

Teaching Writing in Elementary School and Middle School

Teaching Beginning Writers and Struggling Writers

How to Grade Writing and Classroom Work FAST and FAIRLY Across the Curriculum Using the Pile Method

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How to Grade Writing and Classroom Work FAST and FAIRLY Across the Curriculum Using the Pile Method

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1. Holding Students Accountable for Using Proper Writing Skills in Daily Writing Across the Curriculum

Every time students pick up a pencil or type on a keypad, they are writing. So how important is the occasional writing grade that you give your students if your students spend the rest of their time writing carelessly? That's why I use the term "**Holding Students Accountable for Using Proper Writing Skills in Daily Writing Across the Curriculum.**"

There are two things in particular that I hold students accountable for:

1. Writing skills, techniques, strategies, and concepts that I have taught them.
2. Writing skills, techniques, strategies, and concepts that they have certainly been taught multiple times over the years.

That is what we are constantly building on.

Although giving grades is very important, I don't grade every single piece of paper. I don't think that is an effective way to teach writing. The reality is that I want my students to care more about their writing than I do. You don't make that happen by giving grades. And although it does take a while, eventually, my students do care more than I care.

I have ten ways that I hold my students accountable for using proper writing skills:

1. The Timed Writing System
2. Read It to At Least One Other Person
3. **The Pile Method and Holistic Scoring**
4. RCAs: Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets
5. Grades
6. Feedback
7. Teaching Writing by Walking Around
8. Fostering Student Ownership of Writing
9. Publishing
10. Always Be Teaching Writing

I have written about most of these ten ways elsewhere, so I won't cover the other nine here. Our purpose here is to discuss just one of them: The Pile Method and Holistic Scoring.

However, I will say this: The result of all of these systems is that students know that they are going to be held accountable, so they pay attention to the lessons, they pay attention to the feedback, and

they put out constant effort. The result is that my students' writing improves to the level that they say, "I can't even read what I was writing before!" This is when they truly start to care about and take pride in their writing. This is when they develop a real interest in writing well.

Please note that the foundation and framework for everything I do in teaching writing is **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay**. If you teach beginning writers or struggling writers and you want to get better results faster, it is the missing piece of the puzzle that makes teaching writing easy! I always say that **how** you teach writing is more important than **what** you teach about writing. Well, **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** is a system and methodology of both **how** and **what** that gets results fast! It's the fastest, most effective way to teach students organized multi-paragraph writing... Guaranteed! Be sure to see if it's right for you!

2. The Pile Method for Grading Writing and Classroom Work Fast

Welcome to the Pile Method! The Pile Method is a holistic scoring system that helps teachers grade lots of papers fast. What is a holistic scoring system? Well, a holistic score treats a piece of work as a whole, and the score expresses an overall impression of the piece work. Most state and district writing assessments are scored using a holistic scoring system. Regardless of whether the writing assessment uses a Six Traits rubric or a Common Core rubric, the score is a holistic score.

Writing assessments use holistic scoring systems for two reasons:

1. They are an effective use of time and resources.
2. They are systematic, objective, reliable, and accurate.

Teachers may want to use a holistic scoring system for the same two reasons.

3. Classroom Writing Across the Curriculum vs. Writing-Assessment Writing

Teachers can download tons of state writing-assessment rubrics and other state writing-assessment scoring materials both [here](#) and [here](#). Although these testing resources are extremely helpful and valuable in many ways, they don't really help teachers score their students' writing across the curriculum.

Writing across the curriculum is any time students pick up a pencil or type on a keypad. This means comprehension questions, book reports, science experiment reports, field trip slips, short answers, journal writing, learning logs, and of course, essays and reports—and more.

Traditionally, on writing assessments, students write about what is already in their brain—i.e., their experiences, their opinions, and their imaginative story ideas. They are not writing to learn anything. Is that how your students write in your classroom? In this modern age of the Common Core, my students rarely pick up a pencil if the goal is not to learn something. Keep in mind that we learn about things by writing about things. In the classroom, I try to blend teaching writing with teaching content as much as possible.

And one final note: In the classroom, *assessment* is really part assessment and part teaching. In other words, we use assessment to (1) support our report card grades and (2) to teach. Most classroom writing is different from writing-assessment writing because when teachers have their students write across the curriculum, their primary goal is rarely to assess writing, but instead to teach both writing and subject content.

4. The Pile Method: An Especially Valuable Tool for Teachers Who...

To be clear, the Pile Method is just one tool that I use for grading papers, but it is a valuable tool. It's an especially valuable tool for teachers who fall into two categories:

1. **Teachers Who Are Not Grading Enough Papers:** When teachers don't grade enough papers, their students may not be doing their best work. A grade is concrete feedback, and students need concrete feedback. A grade can say what words alone cannot say.
2. **Teachers Who Need to Give Grades More Consistently Throughout the Semester:** In everything that they do, we caution our students and plead with our students not to wait until the last minute. However, when it comes to grading our students' work, teachers often wait until the weeks right before report card time to get many of the grades that they need to get. When that's the case, it's too late to use the grades and the assessments as a teaching tool. Put simply, when teachers procrastinate and then binge grade, they waste one of their most valuable teaching and feedback tools.

5. "This Grade Lets Me Know That I Need To Work Harder"

Grading is a complex topic that is composed of many complex topics—too many to cover here. However, I would be remiss if I did not address the topic at all. What I have to say here about grades and grading can be summed up in a single sentence that a student once said to me: "This grade lets me know that I need to work harder." Keep that sentence in mind as you learn about the Pile Method.

Do you need to get results teaching writing?

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So, what motivates your students to do their best work? Grades are certainly a part of the puzzle. However, I've been in classrooms where I didn't need to give lots of grades to get students to do their best work, and I've been in classrooms where I did.

Students need feedback, and grades are a feedback tool. I've noticed over the years that five things affect how grades motivate students: 1) grade level, 2) achievement level, 3) student/teacher relationship, 4) classroom composition/academic ability grouping, and 5) teacher skill and judgment in grading.

Grading papers is always a tradeoff in time. What could you be doing for your classroom if you weren't grading papers?

1. You could be preparing for and creating interesting assignments.
2. You could be preparing for and setting up for activities.
3. You could be sprucing up your classroom to make it a more inviting and engaging learning environment.
4. You could be walking around and keeping an ever-watchful eye on your students, which would let you teach and provide feedback to each student in the moment.
5. You could be performing other important administrative tasks.

Like many teachers, I have an arsenal of tools and tricks to hold students accountable and provide feedback. Assigning grades is one of them. When I am grading papers, I am doing it because I am confident that it will send a feedback message that motivates students. It's far easier to teach motivated students than unmotivated students. I don't grade papers just to be busy—i.e., busy work.

Because I want to use my time wisely, I am always trying to figure out if I am over-grading or under-grading. Here is an example of a time when I figured out that I had been under-grading. When I moved from teaching third grade to sixth grade, things were not going so well at first. Looking for a solution, I decided that I would try grading substantially more work. Imagine my surprise when one student looked at his low score and said, "This grade lets me know that I need to work harder."

When you discover that you need to be giving lots more grades, the Pile Method will be your most valuable tool. Sometimes students need lots of grades (not words or warnings) to set the standard.

6. Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum and the Pile Method

The most famous holistic scoring models that I am aware of were created with writing in mind. However, I try to teach writing across the curriculum as much as possible, and most of my students' writing is related to what they are learning across the curriculum.

Point being: Teachers can certainly use the Pile Method and holistic scoring to assess writing; however, across the curriculum, we must separate our writing grades from our content grades. Across the curriculum, the division looks something like this:

1. Writing: The Use of the Six Traits, etc.
2. Content/Correctness: Demonstrates Understanding and Knowledge.

Later, we will take a closer look at this important division. However, as we move forward, keep an open mind and consider how you may be able to use the Pile Method in your classroom. You may find that it is helpful for many different kinds of assignments, including math worksheets, homework, etc. You can certainly use it on anything that is ✓- ✓ ✓+.

7. Holistic Scoring in the Classroom vs. Holistic Scoring on a Writing Assessment

Once again, on most writing assessments, students write about what is already in their brain—i.e., their experiences, their opinions, and their imaginative story ideas. In this age of Common Core, teachers are not using their classroom time wisely if that's what their students are primarily writing about.

Students should be writing about what they are learning about in the classroom. Although teachers can use a generic rubric to guide them in the Pile Method, a generic rubric does not reflect the specifics of what students have learned in the classroom. I like to hold my students accountable for the specifics of what I have taught them.

As you will see, my criteria are based on my expectations. I hold my students accountable for learning and using what I have taught them, and of course, that is always in the context of state standards and grade-level requirements. I say this so that teachers don't use an oversimplified Pile Method. I encourage teachers to use deep and thoughtful thinking when giving grades, and you will learn how to do that here.

8. What Kinds of Assignments Do The Pile Method and Holistic Scoring Work On?

The Pile Method and holistic scoring work best with certain types of student work. In particular, the Pile Method and holistic scoring work well with multi-paragraph essay writing. This is why most state and district writing assessments use holistic scoring.

However, teachers can also use the Pile Method and holistic scoring for various types of assignments across the curriculum. Ideally, the assignment should fall into at least one of these categories:

1. Work where students communicate a general understanding or a personal interpretation: e.g., basic reports, general or personal essays, narrative stories, summaries, literary analysis, response to literature, etc.
2. Work where students must put forth effort, follow directions, do their best work, and use their time wisely. In other words, this is work where the work habits largely contribute to the quality of the work or work where teachers want to assess the work habits that went into the work.

Example 1: If the work is unfinished, the student should have worked faster or more diligently or managed his or her time better.

Example 2: If the work contains lots of careless errors, it reveals careless work and poor effort.

3. Work where students have the same opportunity to succeed: e.g., a science experiment report, a book report, open-book work, etc.
4. Reflective work, journal writing, learning log work.

The Pile Method does not work well with assignments where the answers fall rigidly into the categories of RIGHT or WRONG. As a rule, the Pile Method is not appropriate for short-answer comprehension questions and fill-in-the-blank work—but truthfully, if teachers need to get lots of grades fast, they can still make it work by focusing on the work habits that went into creating the work.

9. Holistic Scoring and Traits

A holistic score treats a piece of work as a whole and expresses an overall impression of the piece of work. Even though the piece of work is assessed as a whole, scorers must generate that score by considering the parts in the form of criteria and traits.

Illustrating this point is how the Six Traits of Writing is often used holistically on state and district writing assessments. The Pile Method is also a holistic way to score, and we can combine it with the Six Traits.

10. The Pile Method: Making Piles by Comparison

In case you hadn't figured it out, with the Pile Method, we holistically score our students' work by placing it into piles. There are no rules for how many piles you create because it is the quality of the work in relation to your expectations that creates the piles. I aim for five piles:

	Pile 1	Pile 2	Pile 3	Pile 4	Pile 5
Example 1	F	D	C	B	A
Example 2	C-	C	B	A-	A+
Example 3	D+	C	B-	B	
Example 4		Fix or Inc.	✓-	✓	✓+

What makes the Pile Method so fast and effective is that it uses comparison as a tool. In fact, with the Pile Method, we use two types of comparison: 1) Comparison with Teacher Expectations, and 2) Comparison Between Student Work. Let's unpack each of these.

1. Comparison with Teacher Expectations: When teachers give assignments, they have expectations of how the work will look. Sometimes our students exceed our expectations, and sometimes they don't. Every grade we give takes our expectations into account. Teachers give grades in the context of and in comparison with their expectations. But where do our expectations come from? Here are four important influences on teacher expectations:

- a. **State and District Grade-Level Standards and Requirements:** Teachers give grades in the context of grade-level standards and requirements. Regardless of how a teacher grades, these grade-level standards and requirements are taken into account.
- b. **Time:** Teachers' expectations are always different when the class spends 20 minutes learning information and working compared to 40 minutes. The more class time we give to a topic or assignment, the higher our expectations will be.
- c. **A History of Work:** Teachers don't assign grades in a vacuum. Teachers know what their students have done in the past and have an idea of what they are capable of. As a rule, teachers want their students to improve upon their previous work. They also have a good idea of when students have done their best work and when they haven't.
- d. **Traits and Criteria: Formal or Informal:** Teachers constantly evaluate things in the classroom using traits and criteria without even thinking about it: e.g., **Trait: Noise:** "It's too noisy in here." Behind every expectation, critique, and criterion is a trait.

The easy way to think of traits is that they are nouns. *Beauty* is a trait. *Beautiful* is not a trait.

When we think that something is good or bad, whether we know it or not, we are evaluating it using traits and criteria.

- **Critique:** It's messy. **Trait:** Neatness
- **Critique:** It's confusing. **Trait:** Clearness/Clarity

2. Comparison Between Student Work: If we look at two papers and one is excellent in comparison to the other, we know which one gets the higher grade. This kind of comparison is common sense and a reality of life.

Our comparisons with the Pile Method are very fast because we use just one question: Is it better, worse, or equal? As we ask that question, we place our students' work into piles.

Remember: The Pile Method is holistic scoring. We place the work into piles by looking at each piece of work as a whole, and we score it based on the overall impression it makes. The overall impression each paper makes with the Pile Method is always based on traits, criteria, expectations, and comparison.

Please Note: Don't think of this as pitting students against each other or even as grading on a curve. The teacher is in control of the piles. Everyone can get an A or an F if the work is equally good or bad. In reality, comparison and piles are one of the most objective ways to evaluate students fairly. It's difficult to argue against a fair comparison.

11. Rounds

When teachers give grades, they have an obligation to get it right. But the reality is that I could fill many pages with quotes about how often teachers get it wrong. Teachers get it wrong for many different reasons and because of many strange biases.

Although the Pile Method and holistic scoring are fast, I am not suggesting that we be careless. Let's make sure that we get it right, and it may take a couple of quick rounds to get it right.

12. Piles and Traits

When evaluators give a holistic score, they consider traits. So, as we use the Pile Method, we should consider the traits and criteria that are guiding our process. This shouldn't be difficult to do because the traits and criteria reflect what we have taught our students. Furthermore, the traits and criteria reflect what we want them to do—i.e., our expectations.

On many assignments, teachers may only want to think about the Six Traits. However, across the curriculum, teachers may want to consider other traits and criteria, including assignment-specific traits and criteria. Furthermore, teachers may want to consider traits and criteria based on the specific skills that they want to see their students use.

Here are two valuable resources that will help teachers think about and consider the writing skills, traits, and criteria that they are teaching, along with what they want to teach:

1. [The Definitive List of Writing and Grammar Skills, Strategies, Concepts, Categories, and Models](#)
2. [Teaching Writing with The Six Traits and The Common Core Traits](#)

Later, I present a few trait-based holistic scoring sheets to serve as examples.

13. Round 1: Piles

Round one consists of placing our students' work into piles. It's just that simple! Once again, we use comparison, traits, and criteria to place the work into piles. Here are three ways teachers can approach Round 1:

1. First: Create Piles Then: Consider Traits	2. First: Consider Traits Then: Create Piles	3. Consider Traits and Create Piles at the Same Time
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14. Round 2: Verification

Pick a representative anchor paper for each score (pile) and place it on top of the corresponding pile. Examine and compare your anchor papers. Do you like what you see? Do they reflect the gradation of student work and an effective range of scores? If you like what you see, it is time to verify the validity of each pile.

Choose a pile to work with. Pick up the pile and place the anchor paper from that pile back where the pile was. Now you have a pile of papers in your hands to work with, and all of your anchor papers are still in place.

Now, one by one compare each paper in your pile against your anchor papers, especially the anchor paper for the pile you are working on. Remember that each paper will be strong in some traits and

weak in other traits; however, our goal is to evaluate each paper as a whole. What is our overall impression of the piece of work? Does it match our overall impression of our anchor paper?

Once you have verified your piles, move on to step three.

15. Round 3a: Grades

Assign grades in line with your piles. Teachers should remember that state and district writing assessments don't provide any additional feedback—just a single holistic score. Furthermore, if students agree that the score is accurate (which it is), this score is all the feedback that many students need to improve the effort they put into their writing and their work. This single score holds students accountable—and it's fast.

16. Round 3b: Feedback

Even though the Pile Method is a holistic scoring model, teachers may want to provide additional feedback. Teachers have three basic ways to provide feedback, and teachers can use these three ways in combination.

1. **Marking Up:** Teachers can circle misspelled words or add a question mark to a confusing section. Teachers can cross out parts or added brackets to a section with a comment. They can draw lines and arrows. Teachers can add a mark for anything that draws their attention and reflects the score the paper received.
2. **Commenting:** Teachers can add a comment for anything that draws their attention and reflects the score the paper received: e.g., Excellent support and logic! Confusing. This made me smile! You made a strong case! Where are the fun words? Easy to read! It flows! Nice!
3. **Traits and More Scores:** Our holistic scores are based on an analysis of traits. Put simply, we must consider traits consciously or otherwise to place them into piles. So if we considered Six Traits to place the papers into piles, it only makes sense that we could spend some extra time and assign formal or informal (e.g., -, +) scores to each of the Six Traits. On the other hand, we may wish to assign these additional scores to only the most impactful categories that most strongly influenced the holistic score.

17. Assessment Sheets: Communicating Traits, Criteria, and Expectations

I provide many free resources that discuss how I teach writing across the curriculum. Here are just three of them:

1. [Nine Strategies for Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum](#)
2. [How to Create Scaffolded, Student-Owned Writing Assignments with Your Students to Teach Writing Across the Curriculum](#)
3. RCAs: Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets (RCAs)

In short, when my students pick up a pencil, they have a pretty good idea of what I expect from them. I'm persistent in my expectations, and I consistently reiterate them. So, when I give a holistic score, my students will look at their papers and agree.

Across the curriculum, I may address my expectations for the assignment as I teach the content; I certainly make my expectations for the assignment clear when I give the assignment; I may speak to certain expectations as students work, especially if some students are off track.

But even after all that, I try not to give a holistic score without a few traits attached. I may or may not add comments, and I may or may not add additional scores, including ✓- ✓ ✓+ to the traits; however, I do want my students to view their holistic score in the context of traits. I want them to be able to reflect on the holistic score in the context of traits or criteria.

For this reason, I usually write the score on an Assessment Sheet. Here are two Six-Trait Assessment Sheets that I have used.

Paper:			
1. Ideas/Content	✓-	✓	✓+
2. Organization	✓-	✓	✓+
3. Sentence Fluency	✓-	✓	✓+
4. Word Choice	✓-	✓	✓+
5. Conventions	✓-	✓	✓+
6. Voice	✓-	✓	✓+
7. Presentation	✓-	✓	✓+
Score:			

Paper:	
1. Ideas/Content	
2. Organization	
3. Sentence Fluency	
4. Word Choice	
5. Conventions	
6. Voice	
7. Presentation	
Score:	

Do you teach elementary school writing or struggling middle school writers?

If so, be sure to check out

Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay!

18. The Pile Method: A Time and a Place and Building on It

When teachers don't grade enough papers, their students may not be doing their best work. The Pile Method is a tool that can help teachers grade paper accurately, fairly, and quickly. Having said that, the Pile Method is a specialized tool. It works on certain kinds of assignments. The good news is that it works on most assignments where teachers want to evaluate if their students have used their time wisely, put out effort, and followed directions—i.e., work habits. It also works on general essay writing, narrative-story writing, and reflective journal or learning-log writing.

Furthermore, it's a tool that you can build on and adapt to suit your needs. Teachers just need to figure out which traits and criteria they want to use to hold their students accountable. Once again, you can do this before you give the assignment or as you create the piles. I have a long list of things that I look for. Of course, that list is based on what I teach my students. What is the assignment you gave? What did you tell your students that you expected? What have you taught your students? That's the foundation of the traits and criteria that you will use when you create your piles. Here is a small list to get you started:

Small Sample of Traits and Criteria			
Neatness	Name and Date	Followed Directions	Completeness
Word Count	Used Time Wisely	Answered the Question	Formatting
Used Sensory Details	Readability/Flow	Paragraphing Style	Persuasiveness
Uses Comparison	Explained a Process	Clearness of Ideas	Clearness of Expression
Demonstrates Understanding	Provides Important Information	Strength and Relevance of Details and Support	Provided Examples from the Text

19. Two Holistic Scores: Using the Pile Method When Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum

We are going to build on everything that we have covered so far. Placing work into piles is always a great place to begin when grading paper. You create an overview of the quality of the work, along with the important traits and criteria that you may want to consider.

When you are teaching writing across the curriculum, it's only fair to separate the **CONTENT** from the **WRITING**. Of course, the quality of the *content* and the quality of the *writing* often go hand in hand, and that's a good thing when it comes to the Pile Method. However, teachers must discern when they don't go hand in hand and grade accurately and fairly.

Once again, teachers often need to grade specifically for correct and incorrect answers. That's not the purpose of the Pile Method. However, it can be used for assigning two holistic scores:

Score 1: Writing: The Use of the Six Traits, etc.

Score 2: Content/Correctness: Demonstrates Understanding and Knowledge.

As we have already discussed and as the following Assessment Sheet shows, we can provide additional comments and scores. Even if the teacher doesn't provide additional comments and scores, I hope you can see that this Assessment Sheet provides valuable feedback for the students.

Writing 1: Grammar, Spelling, Punctuation	1	2	3	4	5
Writing 2: Sentence Structure	1	2	3	4	5
Writing 3: Paragraphing Style, Organization, Logic, Development	1	2	3	4	5
Writing 4: Presentation	1	2	3	4	5
Score: Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Writing Notes:					
Content/Correctness 1: Demonstrates Understanding and Knowledge	1	2	3	4	5
Content/Correctness 2: Followed Directions	1	2	3	4	5
Content/Correctness 3: Completeness, Used Time Wisely	1	2	3	4	5
Content/Correctness 4: Central Ideas, Support, Explanations	1	2	3	4	5
Content/Correctness 5: Facts and Details	1	2	3	4	5
Score: Content/Correctness	1	2	3	4	5
Content/Correctness Notes:					

Important Note on Creating Student Ownership: You may want to have your students reflect on their scores and fill in the rest of the Assessment Sheet. Have your students figure out why they received the score that they received. In short, these Assessment Sheets that have only a holistic score filled in present excellent opportunities to train your students on RCAs and to create student-ownership of writing.

20. The Pile Method: How Many Traits Do You Want to Grade? Which Traits Do You Want to Grade? Answer: Take Charge

There are two basic ways to grade: 1) Correctness and Understanding, and 2) Work Habits. I always encourage teachers to figure out what works for them and their students. There is no one way. But there is success and failure. Try to do what works. When it stops working, change it up and surprise your students.

Sometimes I focus on correct answers, sometimes I focus on work habits, and often I focus on both. Out of Six Traits, I may focus on two or three at a time—and sometimes all six. As you may have guessed, I use many systems and routines, so I am rarely haphazard. But I also use novelty and intermittent rewards. What have you communicated to your students recently that is important to you? Hold them accountable for that to make it stick.

I get all of my students writing! I need my students to be willing to write to teach writing. Sometimes I need to make the point that some students need to write more. Here is how I might do it:

Scale of 1 to 5	
Word Count: 2	Quality and Correctness of Ideas: 4
Holistic Score: 2.5	
Note: The answer is technically correct, but you provide few details and little explanation. Students are graded largely on how well they communicate their understanding, and you need to write more words to do that.	

In short, be sure to grade your students on what you repeatedly teach them and tell them.

21. How Do You Teach Writing?

The short version is that you teach writing with lessons, systems, and routines.

Many teachers believe that the lessons that they teach are the most important part of teaching writing. The reality is that if they are grammar lessons or anything that falls into the category of isolates skill drills, **over five decades of research shows that these lessons don't improve students' writing.**

While lessons do teach something about writing, they don't teach writing. It's the teacher that teaches writing, and teachers need systems and routines to teach writing. I hope you find that the Pile Method serves as a valuable system and routine. If it does, you will certainly want to read all about how to use RCAs: Rubrics, Checklists, and Assessment Sheets.

Once again, if you teach beginning writers or struggling writers and you want to get better results faster, be sure to check out **Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay** on the homepage. The program is a system and a methodology that functions as a foundation and framework for everything you teach in writing across the curriculum. It's fast, it's step-by-step easy, and it's fun! But most important—it makes sense to kids! Your students will start saying, "I can't even read what I was writing before!"

It's the Missing Piece of the Puzzle That
Makes Teaching Writing Easy!
Pattern Based Writing: Quick & Easy Essay