

Leading writing instruction at your school

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Students' ability to write – and write well – across subjects is important for their success at school. Writing helps students synthesise knowledge, analyse information and develop logical relationships between ideas to express opinions. It supports communication and collaboration, so it's a key skill for academic achievement and life beyond school.

The most effective way to improve student writing is to systematically build teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching the types of writing that align with the curriculum and support them to apply these in their teaching practice.

This practice resource will help school leaders lead an approach to strengthening writing instruction at their schools, using the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s [School Writing Instruction professional learning courses](#).

Introducing the School Writing Instruction professional learning courses

AERO's School Writing Instruction professional learning courses are designed to build knowledge about how best to:

- support the explicit teaching of writing
- plan, design and assess writing in the context of subject areas.

The courses' content can be applied across all subject areas in upper primary and secondary school. It's based on [research conducted by AERO](#) and was developed in consultation with a wide range of experts, including researchers and practitioners from across Australia.

There are 3 courses that, taken together, will give you and your staff the knowledge and tools to strengthen writing instruction at your school. It's important that you and your teachers allocate sufficient time to not only engage with the courses, but also to effectively integrate what you've learned into your teaching practice and subject-specific programs. [Table 1](#) provides a suggested timeline to help guide you through completing the School Writing Instruction professional learning courses, planning and implementation.

The courses comprise:



For school leaders

One specifically for school leaders that will help you prepare for a consistent, multi-subject approach to writing at your school:



Course 1

[Understanding Writing Needs in Your School](#)



For teachers and school leaders

Two for teachers and school leaders to work through together that will help bring consistency and confidence to writing instruction across subject areas:



Course 2

[Understanding Sentence Structure and Grammar](#)



Course 3

[Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices](#)

Before you get started, consider the steps you'll take to ensure efforts to strengthen writing instruction have a positive impact for your students.

To lead a focus on writing instruction at your school:

1. [Decide on a deliberate and structured approach to implementation.](#)
2. [Build an understanding of writing needs in your school.](#)
3. [Identify teachers who'll participate and plan how to support them.](#)
4. [Support teachers to build and embed knowledge into practice.](#)
5. [Allocate time for completing AERO's School Writing Instruction professional learning courses.](#)

1. Decide on a deliberate and structured approach to implementation

AERO has developed a [deliberate and structured approach to implementation](#), based on operationalising key concepts from implementation research, designed to help schools [embed evidence-based practices effectively](#).

AERO's [implementation explainers](#) outline the 4 key components of this deliberate and structured approach. A deliberate and structured approach to implementation:

- is grounded in school context (the 'where')
- focuses on an evidence-based teaching practice (the 'what')
- relies on 4 implementation components (the 'how'), which are:



[Using a staged approach](#)



[Selecting implementation strategies](#)



[Addressing enablers and barriers](#)



[Monitoring implementation outcomes](#)

To learn more about AERO's deliberate and structured approach to implementation, see our explainers and resources on [implementing evidence-based teaching practices](#) in schools.

As a starting point to consider whether a focus on writing is suitable for your schools' context, reflect on the following questions:

- How does strengthening writing align with your school's strategic goals? How might this help you gain buy-in from your teachers?
- To what extent is strengthening student writing seen as a high priority for teachers in your school? What might this mean for a deliberate and structured implementation approach?
- To what extent is explicitly teaching writing across subject areas valued by teachers?
- What leadership capacity and constraints do you need to consider to ensure teachers are supported as they:
 - complete the professional learning courses?
 - embed explicit writing instruction in their classrooms?
- What school structures (e.g., timetabled release, coaching, meetings) can be leveraged to support a deliberate and structured implementation approach?
- Does your school have staff with expertise in writing instruction who could help lead this initiative and/or support teachers with questions and coaching relating to teaching writing?

Once you've considered these questions with your leadership team, consider how a deliberate and structured approach could help you and your teachers use AERO's School Writing Instruction professional learning courses to help implement evidence-based writing instruction practices in your school.

2. Build an understanding of writing needs in your school

AERO's research into writing instruction identified the importance of communicating and discussing an evidence-informed rationale for a focus on writing instruction across subject areas. You can develop your rationale by:

- exploring the [research evidence](#) that [supports this focus](#)
- analysing student writing data that highlights areas of strength and areas of focus
- considering how student writing skills currently impact learning and assessment in a range of subject areas
- analysing current teacher practices and teacher confidence with respect to writing instruction
- considering the possible connections between teacher practices and student writing.

Completing AERO's professional learning course, [Understanding Writing Needs in Your School](#), along with other relevant school leaders, will guide you through these actions before presenting your findings to staff for reflection and discussion.

3. Identify teachers who'll participate and plan how to support them

It can be helpful to start with a smaller group of teachers rather than the whole staff. This can help you refine your approach before supporting a larger group. You might decide to prioritise teachers from a particular year group, subject area or faculty.

Once you've identified which teachers will participate first, you'll need to plan:

- how you'll support them as they complete the professional learning courses
- who in your school is best placed to answer questions and facilitate discussions to support teachers in developing these techniques and practices. A literacy coach or lead is well-placed to take on this role.

You can plan to support your teachers by:

- ensuring the literacy coach or lead (or other identified person) will have time available to plan and provide ongoing support
- developing a schedule for leaders and teachers to progress through the professional learning courses
- preparing resources (e.g., work samples) required for any collaborative activities in advance
- ensuring staff have time and support to embed the professional learning into their classroom practice and into learning and teaching programs
- scheduling time to seek feedback from teachers (and the literacy coach or leader if applicable), review progress and make adjustments as necessary.

4. Support teachers to build and embed knowledge into practice

After sharing your evidence-based rationale for strengthening writing instruction with staff, introduce participating teachers to:

- [AERO's Writing Instruction Model](#)
- the 2 professional learning courses they'll complete:
 - [Understanding Sentence Structure and Grammar](#)
 - [Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices](#).

It's important you're familiar with the courses' content yourself, so make time to complete these before introducing them to staff. Outline the timeline for completing the courses and the support available and provide time for teachers to ask questions. This will help set everyone up for success.

Allowing time for leaders and teachers to read and discuss AERO's Writing Instruction Model before they start the courses will support connections to new learning by providing foundational knowledge. The model introduces an approach to teaching writing that is explicit and systematic, which can be used in all subject areas that require students to write.

When teachers are familiar with the model, they can begin completing the courses, starting with AERO's second professional learning course, [Understanding Sentence Structure and Grammar](#). This course has been intentionally designed for leaders and teachers to gradually build a knowledge base and metalanguage to support explicitly teaching sentences and grammar. It's underpinned by a functional model of language, which is a powerful tool for teaching writing because it describes how language needs to be used appropriately for different situations and purposes. This understanding is needed to teach discipline-specific writing practices.

As part of the course, there are activities and reflection prompts that will help consolidate teachers' learning and prepare them for follow-up conversations. To help support this learning, you can also schedule regular meetings with teachers to reflect on the course content and discuss implications for teaching programs and classroom practice. Teachers will also need time during this period to apply their learning in practice. The literacy lead or coach can help with this.

After completing the second course, teachers can progress to AERO's third professional learning course, [Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices](#). This course examines how to plan, design and assess writing in the context of their subject area. In addition to activities and reflection prompts, it includes opportunities for teamwork in professional learning sessions. This course is designed for teachers and leaders and is a more interactive course that lends itself to a literacy leader facilitating learning. To make the most of this course, the literacy coach or lead can schedule time for teachers to collaborate on these teamwork activities, organise the key documents needed during these sessions and facilitate discussions. Participants will get the most out of this course if they engage with content in conjunction with their subject curriculum, their assessment tasks and student writing samples.

We recommend scheduling time for a discussion after teachers complete each module in the course.

5. Allocate time for completing AERO's School Writing Instruction professional learning courses

Table 1 provides further details on the 3 courses and the time required to complete each module (along with the activities, including teamwork activities), and embed learning practice as part of writing instruction. This is a guideline only – you'll need to consider it in your school's context.

Table 1: Timeline for implementing the School Writing Instruction Framework

Course 1: Understanding Writing Needs in Your School Timeline for completion: Approximately 2 hours in total that can be spread over 7 weeks	
• This course provides self-paced, individual online learning for school leaders. • You'll need your student NAPLAN raw score writing data. • The course is organised into 5 modules of approximately 15 to 20 minutes of self-paced, individual, online learning. • Meeting with other leaders following each module is recommended to support collaborative discussion and reflection.	
Module	Approximate duration
Introduction	5 mins
The most effective way to improve student writing	15 mins
Analysing writing assessment data	20 mins
Contextualising student writing for targeted instruction	25 mins
Understanding writing instruction at your school	15 minutes (You'll also need to conduct a teacher survey)
Establishing a clear rationale	30 minutes (You'll also need to allocate time to present and discuss the rationale with teaching staff)

Course 2: Understanding Sentence Structure and Grammar

Timeline for completion: Approximately 2.5 hours in total that can be spread over 6 to 8 weeks

- This course provides self-paced, individual online learning for school leaders and teachers.
- The course encourages teachers to engage in collegial discussions with teachers in their year group or subject area.

Module	Approximate duration	Recommended collegial discussion
Introduction	5 mins	Throughout the course, it's helpful for teachers to regularly discuss their learning with colleagues. You could facilitate this by allocating time for staff to complete one (or more) module either prior to, or during, a staff meeting or in other ways that suit your school. For example, during a meeting, you could invite teachers to: • share and discuss their responses to the reflection questions at the end of each module • draw on AERO's Writing Instruction Model to consider where the concepts can be included as part of explicit instruction and, ultimately, subject programs. At 2 points in the course, teachers are encouraged to engage in specific collegial discussion as indicated below in the Complex sentences and Nominalisation and academic writing modules.
A functional model of language	15 mins	
Verbs	15 mins	
Nouns	15 mins	
Clauses and phrases	15 mins	
Simple sentences	15 mins	
Compound sentences	15 mins	• How can explicitly teaching sentence structure improve student writing in our subject area/year level? • How can we embed writing instruction into our classroom routines?
Complex sentences	25 mins	
Connectives	20 mins	During a meeting, you could invite teachers to: • share and discuss their responses to the reflection questions at the end of this module • draw on AERO's Writing Instruction Model to consider where the concepts can be included as part of explicit instruction and, ultimately, subject programs
Nominalisation and academic writing	15 mins	• How have we taught sentence structure to improve students' writing? What worked well? What can we refine? • How have we embedded writing instruction into our classroom routines? What worked well? What can we refine? • How can we incorporate more explicit writing instruction into next term's teaching program? (Don't forget to bring your program to aid the discussion.)

Course 3: Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices

Timeline for completion: Approximately 2.5 hours in total that can be spread over 8 to 10 weeks

- This course provides self-paced, individual online learning for school leaders and teachers.
- Each module of the course prepares teachers for a staff professional learning session.

Module	Approximate duration	What teachers need to complete the self-paced learning	What teachers need to bring to the staff professional learning session	Suggested activities for professional learning session
Introduction	5 mins	N/A	N/A	N/A
Planning for teaching, learning and assessment	15 min	N/A	• The curriculum content descriptors they've selected in the course • The learning objectives they've developed • Acceptable evidence for these learning objectives • Their teaching considerations for supporting students to produce this acceptable evidence.	Work with colleagues from a subject area(s) or year level(s). Share and discuss: • the learning objectives that have been developed • acceptable evidence for these learning objectives • teaching considerations for supporting students to produce this acceptable evidence. • how front-ending assessment might influence programming.
Assessment task design	25 min	One written assessment they've used recently and the accompanying criteria and/or rubric or marking guide	One written assessment they've used recently (including accompanying criteria and/or rubric or marking guide) Their reflection on: • how clear the purpose is • the writing demands • the features of quality assessment evident and missing • what they might do differently next time.	Work with colleagues from a subject area(s) or year level(s). Share and discuss reflections on a recent assessment task in relation to the features of quality assessment tasks. Change groups to work with colleagues who aren't from your subject area or year level. Discuss how much consistency students experience in the design of written assessment tasks: • What consistencies and inconsistencies do they experience across subject areas/year levels? • If you were to create an assessment template that could be adapted by all subject areas/year levels, what would that look like?

Course 3: Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices

Timeline for completion: Approximately 2.5 hours in total that can be spread over 8 to 10 weeks

Defining quality writing criteria with clear links to assessment tasks	15 mins	N/A	Their reflection on their subject area or year level assessment criteria	Discuss with colleagues in a subject area(s) or year level(s): How well do subject area or year level assessment criteria support all students – including those at different levels – to show what they can do in writing?
Using AERO's writing criteria for your school's assessment tasks	15 mins	N/A	N/A	N/A
Using AERO's writing criteria to improve student writing	30 min	3 students' writing samples from previous assessment tasks	N/A	N/A
Feedback	10 mins	N/A	N/A	Discuss in small groups: - learnings about the differences between marking and feedback. Consider: - Would it be useful to provide feedback using the 2 questions: - What needs attention? - How can we fix it? - What would this look like in the context of different subject areas or year levels?

Course 3: Embedding Effective Writing Assessment Practices

Timeline for completion: Approximately 2.5 hours in total that can be spread over 8 to 10 weeks

Providing feedback using AERO's writing criteria	30 min	3 students' writing samples from a previous assessment to practise providing feedback (If possible, these samples should be one at, above and below the expected level). They'll also need a copy of AERO's Writing Criteria.	N/A	In small groups: • share reflections on applying AERO's writing criteria • discuss what this means for an approach to teaching and assessing writing in different subject areas or year levels • suggest opportunities for providing targeted feedback on writing using AERO's writing criteria and refinement of marking practices.
Moderation	10 min	N/A	N/A	With colleagues in subject areas or year levels: • schedule moderation sessions • discuss the practical implications for different contexts.