

 **AUDIO**  
3:42 min

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## Not Grammar for Grammar's Sake

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**Topic** TEACHING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS TO BE EFFECTIVE WRITERS

**Practice** FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

- Highlights**
- » Students need to be able to spell words correctly and write legibly so others can read their writing.
  - » Students need to be able to use a variety of sentence constructions to convey their ideas.
  - » It is important to teach these basic skills embedded within the writing process.
  - » It is more effective for students to learn basic grammar through working on their own sentences rather than circling nouns and verbs in isolated sentences.
  - » Teachers should not teach grammar for grammar's sake; rather, they should teach students that grammar is important to help them learn how to write and convey increasingly complex ideas.
  - » Basic skills should be effortless to allow students to convey ideas. Instruction in these skills should be embedded within real writing experiences and not taught as separate stand-alone skills.

## About the Interviewee

Deborah McCutchen, Ph.D., is a professor of education at the University of Washington. Dr. McCutchen's teaching and research interests include the psychology of reading and writing, teacher knowledge, and classroom learning. Her work, supported by the National Institutes of Health and more recently by the Institute of Education Sciences, examines the linguistic bases of reading and writing skills. Her research has ranged from basic research on cognitive processes supporting literacy to studies of the subject-matter knowledge needed by teachers of reading. She is a former coeditor of *Cognition and Instruction* and contributor to volumes such as the *Handbook of Writing Research*, the *Handbook of Research on Learning and Instruction*, and the *Handbook of Research on Writing*.

## Full Transcript




**00:05** I'm Deborah McCutchen, and I'm a professor at the University of Washington. I served as a member of the panel that developed the Practice Guide entitled *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*.


**00:17** Students need to understand that they need to spell words correctly and write legibly so that those who read their writing can recognize their words. Students need to understand that different sentence forms convey ideas differently, highlighting some ideas while downplaying others. When these basic skills are embedded in the entire writing process from the start, students are much more likely to incorporate them into their writing.


**00:46** In the case of handwriting instruction, the goal is for handwriting to become fluent, economical, and legible. For all students, learning to keyboard on a computer is a useful skill as digital technologies become more and more prevalent. Many standardized tests are moving to computerized administration.


**01:09** Grammar instruction can sometimes rely on worksheets requiring students to circle nouns and verbs and underline adjectives and the like. Perhaps more effective would be having students work on

their own sentences, identifying the verbs in their sentences, thinking about other verbs that might replace those to make the language more vivid, thinking about where and how they could include additional adjectives to make their descriptions come alive. The idea is not to teach grammar for grammar's sake, but to help students understand how sentences can be built to convey increasingly complex ideas.

 **01:56** In the upper elementary grades, instruction would focus less on how to create sentences with different structures and more on the effects that different structures have on the reader. That is, how one phrasing seems to spotlight one idea in a sentence while a different phrasing highlights another.

 **02:16** Sentence construction is all about cloaking ideas in the language that most appropriately conveys the writer's intentions. And spelling and handwriting, or in some cases, typing on a keyboard, are crucial for getting that language onto the page. When spelling and handwriting are fluent they seem effortless, allowing the student to focus on ideas.

 **02:42** Similarly, when a student can think of a variety of sentences to convey an idea, she can pick the one that best conveys it. But when spelling, handwriting, or sentence construction are not fluent and do require effort, as can be the case for some young writers, they can really impede writing. They can act as a bottleneck, draining students' energy and discouraging them from trying to express much. We don't want students to avoid the perfect word because they are unsure of its spelling or to leave out important details because they can't corral all those ideas into grammatical sentences.

 **03:23** It's so important that these so-called basic skills are integrated into authentic writing experiences from the start, not taught as separate, stand-alone skills.

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