

Newport Elementary School

1327 West Balboa Blvd.
Newport Beach, CA 92661
Amy Nagy, Principal

At Newport Elementary School, teachers are committed to including at least 45 minutes of writing instruction and practice in their daily routines. Newport teachers use a writer's workshop model that gives students the opportunity to choose their writing topics and learn to move through the writing process independently. When just 13% of fourth graders passed the state writing assessment in 2004, the school began focusing on improving writing instruction, training with consultants such as Ralph Fletcher and Elizabeth Hale to gain expertise. In 2011, 83% of fourth-grade students passed the writing assessment.

- ◆ K-6
- ◆ 81% White
- ◆ 10% Hispanic
- ◆ 4% Asian
- ◆ 3% Black
- ◆ 1% Native American
- ◆ 17% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 6% English Language Learners
- ◆ 17% Special Education

A Schoolwide Approach to Teaching Writing

The Schoolwide Routine

With 45 minutes every day dedicated to writer's workshop, students have time to develop their writing skills. Workshops consist of a mini-lesson discussing and modeling a particular strategy or genre, time for students to practice writing independently, and conference sessions allowing students to discuss their writing and get feedback from the teacher.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, all classes hold writer's workshop at the same time. This practice makes it easier for the principal to be involved in writing instruction and help teachers gain expertise in writing instruction. During these whole-school workshop times, the principal visits classrooms to work with students, observe teachers' practice, and take photos. She then sends an all-staff email—with photos—to the whole teaching staff, highlighting some strong writing instruction practices she saw that day.

Weekly staff meetings provide opportunities to share and discuss instructional practices the principal would like to highlight. Frequently, when the principal shares the practices one teacher has found successful, other teachers choose to adopt them in their own classroom. After talking about one teacher's implementation of a "Writer's Toolkit"—a binder students can refer to for help with sensory words, openers/closers, transitions, and so on—it became a tool used in all classes. Now, students can frequently be seen flipping through their Toolkits for help when writing.

The Writing Process

Newport teachers focus on helping students understand the whole writing process and how to use it independently. Teachers model strategies through mentor texts and

shared writing, allowing students to then choose their own topics in independent writing. Teachers make sure students understand the concept of audience, the purposes and attributes of different genres, and effective word choice and organization. Students plan, draft, revise, and conference with each other, and they learn to assess their own writing and self-reflect on areas for improvement.

To further help students understand the different purposes for writing, teachers invite community members such as firemen, lawyers, and journalists into the classroom to talk about how they use writing in their jobs.

Building Blocks

Spelling

Teachers at Newport want their students to be accomplished writers in every sense, and they want them to feel comfortable taking risks in their writing. They encourage students to focus on getting their ideas down on paper and to use approximate spellings rather than spending time worrying about whether every word is spelled correctly. Teachers set aside separate time for students to focus on learning correct spelling. However, spelling is not taught in isolation. Newport teachers use each student's writing to make an individualized list of "spelling demons"—words that trouble that student repeatedly. All students have a writer's notebook where they keep their "spelling demons" list so they can easily refer to it.

In kindergarten through fourth grade, teachers focus spelling instruction on a "pattern of the week" and conduct activities to practice that pattern. For example, students may practice the *-le* ending by constructing sentences such as "There was a little bottle in the middle of the circle." Then they connect their sentences to construct a story. Teachers also ask students to practice using the pattern in their own writing; during writing time they may encourage students to use words like "griddle" if they are writing an informative essay about how to make pancakes, or "puddle" if they are writing a poem about the rain.

Writing Good Sentences

While they used to focus on error correction exercises, teachers now use mentor texts that illustrate exemplary sentences and discuss with students what makes something well written. They look at the function of the punctuation marks, the purpose and meaning of the words, and how the author constructed the sentence to convey an idea. This way, students learn to use sentence structure to communicate their ideas effectively. They also spend time discussing the different sentence structures that go well with different genres, such as poetry, persuasive writing, or a personal memoir.

Students use the "Try It" section in the back of their writer's notebooks to complete exercises practicing writing different types of sentence constructions. For example, a teacher may give a mini-lesson on different ways to express "said." After showing students some well-constructed sentences in a mentor text that use words such as *whisper*, *shout*, or *reply*, the teacher would then ask students to turn to the "Try It" section of their writer's notebook, label the craft clearly at the top of the page, and spend 2–3 minutes writing good sentences that use a word other than "said." Teachers frequently see students referring back to their "Try It" section during writing time.

Schoolwide Writing Community

Choice and Ownership

Students at Newport have ownership over their writing. They choose their writing topics within a genre, as opposed to responding to assigned writing prompts, and work through the writing process at their own pace, self-assessing all the steps as they go along. To help students feel empowered, teachers call them *writers* or *authors*. The students are encouraged to talk about their writing with terms like “adding voice” or “craft lesson.”

Collaborative Environment

Newport teachers don’t ask students to do any writing they don’t do themselves. They complete every assignment they give students, write in front of their students during a mini-lesson, and show students that they make mistakes, too. They model the whole writing process, communicating that it’s okay to go back and revise multiple times. This teacher participation helps students feel more excited about writing in general and more comfortable taking risks, such as adding more details or writing about deeper feelings.

Using common language across the school when talking about writing contributes to the sense of community. Every teacher calls writing time Writer’s Workshop, and every teacher refers to the exemplary texts used to illustrate concepts as mentor texts. Students learn to use these terms, and dialog happens naturally among them.

The “Big Buddies” program builds community and collaboration by allowing older students to visit students in lower grades to help them revise or edit their writing. They underline words or phrases that the student should investigate and consider revising, and they model by sharing their own writing. One sixth-grade teacher whose students work with second-grade Buddies frequently hears them giving the same feedback she gives them, such as “Could you write that sentence another way?”

Community Beyond the Classroom

Newport Elementary has committed to the idea that writing must be celebrated. The school’s hallways are lined with student writing, and teachers have created an online blog of student writing examples. In order to be accepted into the student blog, a piece must be a completed, publishable piece, which serves as an incentive for students to polish their writing. Newport also celebrates writing by inviting parents to their monthly “Flag Deck” celebrations, or schoolwide assemblies during which the students of one class share their writing in front of the whole school.