

FROM THE AUTHOR OF SUPER SENTENCES & PERFECT PARAGRAPHS

ACE THE WRITING TEST

TIPS FOR TEACHING WRITING IN GRADES 3 TO 8



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*A Sneak Peek at
Super Sentences &
Perfect Paragraphs*

By Scholastic Author & National Board Teacher

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How to Ace the State Writing Test

by Mack Lewis ♦ www.mackowiecki.com



The last time I checked, only about half of the nation's 4th and 5th graders were passing a standardized test in writing. Given the way writing

instruction is delivered in many classrooms, this low figure comes as no surprise to most elementary school teachers. Of course, we all know the State Writing Test doesn't exactly represent the apex of quality writing. Many educators believe the State Test is something merely to be endured, while others believe it drives practical instruction in the classroom. Regardless of teacher opinion, we're all still faced with the task of preparing our students for the realities of the standardized writing test.

Writing has long been a difficult subject to teach. Many teachers merely assign a topic, and then grow frustrated with the peppering of stray punctuation and the lack of structure. Other teachers devote hours to one-on-one conferencing, but find the classroom management required exhausts them to the edge of burn-out. Many teachers are adept at teaching the writing process—but they're often disappointed by poor mechanics, sloppy editing, and mundane content. But wait! There's hope. Despite these common complaints, your students *can* succeed on the State Writing Exam. In the process, they *can* develop skills applicable to the "real" writing they do long after the test has been mailed. And best of all, they *can* have fun doing it.

Does your writing instruction suffer from any of these ailments?

"One-on-one conferencing is time-consuming and the classroom management necessary to make it work is taxing. I soon burn-out on teaching writing."

"I'm adept at teaching the writing process, but my students still have difficulty generating quality content. What's more, they're often sloppy editors."

"I use the textbook and worksheets to teach grammar, but my students often don't apply what they've learned to 'real' writing."

"While students may spell "sorbefacient" correctly on a spelling test, when it comes time to write an essay, they use only basic vocabulary and they often misspell simple words."

"Although I work hard teaching writing, not enough of my students pass the State Writing Exam."

"Sure, I'd like my students to write every day, but how will I ever keep up with all that grading?"

Here are five tips from my book *Super Sentences & Perfect Paragraphs* designed to help your students pass standardized writing tests while giving them the tools necessary to write "for real."

Steps to Success:

Make no mistake—this article is meant to promote *Super Sentences & Perfect Paragraphs*. But whether you try my approach or design your own program, these tips will help your students write “Out-of-this-World sentences,” quality paragraphs, and well-structured essays.

Focus on the sentence. An innate grasp of basic sentence structure is to writing what knowing the multiplication facts is to algebra. It takes a lot of drill and practice for elementary students to develop automaticity with the multiplication tables, even more so for them to develop automaticity with the concept of a sentence, but that “natural feel” for the sentence is essential for success on any writing exam. To get it, students need engaging practice with the individual sentence in addition to their regular writing projects. The daily, 15-minute sentence activity in *Super Sentences & Perfect Paragraphs* builds sentence automaticity without limiting their individual creativity.

Write every day. If you’re students are engaging in structured writing activities only once in a blue moon, they will be unprepared for the Standardized Writing Exam. They need to be writing every day. Daily work with the individual sentence and weekly work with the individual paragraph lead kids to success on more significant

projects. Journal writing, “free” writing, cross-curricular writing, and creative writing activities all have their place, but it’s the daily and weekly writing lessons that teach the structure essential to success on not only the State Exam, but all writing tasks.

Emphasize authenticity. While the sentences in the traditional textbook lessons may thoroughly cover punctuation and sentence structure, posting and discussing student-created sentences is far more authentic and effective. This is at the core of the *Super Sentence* approach. Students adopt the phrase “Learn from your mistakes” when posting and discussing their work. It helps break down their inhibitions, makes grammar more intrinsic, and prepares them for the State Exam in a way the text books cannot. Don’t be afraid to toss aside the textbook!



Use templates to craft rough drafts. Story webs have traditionally been used for brainstorming or mapping during the “pre-write” stage, but they’re even more effective as templates or scaffolds with which to craft rough drafts. Instead of writing an idea or a concept in the box or bubble, students should be taught to write a single complete sentence. “One sentence per box” should become a mantra for elementary writing instruction. This furthers the student’s sense of the sentence and helps his or her story flow as, for example, he or she differentiates between topic sentences, detail sentences, and transitions. It also facilitates quality editing and improves word choice and creative phrasing. The templates in *Super Sentences & Perfect Paragraphs* are designed to match traditionally-accepted paragraph



structures, yet they allow for students to alter them to meet their own creative needs.

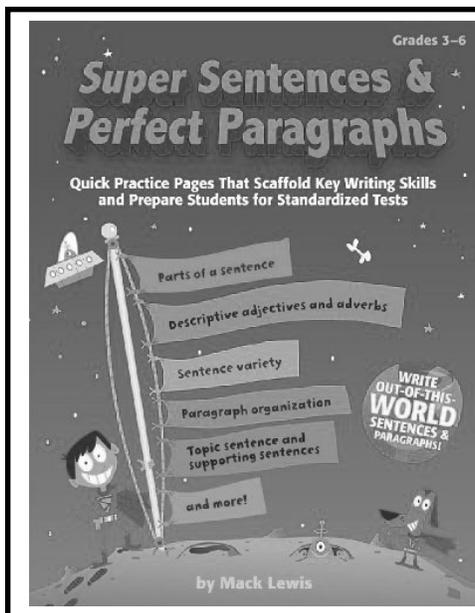
Transition to student-created scaffolds. Most standardized assessments don't allow teachers to distribute forms such as templates or story webs. Therefore it is important that the teacher slowly transition students from pre-printed templates to self-created ones. Once my students are comfortable with using pre-printed templates, such as the "Project Template" in *Super Sentences and Perfect Paragraphs*, I have them draw their own template on 12 x 18" white construction paper and write their rough draft there.



The template doubles as a writing folder. By the time the State's standardized writing test comes around, they've already done this at

least once, so their normal writing "process" includes creating their own templates. This process of using a scaffold, I contend, is the most significant element to improved success on the writing exam.

Of course, there's no replacement for an enthusiastic teacher. Whether you use *Super Sentences* or merely try to embed these ideas into your own instruction, given practice you'll not only find the teaching of writing easier, but more fun, too. If you'd like more help, check out *Super Sentences and Perfect Paragraphs* at www.SuperSentences.com. It gives students daily writing practice, the ability to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. It gives them an innate grasp of a variety of sentence structures and grammatical tools. It gives them consistent practice in paragraph structure while allowing creative freedom. And it gives them the structural tools to succeed at any writing task—including those troublesome high-stakes exams. It's straight-forward, and although just 96 easy-to-use pages, it's an entire writing program in itself. Thanks!



Give Young Writers the Tools to Soar!

Super Sentences & Perfect Paragraphs
Quick Practice Pages That Scaffold Key Writing Skills
And Prepare Students For State Tests

By National Board Certified Teacher and Scholastic
Author Mack Lewis

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