

Engaging Strategies for Academic Writing

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Building academic writing skills is essential for English language learners planning to pursue higher education, but students sometimes dread writing classes. Is it possible to make academic writing interactive and engrossing? As ESL instructors, we continually seek new approaches and strategies to strengthen our students' writing. An approach described by Gibbons (2009) is a valuable way of integrating the development of academic knowledge with explicit language teaching and lends itself well to a variety of writing activities.

In this approach (Gibbons, 2009), a particular genre of writing is selected, introduced, modeled, and practiced. In this article, we outline the goals of each stage in this writing process and provide some suggested learning activities that can integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Developing Knowledge of the Topic

Before students engage in the writing task, they are introduced to a topic and engage in activities that build information to support the content of their writing. The following are some suggested activities to foster development of topic knowledge:

1. **Brain Writing:** "Brain writing" can be used as a prewriting tool. Place students in small groups and assign a topic. Each student writes for a few minutes, and then all students put their papers in the middle of the table. Each student reads another's paper and adds on to it until all the papers have been read and added to by each group member. Each group develops a master list of ideas from all the papers to be used for drafting.
2. **Mind Mapping:** Let students share what they already know about the topic through a [semantic map](#), wallpapering, or a [progressive brainstorm](#).
3. **Discussion Continuum:** Use a discussion continuum as a prewriting tool. Write two statements on opposite ends of the board—one for a position and one against—and have students write their initials along the continuum to show where they stand and then explain their positions, often using references from reading to support their ideas. (Note: all students must have a chance to speak before others have a second chance.) The ideas presented broaden students' perspectives on issues, give them ideas for their writing, and connect talking to writing.
4. **Create Shared Experiences:** Have students interview an expert about the topic or organize excursions to relevant sites or to museums at the beginning of the topic, so that there is shared experience on which to build new language.

Modeling the Genre

The purpose of modeling the genre is to increase students' awareness of the form and function of the particular genre they will be writing about. At this stage, students need to become familiar

with the purpose, organization, and language features of that genre. For example, if students write an argumentative essay, they need to become familiar with the purpose of an argumentative essay. Next, they need to master the typical organization of this essay genre. Finally, students need to learn typical connectives to sequence the arguments (e.g., first, second, in conclusion, therefore) and typical language features of that genre (e.g., nominalizations used to name arguments, “the *proposal that*”). The following are some suggested activities to increase awareness of genre features:

1. **Model and Reconstruct:** Display a model and read it to the students. Discuss the purpose of the genre with them. Draw attention to the way the text is organized or, alternatively, have students do a text reconstruction in pairs. In text reconstruction, students sequence jumbled sentences into a coherent text. Ask them to explain the sequence they chose.
2. **Dictogloss:** Give groups of students several different examples of the focus genre, and ask them to decide how they are alike. Use a *dictogloss* taken from an example of the focus genre. This will provide a model of text type, and can also be used to revisit subject content. (A *dictogloss* is a classroom dictation activity where learners listen to a dictation of a short text and then reconstruct it by listening and noting down key words).

Joint Construction

The goal of joint construction is for the teacher and students to write together, collaboratively constructing a piece of writing in the chosen genre. At this point, the students are equipped with background knowledge of the topic and the writing genre, and are ready to begin the task of writing. The following are some suggested activities for teacher/student writing:

1. **Teacher as Scribe:** Ask students to contribute ideas about what to write, while you act as scribe and guide, suggesting to or discussing with students how the writing might be improved. “Think aloud” during this process: *That is not very clear, is it? Could we use another word in place of _____ here?* Throughout the process, together with your students, constantly reread what has been written; reorganize ideas; improve wording; or make corrections to grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Discuss language and how it is used while students are actually engaged in composing the text.
2. **Fact Storming:** To help writers clarify the organization of information, they can use “fact storming” as a way to record students’ knowledge after they have had a chance to become familiar with a topic. Students organize their facts by producing data charts in small groups. Then, students can draft paragraphs by directly translating the information contained in the data charts. Student then draft the introduction and conclusions as a teacher-guided, group writing activity, and finally return to their drafts to complete and revise them.
3. **Looped Freewriting:** Students begin writing their ideas for a draft nonstop for 10 minutes. Students or teachers read over their peers’ writing and circle one aspect to explore further. Students write for another 10 minutes about the selected ideas. Again,

characteristics or details from the second draft are circled and students write for another 10 minutes. When students finish looping, they have more and more ideas in their drafts and can begin the revising stage of the process.

Independent Writing

Students should have developed knowledge about the topic, become familiar with the major features of the genre, and participated in joint construction with you as their guide. Students should now be able to write with confidence, incorporating their experiences and their learning. The following are some suggested activities for independent writing:

1. **Editing Sheets:** Encourage reflection and autonomy by providing students with an editing sheet to remind them of the key features of the focus genre.
2. **Provide Opportunities for Feedback:** Confer with students individually as necessary and/or have them show their writing to a partner for feedback. Moreover, support sharing their final versions publicly, encouraging correctness and good presentation.

Once the four writing stages have been completed, consider displaying students' writing on bulletin boards, school showcases, or on the school's Facebook page. Students can share their writing in informal settings, much like "coffee house readings," or through formal settings as in writing contests or in publications. Displaying the final writing product gives students a sense of pride in their work and may motivate them to reach a higher standard.

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