

Why Can't Suzie Write?

**Designing a Writing Program
for At-Risk Students:
5 Steps That Make a Difference**

by Dona Young



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If you asked your students what a sentence is, how would they respond?



Would some say . . .

- **A sentence expresses a thought.**
- **A sentence is an idea.**
- **A sentence gives information.**



How many would say . . .

- **A sentence has a *subject* and a *verb* and expresses a *complete thought*.**



- In fact, how many could identify the *subject* and *verb* of a sentence?

The only way to find out for sure is to ask,
and you may be surprised by the results.



Step 1: Become an *Incurable* Researcher

Do Action Research:

- **Quantitative Research:**
Objectively scored assessments and essays
- **Qualitative Research:**
Formal and informal feedback



Action research gives you an accurate gauge of what your students know and, more importantly, what they don't know.



Step 2: Use the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives to identify *learning gaps*.

1. Knowing
2. Comprehending
3. Applying
4. Analyzing
5. Synthesizing
6. Evaluating



Focus on core principles to fill *learning gaps*.

- **Mistakes are not isolated: errors come in patterns.**
- **Start with the sentence core and other principles of grammar for writing.**



Step 3: Embrace Feelings and Beliefs

Ask your students:

What is difficult about writing?

What is your history as a writer?

Why don't you write?



What is difficult about writing?

- **Getting started**
- **Having ideas evaporate before they hit the page**
- **Using grammar and punctuation correctly**
- **Spelling and word usage**
- **Writing an introduction**
- **Being too wordy . . . getting off topic**
- **Writing a conclusion . . . *and the list goes on***



Step 4: Focus on the Process

- Students need to get past the *first and final draft* mentality.
- Students need to *compose freely* and then *edit ruthlessly*.



Step 5: Give Editing Workshops

- More students have *editor's block* than writer's block.



Develop a Plan

Sequence editing workshops from the simple to the complex:

- **The Sentence Core**
- **Punctuation**
- **Verbs: Irregular Verbs**
- **Pronouns: Subjects vs. Objects and Viewpoint**
- **Active Voice**
- **Being Concise**
- **Parallel Structure**



Two Class Profiles

Indiana University Northwest

	<u>Pretest</u>	<u>Posttest</u>	<u>Improvement</u>
Group 1			
AVERAGE (10 students)	36	64	28 pts. / 74%
Group 2			
AVERAGE (14 students)	44	70	26 pts. / 60%



Writing from the Core

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