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# Professional Resources

MARCELLE M. HADDIX

## The Dynamics of Writing Instruction: A Structured Process Approach for Middle and High School

Peter Smagorinsky, Larry R. Johannessen, Elizabeth A. Kahn, & Thomas M. McCann

*Reviewed by Stephanie M. Bennett Mississippi State University*

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practice & Council of Chief State School Officials, 2010) emphasizes the importance of academic writing, which includes argumentative, informative/explanatory, and narrative (both fictional and real) writing. As a literacy teacher educator, a segment of my content-area literacy course focuses on introducing the students to best practice in writing instruction, including using argumentative, informational, and narrative writing in the content-area classroom. At the start of the semester, I had a conversation with my middle level (grades 4–8) preservice teachers about their experiences with writing instruction in the K–12 schools. Many of the preservice teachers revealed that they were introduced to a formulaic writing approach, with a focus on the five-paragraph essay and traditional grammar. In addition, some students reported seeing the same instruction in their field experiences.

Because of this, I wanted to introduce my students to an alternative approach to writing instruction. As I perused the books on my bookshelf, I came across Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann's *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction: A Structured Process Approach for Middle and High School* (2010), which outlines a task-related, student-centered approach to teaching writing instruction.

While this text is designed for grades 7–12, I had high hopes that it would be applicable to my middle level (grades 4–8) preservice teachers as well. This text exceeded my expectations, and I found I could apply many of the concepts from the text to an upper elementary setting as well.

In their introduction, Smagorinsky, Johannessen, Kahn, and McCann (2010) introduce the reader to the structured process approach to writing—a student-centered writing pedagogy developed by George Hillocks. According to Smagorinsky et al. (2010), the “Hillocksian tradition is founded on the idea that kids learn well when actively engaged with things that interest them” (p. xix). In this approach, the teacher teaches a process approach to writing in structured format.

In the first chapter, Smagorinsky et al. (2010) describe eight writing instruction approaches designed to have the reader reflect on the reader's own beliefs about writing instruction. Smagorinsky et al. (2010) instruct the reader to organize the reader's beliefs in the matrix at the end of the chapter. Once the matrix is completed, they encourage the reader to create the reader's own writing instruction scenario as a means to “embody a theory of writing” and a way to “focus on depicting you as a teacher whose instruction is consistent and coherent” (p. 16). As a culminating activity, they provide a series of reflection questions, which guide the reader through the creation of a writing instruction vision.

In chapter two, Smagorinsky et al. (2010) chronicle the general principles of the structured writing approach, which include students working toward a specific writing goal, in a classroom where the teacher facilitates their learning, and the students actively discuss and share their work with each other. Smagorinsky et al. (2010) also outline an example of a structured writing activity in which students compare and contrast two restaurant menus. The chapter concludes with a set of writing task reflection questions, which serves as a bridge from the theory chapters to theory-into-practice chapters.



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In chapters three through eight, Smagorinsky et al. (2010) provide step-by-step instructions on how to teach a particular genre (e.g., fictional narratives, personal experience narratives, argumentative essays, comparison and contrast essays, extended definition essays, and research papers). Each chapter also includes student work samples. Smagorinsky et al. (2010) also furnish an extension activity, an explanation as to why the approach just outlined is a structured process approach, and reflective questions. Additionally, in chapter six, the authors provide a rubric for evaluating comparison and contrasting essays. Rubrics are not included in the other five chapters on a specific structured writing approach. However, after studying the rubric provided, it appears it could easily be modified for other types of structured writing.

The final chapter focuses on creating a writing curriculum. In this chapter, Smagorinsky et al. (2010) detail their writing instruction guiding principles, which include a focus on content-area integration, writing across the curriculum, an emphasis on teaching the learning process, multiple means of access, and a structured sequence of activities in the classroom. To help the reader visualize how this approach can be incorporated into classroom instruction, Smagorinsky et al. (2010) provide a framework of possible conceptual units for a writing curriculum in

grades 7–12. Each unit is 4–6 weeks long, is focused on a particular theme, genre, archetype, literary period, a movement, a region or an author. Possible texts are also included as well as questions to introduce the unit of study.

After rereading this text, I introduced it to my middle level (grades 4–8) preservice teachers. Like me, they immediately saw how this text can be utilized in an upper elementary through high school classroom. *The Dynamics of Writing Instruction: A Structured Process Approach for Middle and High School* promises to be an exemplar go-to reference for upper elementary, middle, and high school teachers. The plethora of examples, detailed steps in teaching each genre, and extension activities provide a much-needed break away from the typical formulaic writing taught in schools.

#### Reference Not From the Reviewed Text

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). *Common Core State Standards*. Washington, DC: Authors.

#### Text Reference

Smagorinsky, P., Johannessen, L. R., Kahn, E. A., & McCann, T. M. (2010). *The dynamics of writing instruction: A structured process approach for middle and high school*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.