

STEVE'S TOP FIVE

Writing Tips for Grades 5-8

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-Writing is the constant search for what one is saying.

- John Updike



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1. Don't write (or grade) a complete piece all of the time.
2. Use samples (including poor ones) often. Write your own.
3. Write *with* them. Be willing to do what you ask of others.
4. Write in response to literature.
5. Write for authentic audiences – together or separately.

TEACHING FOCUS: Thesis Sentence Work

1. Have students look at an essay on the overhead that has no focus whatsoever. Assist in a discussion of what is wrong with the piece. Then, introduce the concept of a *thesis sentence* – the sentence (sometimes there are two sentences together) that provides the focus of the paper. Be certain students do not confuse the thesis sentence with a *hook* which is used to garner a reader’s interest in the paper.
2. Provide students with a writing prompt. Then, place on the overhead a list of 4-5 possible thesis sentences with varying degrees of quality in response to the prompt. Facilitate a class discussion of which is the best choice and why.
3. When the best sentence is decided upon, explain to students that a thesis sentence is well written when it is simple, concise, and clearly addresses the writing prompt. Remind them that they can often find some key words in the writing prompt to include in their thesis sentences!
4. Begin throwing out some oral writing prompts to the class and creating your own thesis sentences – allowing them to tell you if you are doing a good job or not. Obviously, you will do a terrible job at times to see if they can “remediate you.” Once you have solidly introduced this concept, practice this step again orally every day or so for just a moment or two. It will have a huge impact!
5. Before you complete step 5, do a review of step 4 to get all the kids thinking. Now, pass out a writing prompt. Have someone read it aloud. Call on a student to explain where, specifically, in the writing prompt the writer is told what to write about. Guide them to find this important sentence and have them underline it.
6. Once the students have underlined this critical sentence, ask them to work in groups or pairs to develop two possible thesis sentences for the prompt. Have them star the one they think is best. Circulate while they discuss and write to listen in and help as needed.
7. Before you complete step 7, review step 4 to get all the kids thinking. Pass out a new prompt. Follow the process for step 5 with this new prompt, except that now the student pairs or groups will write 3 possible thesis sentences. Ask them, this time to write one sentence that clearly has a great thesis, one that starts out well but ends in disaster, and one that is just plain awful!
8. Continue this process with new prompts, making subtle changes as you feel the students are ready until, eventually, they are writing a thesis sentence alone for any type of prompt you pass out.

When I was ten years old, my right foot grew larger than my left one. Sometimes, you have dreams about strange things that didn't even really happen, but you think they did. When I told my mom, she said it happens sometimes and that we could order some special shoes with different sizes for my right and left foot. I know sometimes superheroes even have things happen. Like Superman was adopted. I have read some books where something happens to someone but then it doesn't happen because at the end they tell you, "Oh! It was only a dream!" It's not always cheesy but sometimes it is. I will not take my sister because she will make some dumb comment when I am picking out shoes like she always does. Maybe it will be embarrassing. I hope not. It's time to go buy the shoes. Oh, never mind. It was a dream. No, not really. It was a nightmare. Thank goodness! I don't like to wear shoes anyway.

PROMPT: Write a persuasive essay identifying the best show that has ever been on television. Give reasons to support the show you choose as the best.

Scooby Doo Where Are You was my favorite show when I was little, and I still think it is a great show for little kids.

I could never figure out why they always yelled “Scooby Doo, where are you?” He was always standing just a few feet away.

If you don’t think the *Scooby Doo* is the best show that’s ever been on television then we can’t be friends.

The enormous popularity of *Scooby Doo* and the fact that I think Fred and Daphne like each other is why it’s the best.

Will there ever be another version of *Scooby Doo*? Only time will tell.

Scooby Doo is, without question, the best show that has ever been on television.

I saw the movie one summer. It was dumb.

One reason that *Scooby Doo* is the best show that has ever been on television is that it provides entertainment for people of all.

PROMPT: Write a persuasive essay in which you address your feelings regarding Barack Obama's ability to lead our country through this difficult time in our nation's history.

America is in good hands with Barack Obama as our leader, and he won that election fair and square, too.

Barack Obama is a good leader, but he shouldn't have done some of the stuff he did.

Barack Obama is a leader who is equipped to deal with these troubled times.

My dad voted for McCain, and he should of won the whole thing was rigged my dad told me so.

Barack Obama is at the head of this natural disaster, and it will turn out fine in the end if you just have faith.

PROMPT: People are always creating new inventions to make life more pleasurable or easier. Inventions like the microwave, cordless phone, and laptop computers have improved many people's lives. You may think of other inventions that have helped even more. Write an expository paper about one invention and how it helps make people's lives better.

I would like to meet the dude who invented the cell phone. My mom probably owes him a lot of money.

Cellular phones have improved people's lives in a variety of ways.

If you think cellular phones are a waste of time, you are about to hear differently in my essay.

Cell phones are ringing everywhere! Sometimes they are annoying but sometimes they are helpful, too.

I can't imagine life without my little pink cell phone that Daddy got me for my birthday. I sleep with it.

PROMPT: Write an expository essay that tells some positive things about having recess during the school day. Give reasons to support your response.

There are many positives about having recess during the school day.

Recess is fun, great, and cool.

There is nothing I would rather do than have recess.

If we had recess more often, I would like school better.

Tips to Decrease the “Paper Load” – Don’t Grade It All!

-Have students keep folders, notebooks, journals (or whatever) in the classroom so they are easy to get at and store. From these folders will come writing that is evaluated (sometimes). When it is graded, it can be done quickly, easily, and effectively. The idea is to have students write often so that they are thinking and engaged in the learning process—plus getting practice as writers at the same time.

1. Have students write (5-10 minutes) and walk around as they write making random comments.
2. Have students write and then randomly select some students to orally share with the class or with a partner what they have written.
3. Have students write and then self-evaluate their writing.
4. Have students write and then peer-evaluate what they have written with a partner or in a group.
5. Have students write with a partner on four, consecutive days. Have each student write for only two of those days and assist the other two days. On the fifth day, have the partners pick the best one (of the two they wrote) to hand in to be graded. In this way, students were involved with four writing tasks but you are only grading one of those.
6. Have students write for one week and then choose one piece to be evaluated by you, or have students write for one week and let them know you will be collecting one of the samples on Friday.
7. Give students a + (good) an *ok* (average) or a – (poor). Assign points to each of these symbols or use checks and pluses with a certain number of checks being a C and a combination of checks and pluses being a B, and a better combination of checks and pluses being an A.
8. Write a comment on the papers only. Duplicate the best papers and use them as good examples of what you were looking for, or simply put stickers on papers. They are inexpensive, easy to use, and even eighth graders like them.
9. Give them bonus points if they completed everything satisfactorily.

10. Give them points for effort only.
11. Specify an acceptable level of performance you expect; the student either meets the requirements and gets credit or doesn't and gets no credit.
12. Create writing assignments that have a built-in evaluation (pen pals, writing shares with another class, a parent, another school, etc.)
13. Use: Praise (great ideas) Question (what did you mean?) Suggest (work on your mechanics) when you respond.
14. Collect notebooks, journals, learning logs, or whatever you are using and assign bonus points at the end of a unit of study for students who have recorded a daily entry or a certain number of entries within a range (say 10-12 entries out of a possible 15 days of writing. This takes care of "I was sick, I had a field trip , I had band, etc.).

Whenever possible, you should try to write when the students are writing. If you write on an overhead or on the chalkboard, you can serve as a model for students and you can experience writing on the topic yourself.

M. Jancewicz/ Dr. S. Layne, 2009

Having a Writing Conference with Yourself

Questions about Enough Information

Have I told where, when, and with whom this is happening?
Have I clearly explained what I mean? Is there any part that might confuse my reader?
Have I described the scene and people so well that my reader can see and hear my story?
Do people talk? Have I put quotation marks around the words people say out loud?
Have I used examples to show what I mean, instead of just telling?
What's the most exciting or interesting part of the piece? How can I build on it?

Questions about Too Much Information

What parts aren't needed- they don't add to my point or story? Can I cross them out?
What is this piece really talking about? Are there parts that are about something else and shouldn't be here? Can I cross them out?
Do I have more than one story here? Which is the one story I really want to tell?
Is this a "bed-to-bed" piece going through every event of the day? Can I keep the important part of the day and cross out the unimportant parts?
Is there too much conversation? Too many little details? Have I explained too much?

Questions about Beginnings

Does my beginning bring my reader right into the action of the story or main ideas?
Where does my piece really get going? Can I cross out the first paragraph? The first page?

Questions about Endings

Does my ending leave my reader wondering?
Does my ending go on and on?
How do I want my reader to feel at the end? Does this ending do it?
What do I want my reader to know at the end? Does this ending do it?

Questions about Titles

Does my title fit what my piece is about?

Is my title a “grabber”? Would it make a reader want to read my piece?

Questions about Style

Have I said something more than once?

Have I used any words too often (such as “and,” “then,” or “said”)?

Are any sentences too long and tangled up? Too short and chopped up?

Have I paragraphed or indented often enough to give my reader’s eyes some breaks? Have I broken up my piece by paragraphing too much?

Is this the way things happened—do I have it in the right order? Have I grouped ideas together that belong together?

Does the voice telling the story stay the same – I or he or she?

Does the verb tense stay the same – present (I am doing it now) or past (I did it before) or future (I will be doing it but not yet)?

Dr. Layne's Written Paper Evaluation

Name _____

The final grade for this paper is _____

The descriptors below apply to the attached paper. The evaluator is pleased to review papers with any student who requests clarification. Any student requesting a meeting to discuss a paper should arrive prepared to provide evidence of his/her careful reflections regarding the majority of comments made concerning the paper and willing to discuss his/her ideas for revision.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> mature vocabulary | <input type="checkbox"/> unclear antecedents for pronouns |
| <input type="checkbox"/> strong writing skills | <input type="checkbox"/> verbs tense errors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> smooth flow | <input type="checkbox"/> organization impeded flow |
| <input type="checkbox"/> balanced paragraph size | <input type="checkbox"/> run-on sentences / choppy sentences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> effective transitions | <input type="checkbox"/> fragments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clear thesis | <input type="checkbox"/> support weak |
| <input type="checkbox"/> support cited | <input type="checkbox"/> awkward or missing transitions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> focus maintained | <input type="checkbox"/> focus not sustained |
| <input type="checkbox"/> well organized | <input type="checkbox"/> repetitive idea(s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> strong introduction | <input type="checkbox"/> many awkward phrases/sentences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> effective conclusion | <input type="checkbox"/> vague comments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> superior paper | <input type="checkbox"/> content strong / mechanics weak |
| <input type="checkbox"/> impressive thinking | <input type="checkbox"/> mechanics impeded comprehension |
| <input type="checkbox"/> improper use of "you" | <input type="checkbox"/> new idea introduced in closing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> paper needed stronger proofreading | <input type="checkbox"/> writer contradicts him/herself |

INTRODUCTION:

The word *hero* is not something most people really understand. Many people look at movie stars and sports figures as heroic, but being talented doesn't make someone a hero. On September 11, 2002, my Uncle Mike raced into one of the Twin Towers in New York City to save people. He knew that he was risking his life, but that's what firemen train to do. Uncle Mike was one of thousands who died on September 11th, but he's not a hero because of the way he died. He's a hero because of the way he lived. Uncle Mike was honest, brave, and a servant to others – that's my idea of what a hero should be like.

SAMPLE A

BODY PARAGRAPH #1:

Firefighters are among the bravest people in any community. Their safety is at risk every time they enter a burning building due to intense heat. Also, the possibility of part of a building collapsing on them when they are fighting the fire presents a very real danger. The choice firemen make to place themselves in harm's way out of a concern for others each day is admirable and demonstrates their tremendous courage.

SAMPLE B

BODY PARAGRAPH #1:

Uncle Mike only lied to me one time in all the years that I knew him. It wasn't that bad because he only lied about why we were going to this restaurant. We were really going because my family was throwing a surprise party for my birthday, but Uncle Mike said he was just taking me out for a special dinner. So you can't say he isn't honest because it was just that once.

SAMPLE C

BODY PARAGRAPH #1:

To say that Uncle Mike was heroic due to his honesty might sound old-fashioned, but the way you could count on him to tell the truth made him stand out to me. For example, I once saw him hurry toward a check-out lane in a grocery store when another person was also approaching. Uncle Mike beat the woman to the spot, but then he turned suddenly and said, “I’m sorry. I was trying hard to get in this line ahead of you, so I wouldn’t have to wait for a long time to check out. That was very selfish of me, and I’m embarrassed. Please, step ahead of me.” The woman was so surprised at Uncle Mike’s honest apology. Another time that his honesty made an impact on me was when we found a wallet near the Lion cage at the zoo. Uncle Mike was teasing me that several

SAMPLE C (continued)

of the lions were thinking that I looked really tasty when suddenly he looked down and saw a wallet. It had \$150.00 dollars in it. If we took the wallet to Lost and Found, we would miss the beginning of the dolphin show. I didn't want to do it. Uncle Mike, though, said that the person who lost the wallet might need it right away, and that we should sacrifice a few minutes of the show to try to help the owner of the wallet who was probably very worried. These small acts of kindness are heroic to me because I don't think most people would behave like Uncle Mike – putting others first.

SAMPLE D

BODY PARAGRAPH #1:

Uncle Mike is brave and good. I can hardly believe that he is courageous and brave. I feel braver just by being with Uncle Mike because he has the most courage of all. Everyone in the family says that being a firefighter is what Uncle Mike always wanted to do. They say he is the bravest family member, and I agree.

Bravery isn't just about being brave. It also means having the courage to be brave and bold and stand up to bullies. I beat up a kid once who said I coughed like a girl. It was very brave of me to beat him up because his brother is on the wrestling team at our high school. I am brave like Uncle Mike even though he was mad that I beat the guy up.

Dr. L's FREE WRITE LIST

- _____ The best thing about our school is . . .**
- _____ If I compare myself to a candy bar, I'm a lot like a . . .**
- _____ When I think about the future, I imagine . . .**
- _____ I'm the kind of person who see the glass as . . .**
- _____ The wisest person I ever met is . . .**
- _____ I have changed my mind about . . .**
- _____ Who is responsible for school shootings?**
- _____ Constructing a piece of writing is like building a house.**
- _____ Life is not always fair.**
- _____ We need a new definition for the word "hero."**
- _____ If I compare myself to a pair of shoes, I'm a lot like . . .**
- _____ The thing I take for granted is . . .**
- _____ When my best friend and I are fighting, I feel . . .**

Written Response to Literature in Grades 5-8

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli

Leo's frustration with Stargirl's seeming nonchalance about her social status leads to an intense and sobering conversation on pgs. 135-138.

- Following Leo's outburst on these pages, ask students to write to him as if they were personal friends who had overheard the conversation on these pages. What do they want to tell him about his behavior? What do they think about the things he said to Stargirl? Was he justified in saying the things that he said? The letter may take the form of advice or it may simply respond in affirmation or criticism of Leo's decision to have this "discussion" with Stargirl.

This Side of Paradise by Steven L. Layne

Jack makes a variety of statements throughout the novel that are worth deeper exploration, thematically.

- Ask students to journal or free write their personal responses to the following quotes from *This Side of Paradise*. At the end of the book, have students select one of their journal entries or free writes to spend more time on by writing a complete piece on the topic.

"It's puzzling that we sometimes ask questions we don't really want answer to." (pg. 9)

"It's interesting that people do those things, avoid what makes them uncomfortable and yet they're uncomfortable the whole time they're avoiding it." (pg. 43)

"When you're constantly surrounded by beauty, you cease to appreciate it rather quickly." (pg. 60)

"Somewhere, somehow, someone always pays the price for perfection." (pg. 203)

Jack wonders, on pg. 203, whether it was his father or Mr. Eden who made the decision to end his life.

- Have students track the dialogue on pgs. 202-203 carefully, noting which personality is in control of the body at which point in order to determine who, in fact, really "pressed the button." This is a situation that can be argued either way – perfect for a persuasive essay, a true *whodunit!*

Although they are brothers, there are several differences between Jack and Troy. There are also differences between Mr. Eden and Chip Barrett.

- Ask students to use diamante poetry as a way of revealing the differences they note in these characters. They can also use the diamante to compare a character from *This Side of Paradise* to a character from another novel.

***The Giver* by Lois Lowry**

This character-driven novel brings tremendous change to young Jonas from the beginning to the end of the story.

- Ask students to write an “I used to . . . but now I” poem focusing on the changes that have occurred in Jonas. Students should assume Jonas’s personality and write in his voice. For example: *I used to be colorblind, but now I see the rainbow.*

The Chief Elder of the community describes several key attributes necessary for someone to be selected as The Receiver of Memory: intelligence, integrity, courage, and wisdom are four of the key attributes mentioned.

- Ask students to prepare a written evaluation of themselves in terms of these qualities. In the conclusion, students should reveal whether they believe that this “honor” might be bestowed upon them if they lived in the community.

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Father's Day 2001

I scan the room, and there you are.
Your vacant eyes stare past me,
Even when I hold you and kiss you.

I speak to you softly,
Fearful of startling you,
Yet privately wishing I could.

I feed you your lunch,
And you eat it all,
Even the crab cakes you always detested.

They understand without comment,
When I say you want the ice cream,
Not the coconut pudding.

I tell you about your grandchildren.
They are grown, you know,
And you would be so proud.

But you are silent,
Lost in a world
You never chose.

I have come a thousand miles to hold you,
But I would travel the world
To find you again.

- Peg Castelli