
The genre shuffle

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How writing instructional planning has evolved and why interleaving is winning.

Once upon a time – not that long ago, really – writing instruction lived in a world of isolation. Think back to the heyday of *Writer’s Workshop* (Calkins, 1986). Writing was a separate block, untethered from what students read. You’d walk into a classroom and hear kids crafting personal narratives, fictional stories, an informative how-to ‘book’ or an opinion piece.

In the early 2000s, curriculum companies swept in and codified what was happening in classrooms, rather than following the research. They preserved the separate ‘writing band’ and tossed in explicit grammar instruction – even though there was little to no research showing that grammar taught this way had any positive effect on writing. The result? A writing block that stood apart from reading instruction. While students would write in response to texts read during the reading block, ‘writing’ was primarily viewed as the separate block.

The next generation of curricula has continued to emphasise writing in response to texts, and some even dropped the separate writing block. The challenge with these curricula is that they primarily ‘assign’ writing, rather than lean on the kinds of evidence-based strategies supported by evidence-based practices for how to explicitly teach students to write.

Leslie Laud



Three genre instruction arrives

You may recall how in 2012 – the new writing standards burst on the scene. These standards divided writing into three text types: informative, opinion and narrative. In response, and without research yet to guide us, schools moved to divide the year into three parts and teach each for one third of the year.

However, the drawbacks of this evolution surfaced quickly. Informational and opinion writing share the same expository structure. Why separate them, when toggling between the two – while reinforcing shared structures and clarifying their differences – could actually solidify mastery of both more quickly and efficiently? In fact, recent research shows that teaching one (informative) automatically raises quality in the other (opinion) with no additional instruction ([Harris et al., 2023](#)).

Even more, does opinion writing, particularly ‘writing from head’ (think: ‘favourite pet’ assignments) merit its own unit? With only 24% of the United States ([NAEP, 2012](#)) writing proficiently, should a third of the year or even a month be spent on a type of writing that we have no evidence supports larger ELA proficiency gains? Every minute is precious. When students write an opinion piece about which character in a story they most admire, or whether people in ancient Sparta or Athens had a better life, by drawing on evidence to support their reasons, the added benefits are significant. To write opinion pieces in response to texts, students learn to ‘read with a writer’s eye’. As they gather evidence, they can also pull and use the vocabulary or note and mimic sentence patterns they discovered as they read. They mine and use the texts they read as a launch pad to help them to elevate their own writing, growing their overall literacy skills as they do.

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Enter: Interleaving

This brings us forward to 2025 and to the latest thinking in the field of writing which focuses on connecting reading to writing (Kim & Zagata, 2024), and allows us to touch on current important cognitive science advances such as interleaving (Firth et al., 2021). Interleaving suggests that it's more powerful to revisit genres throughout the year rather than isolate teaching them one-at-a-time, bunched up, dedicating a third of the year to each. Interleaving builds long-term retention. It keeps genre structures fresh and supports the development of transferable writing skills.

Schools such as AIM Academy deeply engage in ongoing research and professional development centred around the science of learning. In particular, AIM (Tina's school) is exploring how both interleaved and blocked instructional strategies can support student retention at various stages of the learning process (Firth et al., 2021). These approaches inform AIM's planning across content areas. We continue to further integrate these evidence-based strategies during our curriculum refinement, specifically when it comes to interleaving writing tasks that repeat and revisit genres over the year.

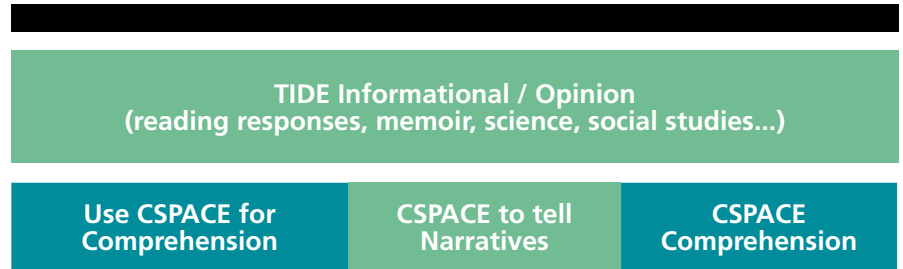
There is time and space for blocked practice, typically when introducing a new genre, and schools working with ThinkSRSD keep this in mind. However, practice must be interleaved, as this approach compels students to engage in critical thinking, which is essential for long-term retention of information.

Even more, the distinction between informative and opinion writing is often unclear and the genres likely blend more

Fall

Winter

Spring



TIDE=Topic, Information, Details/Defend reasons, End
 CSPACE=Characters, Setting, Problem/Purpose, Action, Conclusion/Climax, Emotion
 Figure 1. Suggested teaching schedule by seasons (United States).

often than they do not, with students providing facts in their opinion pieces or wrapping up an informative piece to declare how fascinating it is. Rather than artificially untangling these, we can teach them together, allowing students to naturally draw from each, as great writers always do.

Then, in the winter (US school term), make space for a bunched narrative unit. Let students immerse in storytelling – after all, narrative requires a different structure and benefits from focused practice. You can introduce narrative structure earlier in the year as a tool for reading comprehension and then shift it midyear to teach kids how to craft their own stories.

By spring, students are ready to riff and twist – writing opinion pieces with strong voice, informative pieces with grounded facts, and rich narratives. And the best part? They're not learning these genres in isolation – they're using what they read to inspire what they write.

That's the future of writing instruction. Interleaved. Integrated. Inspired.

This article originally appeared on the [ThinkSRSD](#) and [AIM](#) blogs.

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Blocked

Opinion



Informative



Narrative



Interleaving



Figure 2. Contrast between blocked and interleaved practice.