simplify your approach to teaching in general and writing in particular. You can provide this support when you yourself are supported with a clear set of beliefs from which you operate. I’ll share my three guiding principles here, and I invite you to adopt them or tweak them to suit you. These principles inform the instructional model in this book.



Leah Mermelstein with her daughter Ariana.

## Instruction Emphasizes Purpose

When children understand why they are writing and who they are writing for, they are far more motivated and engaged in the writing process. I was in the midst of finishing my book when the pandemic struck, and I went from literacy consultant on a Thursday to a facilitator of my daughter’s home education on a Friday. My daughter Ariana and I were both anxious about how to approach the learning. My daughter found the way forward. She decided to write a letter to an ER doctor thanking her for her service. The minute she put pencil to paper, an expression of calm resolve came over her face. Purpose-driven writing creates the conditions for skill and craft to flourish.

## Instruction Is Joyful

Every lesson in this book considers that schools should be joyful places because our students deserve nothing less. Recently, there was a study that spoke about how a person’s mood can influence how well they comprehend a text—the better their mood was, the better their comprehension (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2011). Although this study was about reading, the same is true for writing (Bohn-Gettler & Rapp, 2014).

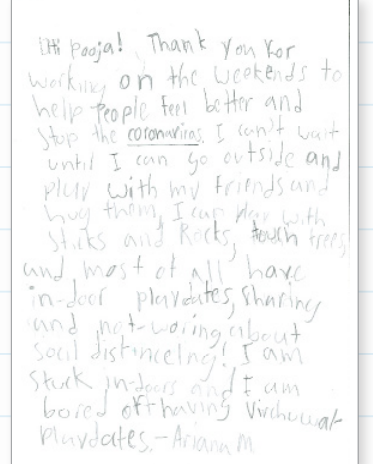
Ralph Fletcher in his book, *Joy Write* (2017, p. 30), says it best, “Play in writing is not just a nice idea—it’s essential. It’s that playfulness that brings a sense of joy to our teaching and to our students’ learning.”

## Instruction Is Geared Toward Independence

There are many ways you can emphasize independence, from classroom routines to meaningful practice and work. In the context of this book, however, I’d say careful, deliberate teacher language in the midst of instruction is the most powerful way to underscore the goal of independence for students. As you will see in the sample lessons in later chapters, what teachers say makes it clear to students that they will eventually be able to do independently what they are now doing collaboratively. It’s through this intentional extended work in the “We-Do” writing phase that we get all students to solid independence sooner.

Thank you for all that you do to make learning come alive for our students.

Humbly,



Ariana writes for an authentic purpose, thanking an ER doctor for all of her efforts and hard work.

# Writing Instruction and Practice

When our teaching practices are not inclusive, we perpetuate systemic inequalities.—*Tricia Ebarvia (2017)*

**W**elcome to We-Do Writing. In this book, you will learn how to develop independent writers through an instructional model that shores up a common weak link in classrooms: collaborative writing practice. Young writers in Kindergarten – Grade 5 are asked to be amazing plate spinners, keeping many recently learned skills in their minds as they put pencils to paper. They attend to spelling, story structure, punctuation, connecting oral and written language, to name a few. In our quest to get students to become independent writers, we model each of these skills carefully, but we often gloss over the “We Do” phase of instruction. This book is devoted to slowing down that critical collaborate practice, so students get the scaffolding they need. Let’s begin!

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**IN THIS CHAPTER**

Two Problems of Practice  
The Solution: Teach Writing  
with Simplicity  
The “We-Do” Writing Model

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## Two Problems of Practice

Before we delve into this model together, I want to share the journey of how this book came to be. As a literacy consultant, I spend my days in schools with teachers and students. In this role, I am always trying to perfect the art of teaching. Because of this, I am always searching for problems to fix, so that children can learn to their full capacities. This book stems from two problems I have noticed and tried to solve.

### Shaky Independence

The first problem was that not all students were benefiting equally from independent writing. Sure, some students used their independent writing time well. They were practicing many of the things that their teachers had taught them, and because of that they were growing as writers. Others were unable to transfer what they had learned or were not learning what they needed. I knew there had to be ways to ensure that all students had equitable access to becoming independent writers.

### Competing Theories of Writing

The second problem I discovered: teachers were not only intimidated by teaching writing, they were paralyzed by the vast number of available choices, both in terms of resources and schools of thought. Many teachers have confided in me that even with the abundance of materials they have, they're unsure about where and how to begin. Which advice do I take? Which do I ignore? How do I maintain the right balance of instruction? And the biggie: How do I meet the needs of diverse classrooms of students?

## The Solution: Teach Writing with Simplicity

Teaching writing is rewarding but it is not simple. Literacy expert Adria Klein said during her keynote at the 2020 National Reading Recovery Conference, “Literacy is complex and dynamic. Teachers make minute by minute decisions and all of these decisions are dependent upon who our students are—their current situations, their experiences and how all of this changes over time.” Adria’s words inform this book, inspiring me to answer the question: How do I help teachers teach writing in a manner that embraces the dynamic changes students present day-to-day, both in terms of strengths and needs?

The answer to both of these challenges lies, first of all, in getting on the same page that teaching writing is a complex task, and then committing to teaching writing with simplicity and a respect for *supported* practice.



A simpler approach to teaching writing will ensure that students get the appropriate amount and type of practice.



Earnest educators center their practice around student needs.

Just what makes teaching writing complex? In the early grades, teachers teach students that reading and writing are reciprocal processes, and that decoding and encoding are about making meaning. Along with that, children learn how to connect letters to sounds, and learn the conventions of written language.

But writing is, of course, so much more than that. As students progress through Grades K–5, they also need to understand:

- Genres of writing and their purposes
- The impact that background knowledge has on writing quality
- The role of sentence structure in writing and how to craft sentences into paragraphs, essays, stories, signs, and books that are focused, organized, elaborated upon, and that include thoughtful word choice
- The ways in which writers use the written language to enlighten and delight their readers
- How to bring a piece of writing through the writing process

I knew teachers needed a simple plan that would help them focus their instruction so that students would get the right amount and type of practice. So I began looking at the research, conducted action-based research on teaching writing, and engaged in the literacy conversations, which were all focused mostly on reading. Curiously enough, the debate raging about how to teach reading became by far the biggest influence on the model for writing I present in this book.

### Finding Common Ground Between Reading and Writing Theories

I can vividly recall being a new teacher in the 1990s and hearing about the so-called “reading wars.” Now, 20 years later, the skirmish over phonics and reading instruction has flared again. The reporters covering the debate often make it sound as though all researchers and teachers are either on one side or the other, with no common ground. The voices most active on Twitter and other social media platforms add to the sense of a deep divide. Inaccurate, exaggerated portrayals of what each side believes go something like this:

- Those who support balanced literacy believe that if you surround students with books and let them choose what to read and write, they will naturally become readers and writers. The teacher’s role is to be a guide-on-the-side.
- Those on “the other side” believe that children learn to read with systematic and explicit phonics, and that students should read and write about content that the teacher and/or curriculum dictate. The teacher’s role is to be a sage-on-the-stage, building core knowledge and skills.

As someone who is in classrooms and working with teachers daily, I can tell you that most teachers tune out the drama, and their instruction is built on best practices in the “sane middle” of the research debate. That’s a good thing. I admit, though, that following the heated literacy conversations online became a favorite pastime as I drafted this book and participating in some of the discussions deepened my thinking. I’ve talked with people who think like me, as well as people who think differently. It compelled me to read research and professional texts on all sides of this conversation, and overall I have learned a great deal and have revised my own teaching in significant ways.

Perhaps it’s my middle-child position that yearns for consensus, but I often wonder what would happen if smart, earnest educators with different experiences and opinions came together around the table with the only “side” being the side of students. How different are these supposed sides? What points of agreement could we find? For me, researchers Gough and Tunmer’s “Simple View of Reading” (1986) was the biggest discovery of common ground. Their Simple View of Reading is a mathematical formula based on scientific research:

$$\text{DECODING (D)} \times \text{LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION (LC)} = \text{READING COMPREHENSION (RC)}$$

### Taking Cues from The Simple View of Reading

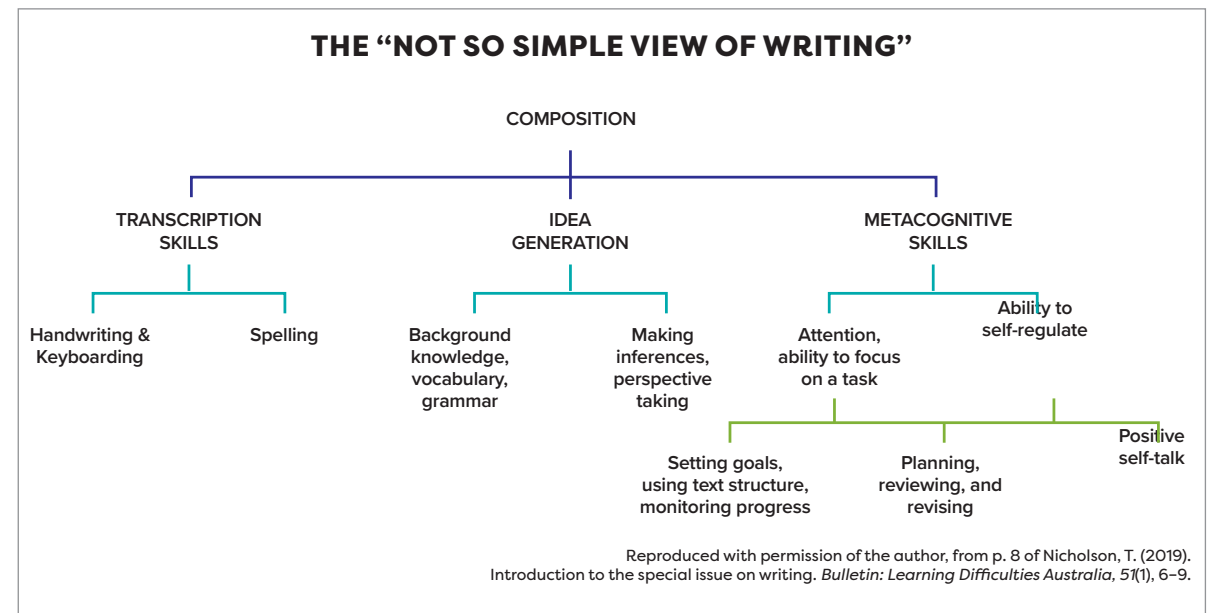
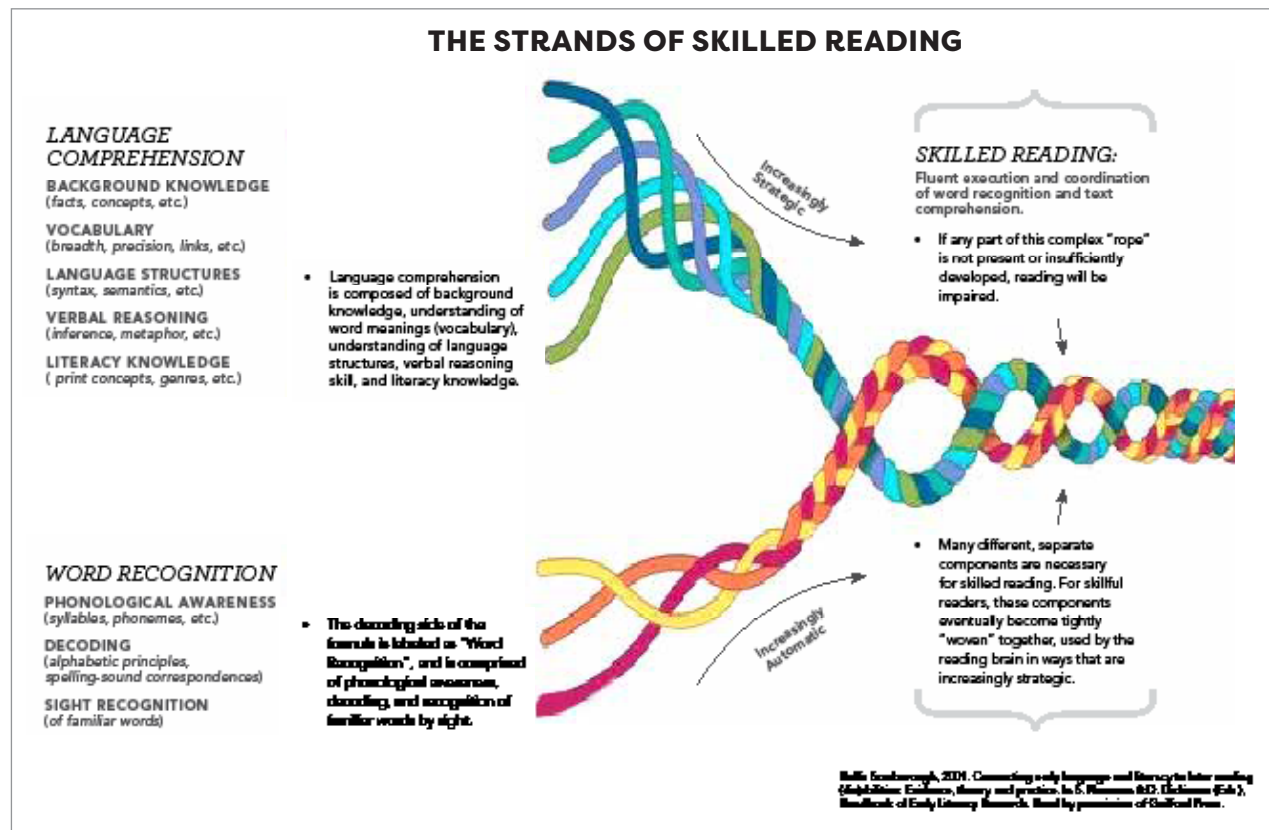
With the Simple View of Reading formula, Gough and Tunmer make the case that strong reading comprehension cannot occur unless both decoding skills and language comprehension skills are strong. So in order to produce skillful readers, teachers need to provide separate instruction in both decoding and language comprehension.

Back in 2001, researcher Hollis Scarborough envisioned Gough and Tunmer’s Simple View of Reading formula as a rope (see color adaptation on page 12). It’s become ubiquitous on social media now, because it helps us envision the many interwoven strands needed to read skillfully. As I kept seeing this graphic and thinking about it, I had an “aha” moment when I realized that teachers would benefit from a similar, simple model for writing.

### Taking Cues from The Simple View of Writing

I am not the first to consider what a Simple View of Writing model might look like. Berninger and colleagues created a model that consisted of two strands: Transcription and Ideation. Transcription is about getting your words on the page. Transcription includes skills such as spelling, punctuation, and handwriting. Ideation is the process of getting your ideas onto the page. Ideation includes things such as knowledge of genre, grammar, and vocabulary. The assertion, just as in the Simple View of Reading, was that teachers should provide separate instruction within both of these strands.

Tom Nicholson more recently (2019) devised what he calls a “Not So Simple View of Writing” which is shown below. His model consists of three, not two, strands: Transcription, Idea Generation, and Metacognitive Skills. These metacognitive skills include things such as the goal-setting, going through steps of the process (planning, reviewing, and revising), and a writer’s ability to pay attention and focus.



The Not So Simple View of Writing has three strands—Transcription, Idea Generation, and Metacognitive Skills.



## The “We-Do” Writing Model

Versions of the simple views of reading and writing have been around for years, but they haven’t been translated into classroom practice. It is for this reason that I leaned on the research of these frameworks to design We-Do Writing, so that all students get the supported practice they need to become independent writers. The model I share harnesses the power of 3: There are 3 instructional strands, 3 corresponding types of writing sessions, and 3 levels of support for students. The model focuses writing instruction on what matters most, and it includes a robust word study/phonics component.

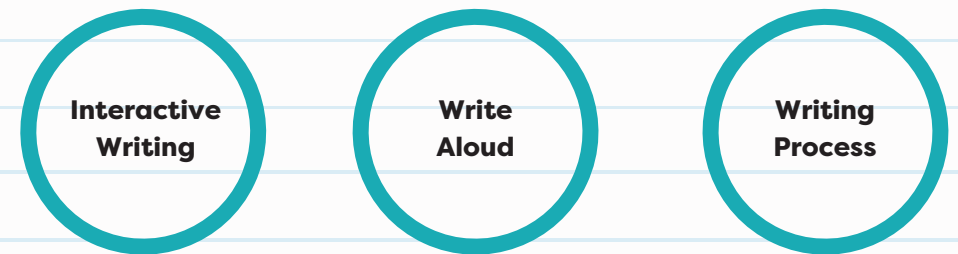
This model complements any writing curriculum you might be using and it is research-based. It’s also crafted from years of supporting teachers in countless classrooms. My greatest hope is that it serves as a simple tool to teach a complex act. Let’s look now at the three strands that bring great focus to your lessons.

The model focuses writing instruction on what matters most, and it includes a robust word study/phonics component.

### Three Instructional Strands



### Three Corresponding Types of Writing Sessions



### Three Levels of Support Within Each Strand



### Three Instructional Strands

#### Language Conventions

Using language conventions is the process of getting print onto the page. It includes:

- Encoding, which is the process of using letter/sound correspondence and spelling knowledge to write
- High-frequency words, which are words that are used often and do not follow common spelling or sound patterns
- Conventions, which includes skills such as capitalization, punctuation, and handwriting

#### Language Composition

Language composition is the process of composing out loud. This consists of:

- Using correct and increasingly sophisticated aspects of grammar (at both the sentence and genre level)
- Using correct and increasingly sophisticated vocabulary (at both the sentence and genre level)

Deliberately planning instruction with these three strands helps teachers to control when and how students will learn.

#### Application

The third strand of “We-Do” writing, the application strand, is one that I believe is necessary in both the reading and writing processes (even though it is not part of the Simple View of Reading). For the purposes of this book, I will focus on how it relates to the writing process.

What I mean by application is that right from the start we provide instruction, showing students how to write, using metacognitive skills to go through the steps of the process. While the class is going through the steps of the process they are applying what they have learned about language conventions and language composition. The application strand provides the big picture of writing’s purpose for students; whereas the other two strands home in on the details. The application strand can be used with learners of all ages. It is successful because it provides learners with a context for how the wholes and the parts fit together.

The application process consists of:

- Going through the writing process
- Applying language conventions and language composition at the same time

#### Benefits for Writers

Deliberately planning instruction with these three strands helps teachers to control when and how students will learn, thus preventing or limiting cognitive overload. This focus helps us to be systematic about what we teach. Over time, these three strands weave together and support students in:

- Developing automaticity when encoding a message onto the page
- Skillfully crafting eloquent and precise text
- Using the writing process effectively and efficiently
- Writing for authentic purposes/audiences

**Planning Interactive Writing**

**Planning Interactive Writing involves choosing the level of practice you want to provide. For example:**

I could do shared interactive writing if I want to give my whole-class instruction in language conventions.

I could do guided interactive writing if I want to give small groups of students tailored instruction in language conventions.

I could do applied interactive writing if I want to help a student use language conventions within a new topic.

**Planning Write-Aloud**

**Planning Write-Aloud involves choosing the level of practice you want to provide. For example:**

I could do shared write-aloud if I want to give my whole-class instruction in language composition.

I could do guided write-aloud if I want to give small groups of students tailored instruction in language composition.

I could do applied write-aloud if I want to help a student use language composition in a new topic.

**Three Types of Writing Sessions**

The three instructional strands in “We-Do” writing are put into action with three types of writing sessions. In each of these sessions, teachers work collaboratively with students giving them supported, intentional practice.

**Interactive Writing**

**Interactive writing is a type of collaborative session in which the teacher and students share the pen to write a message.**

Andrea McCarrier, Gay Su Pinnell, and Irene C. Fountas detail this type of collaborative writing in their book entitled, *Interactive Writing* (2000). In this book, interactive writing serves mainly as a time for students to practice and apply what has currently been taught during word study/phonics and conventions instruction. You will learn more about interactive writing in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Write-Aloud**

**Write-aloud is another type of collaborative session that develops students’ literary and academic language.**

This practice builds on MacLeod and Bodner’s research around the “production effect” in memory. Their research found that saying something out loud yields substantial memory improvement (Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2017). During write-aloud, students and teachers work together composing pieces out loud across many genres. Together, they formulate sentences that are grammatically correct and complicated, and then they practice those sentences out loud as a group, as well as in partnerships. You will learn more about write-aloud in Chapters 6 and 7.

**Writing Process**

**This type of collaborative writing helps students apply language conventions and language composition as they take a piece of writing through an abbreviated writing process.**

Research has shown that one part of becoming an effective writer is the ability to think carefully about the purpose of your writing, plan what it is that you want to say, and then ensure that your reader is able to understand your message (Graham et al., 2012).

During writing process sessions, the teacher and students work together quickly and efficiently to take their writing through the steps of the writing process. This is typically done on shorter pieces of writing. You will learn more about writing process sessions in Chapters 8 and 9. Last but not least, let’s look at the three levels of practice addressed in “We-Do” Writing.

**Planning Writing Process**

**Planning Writing Process involves choosing the level of practice you want to provide. For example:**

I could do shared writing process if I want to give the whole class instruction in writing process.

I could do guided process writing if I want to give small groups of student tailored instruction in process writing.

I could do applied process writing if I want to help a student use the writing process in a new topic.



### Three Levels of Practice

As you plan any writing lesson, you want to take a moment to ask yourself, What are these writers' current needs? What formative assessment information can I look at to guide me? How do I angle this lesson so it's most effective for most learners? Put simply, your decisions come down to whether you are going to **share** the work, **guide** students to try it on their own, or have them **apply** it to new topics on their own. All three are different levels of practice. Here's how I define them:

- **Share:** Teacher and students do the work together
- **Guide:** Groups of students try the work within a shared topic while the teacher supports.
- **Apply:** With teacher support, students integrate what they have learned into new topics/genres.

### Differentiating Instruction

Students need varying amount of support during any kind of shared writing. In order to avoid over scaffolding your students, make sure to:

1. Determine if students need support.
2. Catch yourself if you find yourself talking a lot, because you want students practicing, talking, and asking questions.
3. Give students the least amount of support they need in order to be successful.
4. Be mindful to gradually decrease the amount of support you provide.
5. Keep the goal of independence at the forefront of your lessons.
6. Don't forget to support your most independent writers with enrichment.

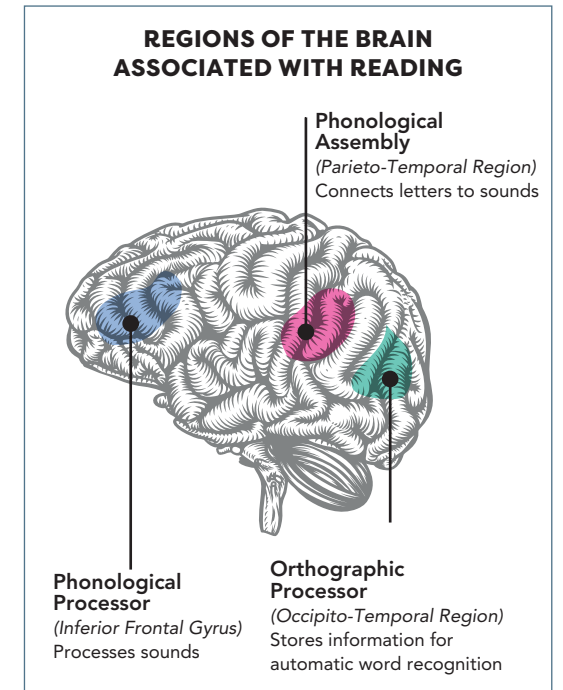
### Word Study for Writers

The We-Do model includes a strong word study/phonics strand. Why? Because word knowledge is the secret weapon of writers. Without it, everything falls apart.

The illustration shown here, you see the three brain regions associated with reading. The first two regions are typically intact. The third region, the phonological assembly region of the brain, is the part that connects letters to sounds. Brain scans have shown that this region is not fully assembled and must be built through successful instructional experiences (American Psychological Association, 2014; Hruby et al., 2011; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2008). Word study/phonics is an important way to build this region.

Word study needs a stronger presence in writing instruction. Giving word study more time helps students develop letter/sound connections. Although there is not an MRI scan I know of related specifically to areas of the brain connected to writing, it stands to reason that developing letter/sound connections through word study strengthens writing as well as reading. So in my "We-Do" writing model, word study has a prominent place. This is a differentiator of my model compared to other writing models, which tend to address word study/phonics incidentally.

Word study/phonics supports children as they learn to encode and decode text. Although some students learn these skills naturally through reading and writing, most do not and need word study to be a part of their instructional day. Rasinski and Zutell (2010, p. 6), when defining word study, said, "Word study is the direct study and exploration of words. It refers to the study of foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, high-frequency words, spelling, handwriting, and vocabulary."



The three parts of the brain involved in reading.

**TO READ MORE**

Many of the teachers I work with lean on professional texts to support word study/conventions and grammar.

*Word Study That Sticks*  
by Pam Koutrakos  
(Corwin, 2019)

*Spell It Out* by Misty Adoniou  
(Cambridge University Press, 2016)

*Meaningful Phonics  
and Word Study*  
by Wiley Blevins  
(PD Essentials, 2021)

*Everyday Editing*  
by Jeff Anderson  
(Stenhouse, 2007)

*Letter Lessons  
and First Words*  
by Heidi Anne Mesmer  
Edited by Nell Duke  
[https://www.aft.org/ae/  
winter2018-2019/duke\\_mesmer](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2018-2019/duke_mesmer)

**Supports Automaticity**

A systematic word study/phonics program will not only ensure that all students have the foundational skills they need but that these skills move from being accurate to automatic; this will, therefore, free up cognitive space for deeper level composition and comprehension skills. Students achieve automaticity by what David Kilpatrick calls orthographic mapping, which is the process we use to store printed words in our long-term memory. Kilpatrick (2015) also speaks about morphology using the meaning of words to help spell novel words as an important part of word study, especially for older students.

**Supports Students in Grades K-5**

People often think of word study/phonics as something that is better suited for our youngest learners, but the reality is that most students in the upper grades need it as well. Often, upper grade teachers will lament that their students don't spell or punctuate correctly. They do it when I'm sitting next to them or remind them, but they don't transfer this knowledge into their writing. Although these older students may be accurate at times, many have not developed the automaticity they need to be able to do it easily. They need more time to study and practice these skills.

**Requires Daily Instruction**

Research hasn't determined an exact amount of time of word study instruction per day, but researchers such as Nell Duke (2019) have suggested about 45 minutes. That sounds like a lot, but keep in mind that a majority of word study should be in the practice phase, which can take place during interactive writing and writing process sessions. You can achieve this recommended amount by embedding word study throughout the content areas—throughout the school day. In other words, it can be delivered as brief, separate lessons as well as being touched upon within other subject areas.

These sessions may take place with the whole class, as well as with small groups and one-on-one conferences. Nell Duke also notes that different students will need varying amounts of practice. My general rule of thumb is that teachers should be doing around 20 to 30 minutes a day of whole-class word study instruction/practice and then giving students who need it more tailored practice in small groups and/or one-on-one.

**What's Ahead**

Chapter 2 addresses the updated Gradual Release of Responsibility model, and suggests a first phase of immersion.

Chapter 3 shows you how to get “We-Do” writing off and running in your classroom. This will make getting started easier for you.

Chapters 4–9 are devoted to the different writing sessions you will do with students—interactive writing, write-aloud, and writing process. For each type, there is a chapter that helps you plan and deliver whole-class shared sessions followed by a chapter on how to differentiate the sessions to maximize success.

**“We need phonics to get words into our internal lexicons. But once those words are automatized phonics is no longer needed.”**

**—Timothy Rasinski, Ph.D. (2010)**