Writing is fundamental to students’ success in school. Through writing, students not only are able to demonstrate their knowledge, but also to gather, remember, and share what they learn. Writing is also an essential skill that many students will use after their school careers. In fact, the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004) found that the majority of large U.S. companies consider writing ability when making hiring and promotion decisions.

Significant concerns exist, however, about student writing in all grades, as the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) consistently show that students are below grade-level proficiency (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). Writing instruction thus remains a concern as well (Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2006, 2009; Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, & MacArthur, 2003; Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009). In a national study of primary grade writing instruction (Graham et al., 2003), findings showed considerable variability in teachers’ instructional practices. For example, teachers reported that the amount of time students in their classrooms spent composing ranged anywhere from 0 to 380 minutes per week (median amount equal to 105 minutes per week).

In a similar study of high school writing practices (Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009), teachers reported infrequent use of evidenced-based practices, defined as instructional practices rooted in evidence from worldwide educational research (Davies, 1999).

Adding to these concerns, many teachers report that effective writing instruction is difficult (Graves, 2002; Troia & Maddox, 2004). From finding appropriate strategies that meet students’ diverse needs to effectively assessing student writing, the complex nature of writing instruction can present a number of challenges for many teachers (Nagin, 2003).

This qualitative study sought to answer the question, “What principles underlie effective writing instruction?” Seven leading authorities in the field of writing were identified and interviewed about their beliefs about writing and effective writing instruction. Although backgrounds and areas of expertise varied among the leaders, many of their ideas and recommendations were similar. These beliefs and suggestions were used to develop the overarching principles of effective writing instruction.

This article offers recommendations for best practices in the writing classroom from experts in the field.
principles for effective writing instruction presented here.

Data Collection and Analysis
Participants for this study included seven of the leading authorities in the field of writing, as nominated by their peers. These participants included the following (in alphabetical order): Linda Flower, Steven Graham, Karen Harris, Jerome Harste, George Hillocks, Thomas Newkirk, and Peter Smagorinsky.

The interview protocol for this study was designed to prompt the writing authorities for a description of effective writing instructional practices. Sample interview questions included: “What does effective writing instruction look like?” and “How do effective writing instructors reach all writers across ability levels?” In addition to the interview protocol, questions were asked to prompt answers from interviewees who gave brief or vague answers to one or more of the questions. See the Research Supplement that accompanies the online version of this article for more details regarding the methods used in this study.

Five major themes of effective writing instruction emerged from the qualitative data collected. These themes are presented as the following principles:

1. Effective writing instructors realize the impact of their own writing beliefs, experiences, and practices.
2. Effective writing instruction encourages student motivation and engagement.
3. Effective writing instruction begins with clear and deliberate planning, but is also flexible.
4. Effective writing instruction and practice happen every day.
5. Effective writing instruction is a scaffolded collaboration between teachers and students.

Guiding Principles of Effective Writing Instruction

Principle 1: Effective Writing Instructors Realize the Impact of Their Own Writing Beliefs, Experiences, and Practices

“Teachers have multiple and sophisticated viewpoints about what’s important in terms of writing instruction and that plays out in terms of their practices.”—Steve Graham

All teachers of writing have at one time been students of writing themselves and therefore have had a variety of writing experiences, likely both positive and negative. In each interview, scholars discussed how past experiences with writing can shape teachers’ beliefs about writing and the writing process, as well as the writing practices employed in their classrooms. Also discussed were the ways in which these beliefs and practices have the potential to influence student learning and practice. Karen Harris described the influence of teacher beliefs from her perspective:

I think personal beliefs about writing are very important. I think they spill over into the classroom in ways that we probably don’t even understand. If a teacher doesn’t see writing as important, or only sees writing as a means to an end—a way for students to get a grade or a way for students to show what they know—then they are communicating that in the classroom. If a teacher doesn’t see the bigger picture of writing as a part of learning and developing, if they don’t have that as part of their personal understanding or their personal pedagogy about writing, then it’s going to be next to impossible for them to impart that in students.

Other leaders agreed on the significance of teacher beliefs and stressed that writing teachers need to be writers themselves and, as Thomas Newkirk said, “know from the inside out what writing is like.” Jerome Harste recommended the following:

If I were to give a tip to teachers, I’d tell them to take out a sheet of paper and start writing. I’d also tell them to share what they write with students. I think we (as teachers) provide the type of demonstration that students need to see and be around. There’s power in making yourself as vulnerable as the students you’re teaching.

Many professionals in the field of writing suggest that journaling is an effective way for teachers to experience writing while reflecting on their practice and learning about themselves as both writers and teachers (Shin, 2006). Also evident in the discussions was the salience of teacher efficacy, or teachers’ confidence in their teaching ability, and how it relates to teaching writing. Reflecting on his past research
with teachers about their writing beliefs and practices (Graham et al., 2003; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Fink, 2002), Steve Graham noted that teachers with higher efficacy for teaching writing tended to spend more time teaching writing, provide more opportunities for their students to practice writing, and make more adaptations for struggling writers. Based on past conversations with teachers, Karen Harris speculated that lower efficacy for teaching writing may stem from feelings of unpreparedness. Steve Graham also highlighted the links between teacher preparation, efficacy, and practice: “The more prepared our teachers are, the more efficacious they are, and the more likely they are to have students write and spend time teaching writing.” In essence, the scholars focused on the need for writing teachers to be positive role models of writing. To do that, however, teachers must first feel confident and prepared to teach writing effectively.

**Principle 2: Effective Writing Instruction Encourages Student Motivation and Engagement**

“A strong writing teacher creates the itch to write. It’s deliberate.”

The importance of motivation in the writing classroom was emphasized by all of the leaders. Especially highlighted was the likelihood that many students might feel alienated from the act of writing. Peter Smagorinsky described the problem from his perspective:

> Many students are not very interested in much of what is emphasized in school, but these are kids who have loads of activities in which they excel. They are very interesting people with very deep passions and even if they don’t seem to care about school, they care a lot about other things, many of which involve literacy. If there were a way to harness that in schools and rethink school so that the kinds of literacy practices that kids take on voluntarily could become more a part of how they’re assessed in school, I think schools would be richer for it.

Jerome Harste echoed this sentiment: “Kids come to school with lots of information about language. They also come to school with a lot of experiences that they can write about.” How can teachers capitalize on students’ interests and experiences? What does this look like in the classroom? Thomas Newkirk proposed, “I think a strong writing teacher creates the itch to write. It’s deliberate. It’s the opening that a teacher uses to spark something in a writer to try something new.”

Other scholars also discussed ways to engage students in writing. In particular, the need for writing for real audiences and real purposes was a focus; as Karen Harris stated, “writing doesn’t happen in a vacuum.” Linda Flower recommended that the goals of effective writing instruction should emphasize writing as a means for social engagement, as a way to do something with writing. She commented:

> I think we need to see writing as preparing students to act and speak in the world, whether that’s local issues, cultural issues, or national issues. Writing is a public act and there’s great potential in teaching our students to be scholarly citizens. I look at literacy and writing as being able to be active in the community, to be able to see problems, to work across cultural differences, and to communicate across those differences.

In addition to the need for authentic writing tasks for students, the influence of writing climate was also evident in many of the interviews. Steve Graham emphasized the importance of context: “We need to set the stage to increase the chances that students see writing as an enjoyable activity. This includes ensuring that there is a nonthreatening environment where kids write. This also includes providing students with meaningful choices.”

Student motivation and engagement is an important issue for teachers to consider in the writing classroom. Says Thomas Newkirk, “Unless you get commitment, everything else can fall apart. Buy-in is the starting place. If you don’t have that, nothing else really matters.” To
cultivate student writing motivation and engagement, the leaders encouraged teachers to set the stage by recognizing student interests and experiences and creating a context in which students are excited to write in meaningful ways. Other literacy scholars posit that writing tasks that provide students with opportunities to be “in charge” of the products they create and the processes they use when writing can foster student motivation and engagement, as these kinds of activities often allow students to make personal choices and to take control of their learning in ways that build their autonomy and confidence (Miller & Meece, 1999; Turner & Paris, 1995).

Principle 3: Effective Writing Instruction Begins With Clear and Deliberate Planning, But Is Also Flexible

“Plan like hell, and then wing it.”
—Thomas Newkirk

Conversations with many of the writing leaders drew attention to the importance of thoughtful and planned writing instruction. Often, such deliberate instruction begins with a specific learning objective. George Hillocks explained, “As a teacher, you cannot be effective, in a reflective way, if you do not have specific learning objectives. If you don’t know exactly what you want the students to be able to do, how can you guide them?” Other researchers agreed that solid writing instruction begins with the teacher’s understanding of the task at hand. Thomas Newkirk proposed the following question to teachers as they plan their writing instruction: “What do you want to have happening in your writing class and then how might you go about rewarding those things that you want to happen?”

Sometimes, however, these objectives are not clearly presented to students. Linda Flower described potential problems when writing tasks lack clarity: “We [as teachers] have to think about how we represent tasks for students. Teachers and students often have very different ideas about what the task is.” The possible disconnection between what is taught and assessed was also clear in several of the interviews. Peter Smagorinsky explained, “Once the purpose and process of the task is defined and taught, it’s important to assess what was taught, but if you haven’t taken the time to teach it, you can’t expect it.”

Although many conversations with the scholars focused on the importance of clear instruction, the opportunistic nature of writing instruction was also highlighted. Thomas Newkirk described the following:

Things come up and when they do, you [as a teacher] stop whatever you’re doing and take advantage of it. Something, some big event, Obama’s inaugural address, for instance. You discuss it. You talk about rhetoric. You take advantage of it. You might not have planned that in your lesson plan before, but you take advantage of those moments. Sometimes the best teaching you do is something that you haven’t planned. It’s the combination of being organized and spontaneous, and I think finding that balance is really the art of teaching.

Principle 4: Effective Writing Instruction and Practice Happen Every Day

“I think right now, one of the most difficult aspects is finding the time to teach writing. We have to make it happen.”—Steve Graham

Improvement in writing does not happen overnight, nor does it generally happen very easily. Throughout the interviews, the writing leaders emphasized how students need extended opportunities to write both inside and outside of the classroom to become better writers. Jerome Harste commented,

I think one of the things students have to have is uninterrupted time for writing every day. Just having time to write daily, not occasionally, is essential. Writing should never be a surprise activity—it needs to be something that is done consistently.

Steve Graham added, “We need to double or triple the amount of writing that kids do.” Although the need for daily writing practice was stressed, the scholars recognized that there are high demands on teachers and often little time to meet all of those demands. Thomas Newkirk expressed this well: “The curriculum gets crowded sometimes and writing can get pushed to the side.” Karen Harris shared a similar viewpoint: “When teachers feel like something has to give, writing is often one of the first things to go.” She recalled her past conversations with elementary teachers: “They tell me, ‘When I’m down to the wire for state testing and something has to go, it’s going to be my writing time. I have to do extra math. I have to do extra reading.’”

With all of the pressures that teachers face in the classroom today, is it possible for them to commit the time necessary for quality writing instruction? Many of the scholars believed it is possible, but noted that teachers may need to be creative and flexible in order for this to happen. Thomas Newkirk explained,

Sometimes teachers can feel like they’re locked into a curriculum—almost like they create these imaginary boundaries for themselves. I’m thinking, ‘I bet the curriculum is a little bit more bendable than that and if it’s not, teachers should argue for it to be more bendable.’ We have to be flexible.

Others interviewed commented that teachers might also be able to find creative ways to teach writing genres
across the curriculum and use writing to stimulate students to think about different topics. Research from the National Commission on Writing (2010) discusses the use of technology in the classroom as a means of creatively getting students to think about writing everyday and apply writing strategies across the curriculum. The report suggests that teaching keyboarding is fundamental in the 21st-century writing classroom and that providing students with computers to work with gives them a sense of self-efficacy, accomplishment, and professionalism that is key in the real world.

Also suggested was the use of podcasting or blogging, where students create audio or video files to share on the internet. Podcasting and blogging allow students to reach a broad audience, be creative in their writing, write in different genres, and reflect on their work. Using computer technology in the writing classroom can help students develop the skills needed to be successful in this age of writing and is a way for teachers to create writing opportunities about different topics across the curriculum.

**Principle 5: Effective Writing Instruction Is a Scaffolded Collaboration Between Teachers and Students**

“Sometimes students are asked to do something they’re not given the tools to do. It’s like telling people to dig a gold mine and not giving them shovels and axes. The gold is down there, but they can’t get to it without tools.”—Karen Harris

Effective writing instruction includes more than just daily practice. It focuses on individual student needs and provides instruction to help students meet their goals. When asked how teachers might meet student needs, Karen Harris emphasized the following:

> We need to know every child. We need to know what each writer is capable of doing. How much do they care about this task? What prerequisite skills do they have? What are their cognitive and metacognitive abilities and needs? And then you have to structure instruction to reach every writer.

Similarly, George Hillocks stated, “Most important, I think teachers need to know what kids can do. They need to know how to collect writing samples, examine them, and inventory what is there and what is not. Then, they plan instruction from there.”

Supportive writing instruction was a key theme in the conversation with Linda Flower as well: “Ideally, there is a collaborative planning where students talk through their plans with a supporter who offers thoughtful feedback.” Many of the scholars interviewed echoed the importance of providing thoughtful and sensitive feedback to students about their writing, but also cautioned teachers about the possibility of overwhelming students with too much feedback. Steve Graham explained,

> I don’t think kids deal well with a great amount of feedback, especially a great amount of negative feedback. It’s easy to see how a student might ignore a paper that’s been ‘marked to death’ because it’s not easy to deal with all of the issues. Sometimes, there’s just too darn much.

Thomas Newkirk suggested that by carefully reading and responding to only a few aspects of student writing, teachers might be more able to balance getting productivity from students in ways that decrease “spending an unsustainable amount of time reading student writing.”

The value of positive feedback was emphasized in the conversations with the leaders as well. Jerome Harste commented, “I think the real trick in terms of being a good writing teacher is to invite and encourage kids to see a bucket of gold in every draft they write.”

Steve Graham added that “accentuating the positive can go a long ways.” By understanding students’ writing strengths and needs and providing purposeful instruction and positive feedback, teachers are likely to create a writing environment in which all students experience success.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Writing is an important skill for our students to develop. Thus effective writing instruction is a fundamental component of any classroom. The guiding principles in this article offer
suggestions for effective writing instruction from today’s leaders in the field.

First, it is important for writing instructors to be cognizant of how their personal writing experiences and beliefs affect their instruction. Teachers can be powerful models for students, so it is essential that they view themselves as confident writers. Research shows that teacher efficacy has the potential to influence classroom practice (Allinder, 1994; Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Guskey, 1988), student efficacy (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen), 1988, and student achievement (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Graham et al., 2001). The literature also consistently suggests that teachers who engage in writing experiences themselves have a greater ability to connect with students in the writing process (Cremin, 2006; Kaplan, 2008). Through their passion and enthusiasm for writing, as well as their own writing practice, teachers can show students that writing is valuable and important.

Teachers can also communicate the value of writing by increasing the amount of time their students engage in composing activities. The essentiality of frequent writing practice was apparent in the views expressed by the leaders interviewed. The need for more classroom composition time also has been consistently emphasized in the literature (Pressley et al., 2003; Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006; Pressley, Mohan, Fingeret, Reffitt, & Raphel-Bogart, 2007; Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Writing across the curriculum is one way that teachers can find more time for writing throughout the school day. By writing across different content areas, there is potential for students to not only write more, but learn more as well (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004). Pen pals can be a great way of encouraging both student writing practice and writing across the curriculum. Paired with another student in a different country or even in the same class, students can e-mail each other about specific topics they are learning. The site, ePALS (www.epals.com), is a great resource for teachers interested in connecting to other classrooms across the world.

It is reasonable to believe that students will value writing and engage in more frequent writing practice if writing educators are able to spark their interest. As noted in the conversations with the scholars, students naturally bring their curiosities and personal interests to the classroom. It is to the teacher’s advantage to incorporate students’ personal interests into writing activities (Hidi & McLaren, 1991). The Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2010), for example, engages writers—even reluctant writers—into drafting, writing, designing, publishing, and presenting their original comic book ideas. Throughout this process, students are able to be creative and consider their audience as well as the interplay of their writing and artistic/design choices.

Poetry is another outlet that can spark unengaged or challenged writers. Poetry can be woven across the curriculum and into writers’ workshop throughout the year. For example, poetry can be used as a means of free writing or responding to literature, or it can be made into a song for learning a particularly difficult science or math concept. When poetry instruction and practice are scaffolded, all students can be successful and find ways to find and share their voice (Dorfman & Cappell, 2007). One place for students to read and, more importantly, share poetry is the Poetry Hut Blog (www.poetryhut.wordpress.com).

Providing students with authentic writing tasks, or writing activities designed with real-world audiences and purposes in mind, can also stimulate student motivation and engagement in the writing classroom. In the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) initiative, teachers and their students research and write about their communities (Robbins, 2005). One classroom of students with the KCAC initiative became active members of the community by researching, writing, and publicly sharing personally meaningful people and places within their community with the My Place project (Martinez, 2005). Through their research and writing, students learned about both community understanding and civic responsibility. Ultimately, finding ways to motivate and engage student writers is important, as student engagement in literacy activities often returns higher literacy achievement, which in turn can reinforce literacy engagement (Guthrie, 2004).

Writing instruction must also be clear and collaborative. Well-planned instruction provides teachers with concrete guidance on what and how to teach. Generally, effective instructional plans include a task analysis, or the identification of specific behaviors,
knowledge, and cognitive processes that students need to master a specific learning activity (Jonassen, Hannum, & Tessmer, 1989), which is communicated to writers to help ensure that students understand and meet teacher expectations (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2009).

It is also important that writing instruction be guided by each student’s individual needs and goals (Graham & Harris, 2005; Harris & Graham, 1996). Guided writing instruction, in which teachers guide students through the writing process with a combination of modeling, direct instruction, and guided and independent practice, is one such way that teachers can provide appropriate scaffolding for individual students to improve writing proficiency (Gibson, 2008). To help keep track of each student’s writing progress, Cohen and Cowen (2011) suggested that teachers use a writing conference record to track the number of conferences he or she has with each student, the date each conference was held, suggestions and praise given, and the goals that the student is currently working on. This formative assessment piece can help effectively guide teacher instruction and student learning.

Finally, as students work toward their literacy goals, specific feedback is essential in guiding students to improvement in their writing (Graham & Harris, 1993; Schunk & Swartz, 1993; Straub, 1997). Teachers should be mindful about the feedback given to students, however, as students can become discouraged when feedback is provided in overwhelming amounts.

As the conversations with writing leaders and the research on writing instruction illustrate, writing is a complex process, and there are many components to effective writing instruction. Although not an exhaustive list, we believe these five principles will help educators create writing classrooms that value and encourage increased student writing engagement.

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TAKE ACTION!

1. Be a positive role model of writing for students. Write and share your writing with them often.

2. Connect writing activities to students’ individual interests, whether it’s comic books, horses, or community issues.

3. Create a writing climate in which all writers feel safe to make choices and take risks.

4. Be clear in your expectations for student writers.

5. Find time for students to write every day.

6. Focus on each student’s writing strengths and needs to guide individualized instruction.

7. Provide students with limited, constructive, and thoughtful feedback.
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