

Preface

Learning how to write well is not an easy task. Students work on this skill in varying amounts of time from second grade through high school. If they go on to college, they typically complete one or two more courses devoted primarily to developing composition skills. Despite this large investment in time and effort, however, many students still do not write very well. Something is wrong here; we should be getting a better return on our investment.

Part of the problem, of course, is that students no longer spend much time reading professionally written and edited material for pleasure, so they are not exposed to as much well-written material. This decrease in exposure, however, has not been accompanied by a decrease in expectations: Society still demands good writing skills in academic and business/professional circles.

In academics, for example, knowledge is often displayed in written form. Students with poorly developed writing skills are at a distinct disadvantage. If they cannot express themselves properly, their grades will probably suffer no matter how well they know the subject matter. High-stakes testing at all levels of education has, of course, raised the ante considerably.

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (p. 3) conducted a survey in 2004 of 64 major U.S. corporations. The following quote sums up the results: "People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion" (p. 5).

Blaauw-Hara (2006) recounts the situation very nicely:

Despite how we may feel politically and emotionally about valuing students' native dialects and the desirability of myriad patterns of speech and writing, the work world—and, indeed, most of the world of higher education not directly involved in language studies—that awaits our students upon graduation or transfer does not share such values. (p. 166)

A revolution in the way we teach writing has already begun. Ground-breaking books by Rei Noguchi, Constance Weaver, Jeff Anderson, and Amy Benjamin have fired some important first shots. This book, written for preservice as well as in-service teachers, joins the battle, but from a fresh perspective.

Divide and Conquer

Writing consists of two equally important (albeit somewhat overlapping) skill categories, areas that I refer to as *sentence management* and *concept management*. Vicki Spandel developed a very popular instructional approach—6 Trait Writing®—that we can use to further define these two areas. Table 1 assigns each of the 6 Traits to its appropriate category.

This book takes dead aim at the left side of Table 1. It presents effective, interactive, classroom-tested ways to infuse these sentence management skills into the curriculum in ways that are very much in keeping with natural human learning. This brain-based writing approach takes advantage of the knowledge about spoken and written English that students—standard English learners (SELs), standard English speakers, and advanced English language learners (ELLs)—already possess. This information, tucked away in subconscious areas of the brain, consists of what I metaphorically call **Language Wizards**: special bodies of knowledge about language (English in this case) that must be in place in order for speakers to communicate. Specifically, this text taps into three Wizards—**Grammar Wizards, Sentence Wizards, and Rhetorical Wizards**—using what students already know as a resource, connecting that knowledge to what students need to know in order to express themselves clearly and maturely when writing. As you will see, these Wizards provide an enjoyable, pragmatic, engaged-learning approach to the teaching of sentence structure, sentence fluency, and rhetoric.

Table 1 6 Trait Writing® Breakdown

Sentence Management	Concept Management
Conventions	Ideas
Sentence Fluency	Organization
Voice	
Word Choice	

English Speakers

Today's classrooms often contain a variety of English speakers. The Wizard approach outlined in this book addresses all of them:

- *Standard English Learners (SEs)*: Students who, by circumstance of birth and/or environment, grow up in a community where a so-called non-standard dialect of English is spoken. Included in this category would be speakers of Ebonics (often called Black English), speakers of Hispanic English, speakers of regional dialects (rural, southern, northern, etc.), and others.
- *Standard English Speakers*: Students who, by circumstance of birth and/or environment, grow up in a community where so-called standard English is spoken.
- *English Language Learners (ELs) or English as a Second Language (ESL) Students*: Students whose first language is not English. Here we must acknowledge a simple truth: If you are teaching classes that have both native speakers and beginning or intermediate non-native speakers, you have two groups with which to work. No single approach to acquiring English skills is going to meet the needs of both groups of students. Many years of classroom experience have shown, however, that *advanced non-native speakers* will profit greatly from the Wizard approach.

I will refer to these groups as needed. Unless otherwise specified, however, everything in this book applies to all three groups of students.

In This Book

This book is divided into four sections. Each chapter begins with a true–false “pretest” and ends with discussion questions, the first of which is to see whether you want to reevaluate your answers to the pretest. The answers are provided at the back of the book. The chapters break down as follows:

Part One: The Grammar Wizard

- Chapter 1 gives a classroom example—a microcosm that demonstrates why traditional grammar teaching is not effective. It also provides a more fully developed definition of what grammar actually entails, introduces you to the Grammar Wizard concept, and briefly explains the importance of properly focused and presented grammar instruction.
- Chapter 2 shows classroom-tested demonstrations that will acquaint your students with their Grammar Wizards—and you with yours.

- Chapter 3 examines the brain-based learning movement, human memory, natural versus rote learning, and the natural learning process. It concludes with a listing of 12 basic brain-based learning tenets, showing how traditional grammar pedagogy violates each.
- Chapter 4 outlines the Grammar Wizard Approach: a pedagogical method for presenting grammar instruction that takes advantage of what students already know, albeit subconsciously, tying it to what they need to know when writing.

Part Two: Using the Grammar Wizard

- Chapter 5 provides Grammar Wizard Tests—techniques students can use to get in touch with their Grammar Wizards, query them, and use the results to resolve specific Standard Written American English (SWAE) problem areas.
- Chapter 6 presents a collection of activities that facilitate brain-based learning of many of the concepts presented in previous and future chapters.
- Chapter 7 presents an assortment of constructions for students to place in their grammar toolboxes. When properly used, these structures provide variety and conciseness—key players in the perception of a mature style.
- Chapter 8 deals with punctuation from a brain-based perspective.

There is some truly good news in all of this for you: You do not have to master the arcane and forbidding traditional grammar approach in order to bring the contents of these sections into your classroom. You, as either a native speaker of English or a very advanced non-native speaker, have Wizards in your head that are even more fully developed than those of your students. And they are just sitting there, waiting for you to tap into them.

If you already know traditional grammar, that knowledge will stand you in good stead: the same concepts (and often terminology) apply. If, however, you do not know traditional grammar—if you find it confusing, if you have never really been exposed to it, or if you are afraid of it—relax! These sections will help you gain insights into the inner workings of English by showing *you* how to query *your* Grammar Wizard to figure out all sorts of things about English—painlessly.

Part Three: The Sentence Wizard

- Chapter 9 presents an extended example of a method that tackles the seemingly intractable problem of comma splices, fragments, and run-ons, providing a completely specified Wizard Approach lesson in the process.

This novel approach to sentence boundary errors truly works: Students actually “get” it.

- Chapter 10 delves into sentence variety and complexity. It examines Sentence Beginners, Sentence Interrupters, and Sentence Expanders—patterns that students already know when they read, but may not use when they write. The chapter helps you show students how to learn to read like writers (how to “unpack” text to see what makes it work), and then how to incorporate their findings into their writing.

Part Four: The Rhetorical Wizard

The goal of this section is to explore how to help students leverage their existing subconscious knowledge of the rhetoric of spoken English to make mechanical and structural choices that reflect their engagement, their emotion, and their personalities in a clear and expressive manner.

- Chapter 11 begins with a general exploration of the concept of rhetorical choices, registers, and code switching. It then focuses on punctuation and word choice from a rhetorical perspective. It shows how various choices can change the voice, the tone, or the impact of one’s writing and how our students’ intuitions about English can be used to build their skills.
- Chapter 12 deals with structural issues: given versus new information, placement of constituents, active versus passive voice, fragments, sentence length, and voice.

For your convenience, a glossary has been placed at the end of this text. It contains acronyms and definitions of terms that I have used throughout this text.

Looking Ahead

I have presented workshops on various aspects of brain-based writing contained in this book to many groups of K–16 teachers throughout the United States. Here are a few of their anonymous comments, taken from post-workshop evaluation forms:

“I left with clear ideas and practical strategies to help my students write more varied and sophisticated sentences.”

“. . . simple, direct, and creative ways to include grammar in a meaningful way—and without tears from my students or me.”

“I will no longer allow my students to be bullied by grammar. Instead, I will collaborate with my students and apply the John Crow strategies that will liberate all of us.”

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I invite you to visit BrainBasedWriting.com for supplemental information. The website also has my email address. Please feel free to email me with questions, comments, or suggestions—I would love to hear from you: BrainBasedWriting@gmail.com.

Now, sit back, relax, lower your guard, and open your mind. Let your Language Wizards help you demystify the structure of Standard Written American English and help you turn sentence management from staid, sterile, student-detested lessons into fun-filled, active, student-centered ones.