

Powerful Writing Structures: Brain Pocket Strategies for Supporting a Year-Long Writing Program

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Powerful Writing Structures: Brain Pocket Strategies for Supporting a Year-Long Writing Program

by Adrienne Gear

Pembroke Publishers (2020), 197 pages

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With growing concerns over inadequate instruction and practice in writing in school, *Powerful Writing Structures* provides a solution package for this issue with a balanced, comprehensive writing program. Writing is an extremely complex skill (Hayes, 2012), and learning how to write requires time and good instruction (Graham et al., 2012). However, the typical teacher does not spend enough time on explicit writing instructions and students do not have regular opportunities to practice their writing skills. Even though the difficult situation is related to national, provincial, district, and school policies, most importantly, classroom writing practices are influenced by teachers' beliefs and knowledge, which means that teachers devote more time and attention to teaching writing if they are better prepared, feel more confident, derive greater pleasure, and consider it important (Graham, 2019). *Powerful Writing Structures* models how writing is taught by means of setting up an effective process-based writing routine for weekly practice that include writing goals, writing joy, and writing conferences, which greatly builds up teachers' knowledge and confidence in teaching writing and makes the journey much more fun.

School children are often stuck in their writing as they have no idea of how to organize their thoughts. With her creative "powerful writing structures", Adrienne Gear fits

a wide range of writing forms all into three brain pockets: a *memory pocket* for narrative writing, a *fact pocket* for nonfiction writing, and an *imagination pocket* for story writing. In this way, the author breaks down diverse aspects of the unique text structure for each form of writing into “small and manageable” skills and turns each piece of writing into an easier “filling in” task (p. 9). Throughout the school year, the author progresses from simple to complex, demonstrating “the skills, the structures, the language, and the beauty of effective writing” through weekly, step by step writing practice and finally transforms students into “more confident and competent” writers (p. 7).

Memory pocket writing focuses on personal narratives that are based on “the writer’s own personal experiences, memories, and feelings” (p.37). In this approach, Adrienne Gear presents two types of writing forms: walking stories on personal topics, and event stories on personal events. Following the Topic/Detail/Detail/One time/Feeling process, student writers develop stories from their own lives. *Fact pocket* writing explores different forms of nonfiction writing, including description, instruction, persuasion, explanation, comparison, and biography. As each writing form has a specific purpose, a unique text structure, and particular language features, the author provides explicit and sequential writing lessons, including introductory lessons, mini lessons, and content-area lessons, that outline the specific teaching elements for each form. The introductory lessons highlight the specific text features and structures to help the writers recognize and differentiate between the various nonfiction forms. The mini lessons give prominence to specific writing techniques, such as hooking your reader with a great beginning, putting the facts together, adding your voice, which “provides a wonderful opportunity for teachers to demonstrate writing skills and the composing process through a write-aloud approach” (p. 15). The content-area lessons help the teachers and writers develop ways to link up their writing instruction and practice to the content areas, such as science and social studies. *Imagination pocket* writing addresses the most complex form of story writing, and with her creative template of Somebody/Wanted/But/So/Then, Adrienne Gear breaks the storyline into smaller segments to help the writers succeed.

Accompanied by “outlines of specific lessons, along with reproducible organizers, student samples, and anchor book suggestions”, *Powerful Writing Structures* makes things as “practical and straightforward” as possible (Gear, 2014, p.13), but by no means is it a program that can be carried out without any considerations. The first thing to consider is time. “In today’s schools, writing is a prisoner of time” (NCOW, 2003). As the

typical teacher devotes much less than one hour a day to teaching writing, it is more like an impossible mission to fit the three major genres, along with nine different forms, “all in the very short span of 10 months” (p. 6) and “provide not just one, but many opportunities for students to learn and practice each structure” (p. 8). Moreover, just as the author claims that “slow and steady breeds success” (p. 174), it is more approachable to work through the structure writing process slowly and in a longer period. Second, even though explicit instruction and modeling make every step of teaching more concrete so that the practitioners can pick up the book and use it, teachers may feel it too controlling and limiting where their own creative ideas are concerned; teachers may wish to adapt the provided strategies for their own use.

Teaching writing is challenging, but Adrienne Gear makes it easy. *Powerful Writing Structures* provides insight and inspiration for teachers to understand the subject of writing, the trajectories of writing development, and effective practices for teaching writing, which empowers the society at large, as well as policy makers, school personnel more specifically to change writing instruction for the better.

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