

THE POWER OF EXTREME WRITING

*How do I help my students become
eager and fluent writers?*

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What is Extreme Writing?.....	1
What Does Extreme Writing Look Like In the Classroom?.....	8
How Do I Assess Extreme Writing?.....	13
What Inspirations Can I Use?.....	16
What Other Sources of Inspiration Are There?.....	30
How Do I Signal It's Time for Extreme Writing?.....	34
Encore	37
References	44
About the Author	46

What is Extreme Writing?

Why do we need an all-new look at journaling and writing? I became aware of how much schools were neglecting the element of fluency, and I wanted to create consistent, long-term excitement about writing that would help students build that fluency. Extreme Writing is an intermittent, 20-minutes a day, 10-days in a row act of writing that students actually look forward to and want more of. It's fun, it's fast, and it works. How many times do your students actually ask for more writing? Extreme Writing is the first step in the right direction to making that happen.

Why is Extreme Writing important?

With regard to the anchor ELA standards and their emphasis on writing proficiency, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) document states, "To meet these goals, students must devote significant time and effort to writing, producing numerous pieces over short and extended time frames throughout the year" (CCSSI, 2010). However, many teachers have difficulty getting their students to write anything at all, especially if students know their efforts will be graded. They may procrastinate, write skimpy drafts, write the minimum required, or even not write at all. Extreme Writing gives you a way to cultivate a writing culture that

requires minimal classroom time and builds both fluency and enthusiasm for a skill that is critical to academic success.

You can only improve at something if you practice it often. Many athletes remark that they receive accolades for their great reflexes, top speed, and good understanding of game flow. What they don't mention is all of the practice, practice, practice that's required to be great. The research behind Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* (2011) also stresses that intelligence and ambition are not enough—10,000 hours of work and practice are what produce results in the form of mastery. Unfortunately, we can't grant our students those 10,000 hours of exposure in the classroom, but we can come close and mimic the results with Extreme Writing.

The three skills students must have to be successful writers are code, comprehensibility, and fluency.

- **Code** refers to an understanding of the code of English, including elements such as reading left to right and top to bottom, along with spaces between words, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and paragraph formation. All of these together convey the specific code used to represent English.
- **Comprehensibility** is the ability to write comprehensibly, which includes being able to write with clarity (so a reader can understand) and in the conventional forms of English (e.g., comparison, argument, description, essay, recipe, newspaper report, review)

- **Fluency** is the ability to perform the act of writing quickly. This is the neglected aspect of writing that Extreme Writing can help address.

When students arrive in high school, they may be facing eight subjects, each with its own homework assignments and daunting list of vocabulary to master. For example, in a high school biology text, there can be dozens of potentially unfamiliar words, such as *organelles*, *plantae*, *autotropic*, *eukaryotic*, *chloroplast*, and *mitochondria*. It has been said that high school is a giant vocabulary lesson consisting of the words for multiple disciplines. Classroom and homework assignments must be completed quickly for each discipline.

Picture two students; let's call them Sylvia and Jon. Imagine they are equally clever and equally good at the code of English. Now imagine that they are able to write with equal levels of comprehensibility . . . but Sylvia has twice the fluency of Jon. This means that Sylvia's two hours of homework would take Jon four hours, which is a recipe for a lower grade not because Jon is less smart, able, careful, or hard working but simply because he is slower, less fluent, and therefore less productive.

Indeed, choosing a boy (Jon) and a girl (Sylvia) is more than an example. The 2007 National Writing Assessment used a 100-point scale. Girls in 12th grade averaged scores that were 20 points higher than boys. If a typical boy had 60 points, then a typical girl would have 80 (Salahu-Din, 2008).