

On Your Way with Dr. Christina Williams

Presentation Introduction Tips:

(Don't say these things but use them to build the introduction.)

What will my audience gain from my presentation?

Who are you?

What will my audience remember? What are the key takeaways?

Why is this presentation important to my audience?

INTRO

Whether you're a teacher who's on your way to school to work with kids and you're leaning into the science of reading movement, or you're on your way to tutor some great kids who are struggling with learning to read and spell well, or you're a parent who'd like to learn to better equip and inspire your children from home, the *On Your Way* podcast is for you.

I'm Dr. Christina Williams, and I'm your host.

Today, in the Science of Reading community, lots of teachers are questioning how to most effectively equip children to become skilled writers. We've been learning a lot about the essentials when teaching kids to *read*, and now teachers are wondering about what scientific research says when it comes to early childhood writing instruction.

Many schools had adopted "the writers' workshop approach" a while back, but since the Lucy Calkins curriculum for reading has been eschewed (UH-SHOOED) and explicit systematic phonics instruction has (finally!) taken its rightful place in beginning readers' classrooms, teachers are wondering about what to do with writing time. Should there be time set aside for explicit writing instruction? If so, what are "writing blocks" supposed to look like? Some folks, like Natalie Wexler (one of my heroes) say that teaching writing separate from knowledge-based content is not a worthy time spend. Others, like Tim Shanahan (also one of my heroes) feel that about 20% of literacy instruction time (25-45 minutes or so) should be set aside, daily, for explicit writing instruction.

What's a teacher to do when the experts can't agree?

First, we need to recognize that writing in the content areas requires some requisite skills. For children to convey their ideas in print, basic writing instruction must be provided. It'd be an unfair ask tasking beginning writers with writing about their sink or float experiments if they haven't been explicitly and systematically equipped to do so successfully.

Beginning writers will focus on conveying ideas orally, in the initial stages—for writers must be able to convey ideas verbally before they are tasked with conveying them in print.

Dr. Louisa Moats embraces a *Speech to Print* approach to literacy instruction and even wrote a book by the same name, for kids must be equipped to break the words they say into speech sounds and then represent those speech sounds with letters.

We talked last week about dedicating time to explicitly teaching kids to efficiently form the letters of the alphabet, so the letters are tidy and it's clear what the writer is trying to say.

Stringing letters together to make words and then stringing words together to make sentences and then stringing sentences together to make paragraphs, and then stringing paragraphs together to make . . . Well, you get the idea. It's a process, and the process requires the teaching of some important conventions. Kids must become equipped, through explicit instruction, to proficiently convey their ideas in writing.

Basic essentials include: 1) teaching kids that sentences begin with uppercase letters, 2) we use spaces to separate words within a sentence, 3) most every sentence includes a subject (*Who?* or *What?*) and predicate (*What about it?*), and 4) writers signal the ends of sentences with end marks including periods, question marks, and exclamation points (and maybe even interrobangs).

As an early childhood educator, I taught these conventions using “found sentences” from books I was reading aloud with my students.

Today, a lot of talk in the science of reading community is around the value of read alouds—books read aloud by the teacher to students. During this emphasis on science, it seems everything has come into question. I suppose that's a good thing. Probably because it's been a widely uncontested topic, there's not a whole lot of research about the benefits of teachers reading books aloud to their students.

Though I believe teachers are not, yet, intentional enough about their read aloud selections—the topic of next week's podcast—I don't feel anyone can go wrong with the writing tasks I'm about to share, that lean into read alouds. Most any book of good quality will support the following ideas:

Kids benefit from instruction offered in a systematic manner. For this reason, I suggest parents and teachers use found sentences as “mentor sentences” from the books they're reading aloud to their children. I'll share some examples from a perfect springtime read aloud, [*The Trumpet of the Swan*](#).

In chapter one, there is a three-word sentence that says, “Sam went indoors.” This is the perfect way to introduce subject and predicate. Together, notice that the *who* is Sam and the *what about it* is that he went indoors. Next, you'd have the kids write a sentence (or two or three) about themselves or someone they know that follows this pattern saying who or what went somewhere.

Kids could write, “I went home,” or “Dad went outside.” As kids begin writing, someone might want to say, “Mom went to work,” and you can explain that *to* is a connecting word that expresses direction.

After practicing a bit with kids making sentences matching this pattern, challenge your students to try to perfect one of the sentences they've been working on.

You'll provide a checklist or rubric to remind your students, again, that good sentences, at this stage will **1)** begin with uppercase letters, **2)** have spaces that separate the words within their sentence, **3)** a subject (that tells *Who?* or *What?*) and a predicate (that tells *What about it?*), and **4)** an end mark that signals the end of the sentence (periods, question marks, and exclamation points).

The next day of instruction, you might choose a four-word sentence as a mentor sentence. You might choose, "He loved his mother." The kids could write anything that follows the same pattern, noting that *he* is the *who* (or *what*). The words *loved his mother* is the *what about it*. The kids will work on their own sentences following this pattern.

Perhaps they'll write something like, "I love my dog," or "Dad loves his daughter."

You can share that the "what about it" part can be in present tense or past tense. Anything goes here. They're simply following the basic pattern of the sentence and remembering to use the standard conventions you're focusing on at this point.

NOW, let's get to the Dynamic Dictionary part of this writing instruction.

While you're encouraging your students to write their sentences, a student might have an important word they want to use, but they don't know how to spell it. **THIS** is when kids are directed to use the Dynamic Dictionary.

This is BIG.

You may be sitting at a student table working alongside students working on their sentences. That's perfect. I always had an extra chair at each table so I could conference and/or coach kids at tables, on a rotating basis, so I was somewhere the students could easily locate me. I found this to be a great way to truly observe what kids were doing during our writing time. Monday, I was at table 1, Tuesday at table 2, etc.

Before I go on, you should know that there are some materials you'll need to have available to your students to make this Dynamic Dictionary work. You will need:

- The Learning Resources Alphabet Centre Pocket Chart (Amazon)
- Blank 3x5 index cards,
- Basket (to hold lots of blank index cards)
- Sharpies (for teacher use, only)
- I found it helpful to wear one of those canvas 2-pocket aprons (like Home Depot guys wear) to hold extra index cards and some sharpies

While kids are doing their independent writing,

When kids have a very important word they need for their sentence and they've tried everything they know, but they cannot figure out how to spell the word, you'll allow your kids approach you at your table to request help.

This means that you will be interrupted. That's okay. Embrace it. If one child wants the word, others may need it too. In the early stages, the lessons you're teaching might actually be a little less about the writing process and more about equipping your kids to encode the words they want to write. This is the perfect complement to phonics instruction for reading. It's phonics instruction, leaning into an awareness of the phonemes within words.

You must reinforce PA and phonics with this dictionary for it to yield substantial impact within your students.

For kids to approach you, they must have a pass—which is a blank index card. Kids must first look to see if the word they want spelled is in the pocket of the letter they believe their desired word begins with. If they do not find their word in the pocket, they will come to you with their index card “pass.” They will ask you to share how to spell the word they need for their writing, and you'll do one of two things:

You can either make each sound and invite the child to tell you which letter or letter combination represents that sound (if you've explicitly taught it already) OR you can ask the child to stretch out the sounds and you write the letters on the card. You might say, “I haven't taught you to spell this sound yet, but o-i can say /oy/ and when an e follows c the c often says /s/. That's what's happening in the word *voice*. We'll learn all of that soon, but for now you know that o-i says /oy/ and c-e says /s/ in the word *voice*.”

You'll use standard spelling, always, to write the word, and you'll note aloud what is happening within the word. Is there a magic e? Is the word an irregular featuring an *unexpected* spelling? Is it exactly as we'd expect, knowing what we know about how words work? Whatever the situation, you say so. You may even say, “I'm not sure why there is no s-h in the word *sure*, but I am sure that this is how it's spelled. This is how you'll see it in the books you read. It's an odd ball for sure.”

Let's say a student wants to write, “Dad loved his daughter,” following the mentor sentence above, but the student has no idea how to spell the word *daughter*. Nothing she's tried “looks right” to her.

The student looks in the d pocket. Nothing there looks like it could say *daughter*.

The student brings a blank card to you. You say, “How can I help you?” ☺

The student says, “I need the word *daughter* please.”

Again, you can either make each sound and invite the child to tell you which letter or letter combination represents that sound OR you can ask the child to stretch out the sounds and you write the letters on the card.

Remember, if there something in the word you have not yet explicitly taught, as you'll be stretching out the sounds and you'll say, “Oh. This word *daughter* has a phonics rule I

haven't taught you yet. In the word *daughter* there's an a-u that says /aw/, and (It's crazy but it's true . . .) often, when a-u says /aw/ (the sound you might make when you're petting a cute little puppy) the a-u is followed by a g-h that says, "absolutely nothing."

Present the card to the student. Have the student drag his or her finger under that letters and make the sounds in *daughter*.

The student will then take the word card onto which you've written the word *daughter* to his or her table to write that word in the sentence they're working on—with the expectation that they'll make the sounds aloud as they record the letters onto their papers and then the child will place the word card in the D letter pocket so another student can easily find it and use it when needed.

Remember that before kids are permitted to approach you for a word they'd like the spelling for, they must first look in the appropriate letter pocket of the Dynamic Dictionary.

This is such important work. As kids are looking through those word cards—only a handful initially, but lots of them as the year goes on, they are looking at the letters and thinking about the sounds those letters represent. That work promotes orthographic mapping! Kids should be able to recognize when words match and don't match the sounds they hear in their desired words.

Using the Dynamic Dictionary allows for kids to move during writing time—which can be really important.

Kids do need to remain relatively quiet so they can focus on the important work they're doing, but they're certainly not silent. I often turn the overhead lights out to signal the need for a quieter work environment, but everyone knows they can move about to use the Dynamic Dictionary, to retrieve a new paper, etc.

So much important work is being done in this kind of writing environment. You're dedicating time to equipping your kids to transfer, rather, *translate* speech to print.

As you equip your kids by working with increasingly complex sentences, using mentor sentences that have increasingly complex structures (using commas separating words in lists, sentences with appositives, sentences with conjunctions, sentences with dialogue, compound sentences, etc.---As your students are experimenting with sentence writing, you're ALSO promoting phoneme/grapheme correspondences—that's phonics. Your instruction is firing on all cylinders.

Your students will soon be sufficiently equipped to skillfully navigate our code-based language while also skillfully expressing their ideas in print because they'll understand the architecture and grammar with which they're building sentences and will progress into writing paragraphs, essays, stories, reports, and more.

If you'd like to purchase the Dynamic Dictionary materials and instructions I recommend, email me, Dr. Christina Williams, at christy@bookbums.com. I'll provide all the links and videos you need to get started. Speaking of videos, I've included a video link, via YouTube, in the show notes.

OUTRO-

Hey, everyone. We hope you've enjoyed this episode of *On Your Way with Dr. Christina Williams*. We'd love some feedback. Give us a "thumbs up" if you liked what you heard. Tell us, in the comments, what worked and please share what we could do to make these podcasts even better.

If you appreciate what we're doing, and you believe it may benefit you and your soon-to-be readers, subscribe to our weekly newsletter at www.bookbums.com/blog

Finally, the greatest compliment for us is for you to share our content with others.

We have a mission to get kids reading— and to make it *fast* and **FUN!**

Video Links:

https://youtu.be/3AWP_wrQgfY

<https://youtu.be/70cHupB6xok>

Pocket Chart

<https://amzn.to/4cmqxBo>

Index cards

<https://amzn.to/4juOt89>

Sharpie Markers

<https://amzn.to/3XTT3o5>

Canvas Apron with Two Pockets

<https://amzn.to/4cFdFGl>

Images:

First week of school

End of school year

