



TEACHING READING IN BRIEF WRITING IS COMPONENTIAL

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Teaching the Strands of the Writing Rope: An Interview with Joan Sedita Conducted by Andra Mills, Ed.D.



Joan Sedita, M.Ed.

Ms. Sedita is the founder of **Keys to Literacy** and author of many publications, including her most recent books: *Keys to Early Writing for Grades K-2* (2016), *The Writing Rope* (2023), *Keys to Content Writing for Grades 3 to 12* (2024), *The Key Vocabulary Routine* (2025), and *The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy: Integrating Evidence-based Reading and Writing Instruction in Grades 5-12* (2026).



Introducing the Writing Series

Dear Education Colleagues,

Being taught to write – from letter formation and fluent handwriting to spelling vocabulary words and applying syntactic knowledge to compose well-crafted sentences and thought-provoking essays – should be an expectation for every student in America. Since education is primarily a state and local responsibility, proficient writing can be the goal for all Vermont children and teens.

Make no mistake – **people care about student writing**. Educators and caregivers want students to understand and develop the challenging concepts, processes, and skills good writing requires. Writing is componential, necessitating direct, explicit, systematic, sequential, and cumulative instruction, following a scope and sequence that is not only vertically aligned PreK-12, but also horizontally integrated across all subjects. Ensuring all students learn to write well requires that teachers expand students' oral language, increase subject-specific morphology and vocabulary, teach handwriting, spelling, and syntax, teach sentence, paragraph, and essay structures, and instill an understanding of text types (genres), signal words, referents, literary devices, and audience awareness. Across these writing strands, teachers implement routines that support working memory and executive functioning during classroom instruction.

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Over the course of the 2026-27 school year, *Teaching Reading in Brief* will explore each component by interviewing national experts on writing instruction, curriculum, and assessment. With over twenty issues planned through next June, our goal is twofold: (1) to demonstrate why we need highly effective writing instruction in grades K-12 and higher education, and (2) to show how this instruction can be implemented in every school and for every student.

Writing is complex. In her interview for *Teaching Reading in Brief*, psychologist **Dr. Melissa Farrall** stated, "Writing is one of the most complicated things that we can ask a human being to do. It involves a lot of disparate skills that have to come together with a high degree of automaticity and accuracy so that we can develop a flow of thought."

Joan Sedita of Keys to Literacy explained in her interview that, "[We need] to stop thinking that writing instruction happens during a set time of day... The big idea here is to integrate writing, both instruction and guided practice, throughout the whole day."

Reading specialist and Framing Your Thoughts trainer **Jill Pompi** revealed that, "Research shows students make the greatest gains if they have to write about their learning... The research is clear – if you write about content, you own it more deeply."

Assistive technology and reading specialist **Nanci King Shepardson** shared that, "Oral language might seem counterintuitive when we're talking about writing, but this is actually the most important bedrock. We pour on that oral-language foundation thoroughly, before we even think about teaching writing."

The components of writing can feel uniform and rigid. Writing should be expressive, liberating, and democratizing. How do educators reconcile the two ends?

Assistant Professor of Dyslexia at Georgia State University, **Dr. Brennan Chandler**, said in his interview, "Giving kids access to spelling and handwriting instruction is extremely student-centered and enhances their creativity, because we're giving them these basic skills that they really do need to write well."

Over the course of this school year, we hope you will enjoy reading the perspectives of writing experts, such as those highlighted above. We agree with these accomplished educators and scholars and encourage Vermont educators to teach all components of writing explicitly to every student. Writing is for everyone.

In gratitude,

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.D.

Brenda Warren, MD, PhD

Editors of *Teaching Reading in Brief*

In this interview, Joan Sedita explains the components of reading. Due to its depth and length, we recommend printing the article and annotating as you read to take it all in.

Teaching the Strands of the Writing Rope: An Interview with Joan Sedita

By Andra Mills, Ed.D.

Andra Mills: *Would you tell us about your background, particularly what brought you to reading science and your focus from reading to writing instruction?*

Joan Sedita: I'm actually hitting a milestone. This is my fiftieth year in this field. I started at the Landmark School, which is in Massachusetts, but Landmark College is in Vermont. I actually was part of the team that founded Landmark College. Fifty years ago, I started tutoring some teenagers at Landmark School's summer program, and from that experience, I was completely hooked on helping students who struggle with literacy. It's not like I started with reading and went to writing; I have focused on reading and writing all along. In fact, in my earliest years at Landmark School, I focused more on writing and developed the curriculum that was used there. I was there for 23 years. I participated in early research on dyslexia, focused on older students. When Section 504 became law, and part of IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Act], I worked with colleges on what that meant for older students, and we started a college-prep program that we then moved up to Vermont. Dr. Louisa Moats and I were colleagues for many years, and after I left Landmark School, we started training teachers together. I was one of the first LETRS [Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling] trainers. We authored a book, *Writing the Road to Reading Comprehension* (Sedita & Moats, 2004). (It's no longer in print.) At that time I also worked as a consultant for a school district and

was the lead trainer in Massachusetts for Reading First. By 2007, my work grew to the point where I started Keys to Literacy and began hiring other literacy trainers.

AM: *That's exciting – quite a journey. We often think of reading and writing as reciprocal skills. Can you explain that?*

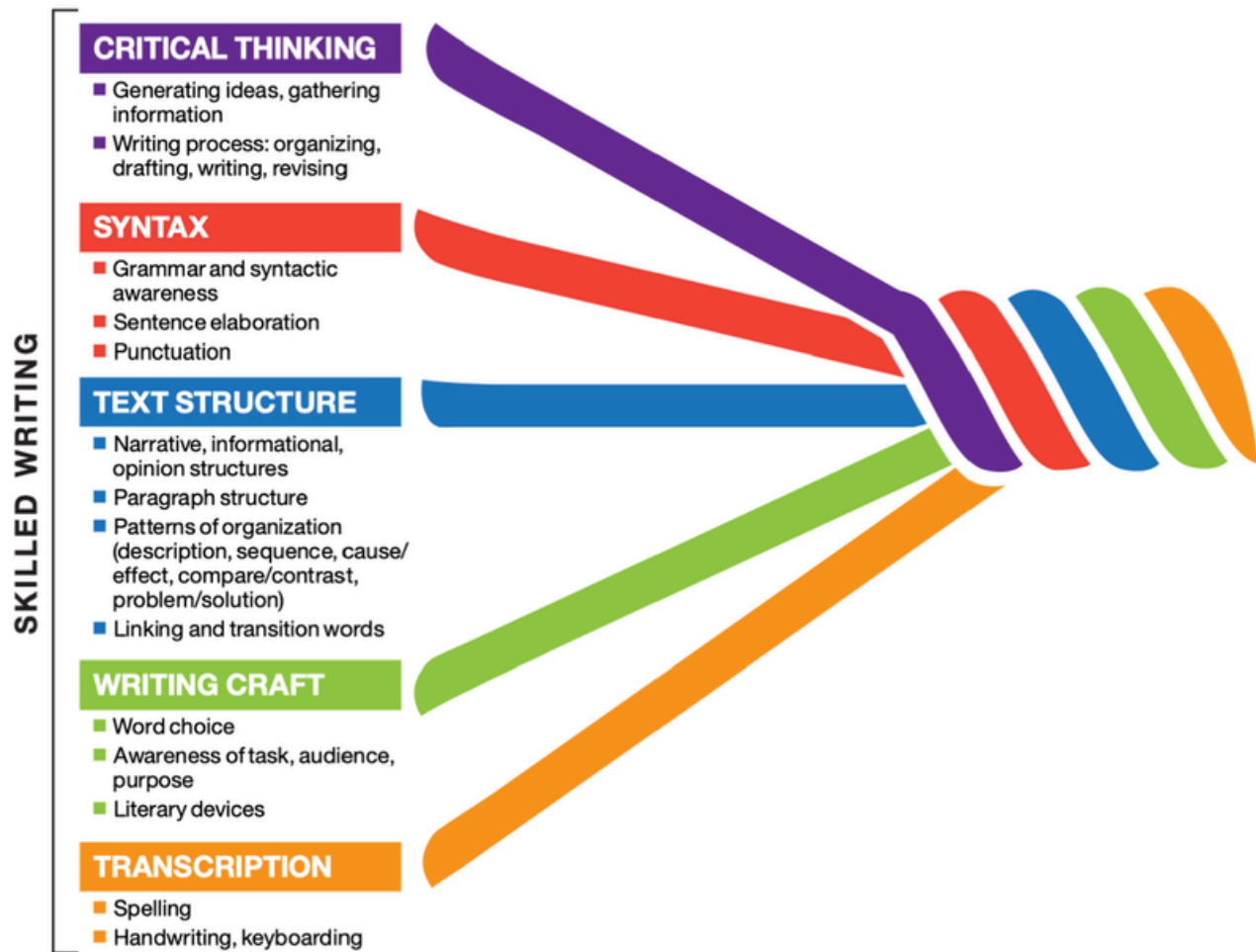
JS: That's a topic that I have been really promoting over the last year or two. In my presentations, I try to get everybody to realize that for too long we've talked about these things as separate. There are so many ways they overlap. The first thing I want to say is, ever since 2000, when the National Reading Panel report came out, we have focused an awful lot on reading in this country, especially on elementary reading. But I think part of what happened was, in order for schools to find the time for reading instruction and assessment, we sort of let writing go. Some of the writing that was happening in schools stopped. The good news, and that's why you're doing this series, is that people are beginning to realize writing is just as essential for literacy achievement. Additionally, while we have a lot more research on effective, evidence-based practices for teaching reading than we do writing, there is a strong research base for writing instruction.

What folks don't realize is just how much overlap there is between reading and writing. I have been showing these connections in my new adolescent literacy book and in presentations, showing the two ropes, Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) and The Writing Rope that I developed in 2018, putting them together and showing all the ways they overlap.

The Writing Rope

The Strands That Are Woven Into Skilled Writing

(Sedita, 2019)



In The Writing Rope®: A framework for explicit writing instruction in all subjects, by Joan Sedita. (2023) Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Inc.; reprinted by permission. © 2019 Joan Sedita. All rights reserved.

First of all, reading and writing don't come naturally, like speaking and listening, but they both draw from the same well of oral language. They both share the linguistic processes used in spoken language, and we have to teach kids how that applies to reading and writing. For reading, Scarborough talks about the importance of background knowledge and verbal reasoning. That goes hand in hand with writing. Many writing tasks that are involved with writing to learn begin as comprehension tasks. One of the strands in The Writing Rope is critical thinking, skills related to writing to learn.

Another really obvious one has to do with sentences or syntax. The Writing Rope has a strand devoted to teaching syntax and sentence writing skills, and the language strand in The Reading Rope addresses syntax.

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to learn to write is greater than ever.**

– Joan Sedita

One of the strands in The Writing Rope is text structure, but that has lots of layers, right? Information, argument or opinion, narrative. There's also sentence structure and paragraph structure. The Reading Rope talks about literacy knowledge, including genres and text structure. In fact, there's a fair amount of research that shows when we teach students about text structure, we are supporting both their reading comprehension and their writing skills.

Another area has to do with words. Scarborough talks about vocabulary as one of the reading strands. Vocabulary is equally important for writing. A lot of folks think we have to teach writing to support reading comprehension. If you don't know the meaning of the words, it's going to affect your comprehension. But also think about how frustrating it is for kids who are trying to express something, and they don't have the words. Any work we do to develop students' vocabulary will support both reading comprehension and their writing. In The Writing Rope, I put vocabulary under the writing craft strand since it relates to word choice, being specific with choosing words, and using colorful language.

Another strand has to do with transcription, which includes the foundational skills of spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding. But think about it, in order to learn to spell, especially in English, which has a pretty complex orthographic system, it's all about teaching phonics. Phonemic awareness to parse the sounds in the words, and then the alphabetic principle, just to learn which letters represent the sounds in words. That's all about phonics, which is in Scarborough's word recognition strand. And one of the things that I always emphasize is that any good phonics lesson should be about not just decoding words. It should be about learning phonics patterns for spelling.

AM: How do we address the writing skills that preservice teachers lack but will soon be expected to teach? We know this applies to the five components of reading as well. What would you recommend that higher education institutions do to address this? And what about the teachers who are already in the schools?

JS: One of the things I've seen when training teachers is that many of the younger teachers, those in their 20s and 30s, went through elementary education during a time when whole-language had infiltrated their schools. I watched this as a parent. I have two sons now in their thirties, and I remember pleading with their principal to please give them some phonics. There's a fair number of students who will learn to read, despite what teachers do. But there are large numbers of students, certainly students who have dyslexia, who need an explicit approach. We now have a lot of teachers who were not given explicit reading, spelling, or writing instruction.



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I find sometimes when giving a training, especially in the more advanced strategies used to teach high school students, such as summarizing and note taking, I learn that a lot of teachers just did not get the instruction and practice they needed. Writing is hard. I've written over thirteen books, and I still don't like to write. I have led trainings where teachers will say, especially middle and high school teachers in science or math, "Listen, I didn't sign up to be a writing teacher, and I'm not good at writing myself. So how can I help students?" We have to support those teachers. Preservice at the college level is important, but so is in-service. It's very hard to do or teach something if nobody is explicitly teaching you how. Instead, it's just assumed you're going to know. Just like we can't assume our older students have solid writing skills and basic reading skills, we can't assume that teachers do.

When you train teachers, you should teach them a very structured approach to teaching any reading or writing component. Let me use spelling as an example. I was not a very good speller growing up, but in my beginning years at Landmark School teaching dyslexic students, I completed an Orton-Gillingham course, and I learned all about English orthography. And guess what? As an adult, I finally learned to spell. Same with basic writing skills. I was never really taught good grammar or sentence structure, how to elaborate a sentence, or where to put semicolons, etc., but once I was trained to teach writing, guess what? Now I write better sentences. Part of the solution to your question is: if our teachers don't have solid writing skills themselves, and we teach them the fundamentals and how to teach their students, this will develop their own writing.

AM: Why should all students be taught to write well? Why is it important?

JS: This question is even more germane given the age of Artificial Intelligence [AI]. Our students need to learn how to write more than ever in this age of instant and constant digital information. Now, we can't pretend AI is not here. It is. Kids are going to use it. We have to distinguish between using it as a tool to support writing versus using it as a crutch that takes the place of the critical thinking necessary to write. Students have to process ideas. When they write, they must think and plan first, then draft their writing, and then revise. At the thinking stage, students brainstorm what they want to write. More importantly, when they're writing about information or an argument, they're gathering information. Then they look at that information and decide what they want to say in their writing. At the planning stage, they organize all those ideas. Think about the critical thinking that's happening at these stages. That's where the kids learn. Even if they never wrote anything afterward, all the learning happens there. So if they use AI to do all that for them, they've missed out on the most important value of writing as it relates to learning.

Think about people who journal. Writing in a journal is a way to process what you're thinking or feeling. If you said to AI, "Write my journal entry for me," what would it decide to write about? You've lost the whole purpose of writing your diary in the first place.

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How can AI support writing? Let's say the student has done all that hard work – thinking the topic through, creating an outline and a structure for presenting their ideas. If they then put it into AI and say, “Look at my outline. Do you have some suggestions for changing the structure?” Then put the AI version next to yours, and go line by line and decide what might be a good idea. The same is true when it comes to revision, especially for our students who have dyslexia, where revision is so hard. Write your piece, then ask AI to find the spelling and punctuation errors, and put them next to each other. See what the differences are. Then we're actually teaching kids and giving them immediate feedback about their grammar and punctuation.

Writing is also important because it can be an assessment. Student writing shows what they have learned. We also use writing for lots of other reasons. We communicate with our family and friends. We use writing to entertain. There are lots of reasons why students absolutely need to write, but I think the biggest is that it supports learning in all content areas.

AM: Writing is described as a componential skill set. What is meant by this, and is this the same as the strands of The Writing Rope?

JS: The strands of The Writing Rope help educators identify those components. That's why I put the rope together. What does multicomponent mean? Over the last 20 years, the five components of reading that the National Reading Panel identified are well known. If I ask any elementary teacher, certainly anybody in the literacy field, and even some secondary educators

about the reading components, they can tell you phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. There's oral language as well. But what I found was that if I were to ask teachers, “What are the skills that students need to be a proficient writer?” they couldn't tell me. If they were an early elementary teacher, they might say handwriting or spelling. If they were an upper-grade teacher, would they say, To respond to prompts on the state test?

Yes, writing is just like reading in that it has multiple components. When you think about writing something, you must stop and analyze the task. You need to think about the skills, strategies, and techniques, and integrate them at the same time in order to write that paragraph. I really thought, back when the Common Core State Standards and similar state standards were adopted, that people would realize that writing has multiple components and pay more attention to writing instruction. But that didn't happen. If you look at the Common Core, you'll see many of the skills and strategies kids need. They are identified in various parts of either the ten writing standards or language standards, or even in some of the reading standards.

But there's more than that. We also have research. There are some real leaders in the field of writing research such as Steve Graham, Karen Harris, and Michael Hebert (2011), who've been doing meta-analyses for decades now. They found a whole bunch of ways to improve students' writing. Between looking at standards and the research, there really are multiple skills students need to develop. Some are skills and some are

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strategies, and some are actually techniques. Since we have lots of them, I tried to organize them with The Writing Rope. Originally, I used the metaphor of a wagon wheel with a lot of different spokes. What happens if one of your spokes breaks? Well, the wheel doesn't work very well. But a few years ago, when Scarborough's Reading Rope became popular again, I realized that using a similar metaphor would be easier for folks. Writing isn't one single thing. Each one of the skills and strategies can be grouped into these larger components, and all need to be explicitly taught. We can't assume students are going to figure them out on their own.

AM: Absolutely. The evidence-aligned compential approach now stands in contrast with an approach of writing as a whole, which has been common over the past two decades. The latter involved students at all grade levels who had minimal direct instruction, attempting to write paragraphs with very little regard for writing conventions. What led to this significant change in teaching practice from an unstructured approach to a compential method?

JS: Some of the elements you're referring to were called Writer's Workshop or guided writing. The emphasis was just to let students write about what they know and feel comfortable with. Let them write personal narratives, and they'll then enjoy writing. There are some elements of that approach that are good such as using mentor texts as models and providing opportunities for collaboration during the writing process. However, there is a difference between a

structured and unstructured approach to writing instruction. For example, in a structured-writing lesson, the teacher directly and explicitly teaches a skill or a strategy, and then students practice using it, and then they celebrate the learning.

Let's talk about the difference between how mentor texts are used in an unstructured versus structured approach. We know that we all learn and improve our writing by emulating how others write. We do it every day. In training teachers, I sometimes use this example: What's something in the last three months, either personally or professionally, that you had to write, and you looked at how somebody else did it well? For example, if you're in a car accident and you have to write an accident report, you look at other accident reports, right? Using mentor or exemplar texts is an excellent teaching strategy, but instruction while using it needs to be explicit.

Take these examples of an unstructured approach. Second graders read Orloff's *I Wanna Iguana*, which is an opinion text. The teacher says, "Look at this book. This is an example of opinion writing. Now you can do the same thing." For older students, you may share a very well-written argument. You show them the thesis, the reasons along with evidence, and tell them, now you go off and write an argument. This approach, though very common, is not explicit enough. When we use our mentor texts as examples, we have to follow a gradual release of responsibility: I do it. We do it. You do it. So instead, we're going to use our mentor text purposely. First, the teacher decides, what's the skill or strategy I need to teach the



kids? Is it how to state a claim? Is it how to use transition words? Is it how to elaborate on a sentence? From the mentor examples, we're going to analyze them together with the students. Look at what that person did. Sometimes this is called "Reading like a writer." Now let's try one together with guided practice. Now try to write a claim statement like that.

AM: Is there anything else that you would want to add?

JS: Learning to write is very important. The meta-analysis, *Writing to Read* (Graham & Hebert, 2010), showed all the ways that writing supports reading skills, especially comprehension. When you write about what you're reading or learning, you comprehend the content. This is a reason why students still need to learn how to write in the age of AI. Writing will help their reading. So an important point I want to emphasize is that writing helps you think and learn.

Interestingly, when I work with college professors many of them say they are requiring students to write responses on tests on paper. In fact, I recently heard that the company that prints exam blue books is sold out! That's because professors want their students to handwrite their exams to express what they've learned.

We need to teach our kids how to write. We need to teach them all the skills in each part of The Writing Rope. The need to learn to write is greater than ever.

AM: Do you have some specifics that you would recommend teachers stop doing and what they should start doing to improve students' writing skills?

JS: One thing has more to do with older students in grades 4 and beyond. Teachers need to stop assuming that students have mastered basic

By writing about what they are learning, they think critically about that content while at the same time practicing writing skills.

- Joan Sedita

foundational skills, including spelling, hand-writing, and keyboarding. We know students who don't have fluency with transcription skills are bogged down with too much cognitive load. It's just like decoding; if you have to spend all your energy decoding the words, you can't spend it on making meaning. In writing, if you're spending all this energy on getting the words down on the page, this takes away from critical thinking, from developing good sentences, and from using solid text structure. When I look at many older students, often the reason they struggle with writing is they still cannot write a good, solid sentence. Many still don't know what a paragraph is. So don't make assumptions that our students, just because they get older, have foundational skills in place. That's the number one thing that needs to change.

The second thing is in elementary grades. Some core reading programs (including those called HQIM, high-quality instructional materials) claim to teach writing, but instead they merely have writing tasks. Teaching the writing skills aren't necessarily included. So the second change needed, especially early elementary, is don't rely solely on your core reading programs to teach writing, because teachers will need to add a lot more. They need training to learn how to teach all components of The Writing Rope as well as to teach oral language and vocabulary. To a certain degree, teachers don't need a program to teach writing; they just need training on how to teach

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writing. If teachers understand sentence and paragraph structures, how to write a claim, and all the other skills identified in The Writing Rope, then they don't need a program. They're going to teach those skills while students write about what they read and learn in class.

The third change is to stop thinking that writing instruction happens during a set time of day, like during the literacy block or a time set aside to teach writing. A lot of what happens once you introduce a writing skill or strategy is that students need guided practice as they begin using it, and that has to happen throughout the school day and in every subject. This becomes even more important as students are in middle and high school, because they begin content or disciplinary writing. It's the math teacher and history teacher and science teacher who know best when having students write an argument about history or findings from a class experiment. The big idea here is to integrate writing, both instruction and guided practice, throughout the whole day. This is where leadership comes in. When we provide in-service professional development about writing instruction, we realize everybody needs to be on the same page. We want to use the same language, the same approaches. In every class, teachers should expect students to follow the same stages of the writing process routine: think, plan, write, revise. Another example is transition words and phrases. These are so important – every classroom can have the same poster with examples of transitions. What transitions do you use to show comparison, to list things, or to show time order? In the same way, teachers share the same approach to teaching note-taking.

AM: You said teachers don't need a curriculum if they understand writing concepts. But when you're talking about a whole school system and content-area teachers teaching writing, not everyone understands or applies the strands of The Writing Rope.

JS: In *Keys to Content Writing* (Sedita, 2024), I take each element of The Writing Rope and train teachers in the same strategy. For example, I will teach them the two-column note-taking strategy so that every teacher across the building uses that strategy. It's consistent. I'm not saying a school shouldn't have a writing curriculum with a scope and sequence. I'm saying that schools shouldn't rely on a program to buy and teach for 30 minutes each day. It's teacher knowledge of writing instruction that matters, teachers in all subjects.

AM: Before we talk about your 2023 book, The Writing Rope, let's take a minute to discuss your other publications on writing. In 2016, Keys to Early Writing, for Grades K-2 was published. And the third edition of Keys to Content Writing for Grades 3 to 12 was published in 2024. What are the keys to early writing, the knowledge and skills that kindergarten through second grade teachers need to teach?

JS: Before I put The Writing Rope framework together, I had been teaching writing and developing writing training for teachers for many years. My first two writing books were *Keys to Early Writing*

and *Keys to Content Writing*. They cover all the skills, strategies, and techniques that kids need, which I later organized into *The Writing Rope*. My focus in these earlier books was on breaking these skills apart and giving evidence-based approaches to teaching them. Let's talk about early writing, grades K to 3. Over time, we learned that the difference between 2nd and 3rd grade developmentally was so great that, when I wrote the second edition, I changed it to K-2. Often teachers think that K-2 is about spelling and handwriting, but it's not. If you look at the Common Core for writing, kids are also expected to know the difference between the different genres, and to use writing to support thinking. The difference is, we have to do it at a developmentally appropriate level. This is going to rest on oral language, especially for kindergarten and into 1st grade.

In my *Keys to Early Writing* book, I have a whole chapter just about drawing, and teaching kids how to draw, and to use drawing with their oral language to rehearse what they want to say. There's a developmental sequence before students can write words. They can still express themselves by drawing. But many of our kids don't know how to draw. So we actually have to teach them how to use shapes and turn shapes into things that represent their ideas.

We can also begin to use drawing to introduce revision. Much of the research shows that K-1 students are not able to revise their writing. So what does revision look like at those grades? You begin with their drawing. A student draws a house with a sun and a tree. The teacher asks, "What do you want to say?" And then the student starts telling you all these things that are happening. You say, "Well, you need to revise your drawing and add more details to it. You said there were children playing in the yard, right?" So you can begin to revise through their drawing.

The next step is to start adding words. That's about labeling. They can label their drawings, label things around the classroom, by starting to write words. This is where invented spelling starts to come in right? And you use that invented spelling to get a measure of how much phonics they're learning.

The next thing that students start to do is make lists. Let's name all the food in the grocery aisle. Let's name all the people we want to invite to our class presentation. Next, they start writing phrases, two to three words strung together. These might not be complete sentences, but all this leads to writing a solid, complete sentence with a subject and a predicate. And this happens in kindergarten or the beginning of 1st grade.

Figure 1

Kindergarten Student Elaborates on their Story Drawing

Image courtesy of Joan Sedita



The next stage is now you've got a couple of sentences about the same topic, so we're going to teach how that turns into a paragraph. In that paragraph, we're going to group those sentences together around the same main idea. We will teach topic sentences. This can happen as early as 1st or 2nd grade. We use mentor texts like read-alouds.

We need to understand where these young children are developmentally, but just because they can't write words and spell well, it doesn't mean they can't use the critical thinking skills involved in writing, or that we can't teach them the differences between text structures. We can begin teaching them patterns of organization: compare and contrast, cause and effect, and a sequence. We can use read-alouds to start teaching them transitions. I've been giving a list of transition words away since 1978. It's probably my most downloaded free template in my Keys to Literacy collection of free things. I created one for the younger grades. I love going into 1st-grade classrooms where teachers are saying, "Look at the wall – use at least one of those transitions." That's what early writing is. It's much more than spelling and handwriting. All the elements of The Writing Rope can be introduced, but we're going to lean heavily on oral language.

AM: Sometimes kindergarten educators are torn between play-based and discovery-based learning instead of direct instruction of academic content. What does the research show teachers need to do for grade-level writing development?

JS: In the meta-analysis on best practices for writing at the elementary level published by the Institute of Education Sciences (Graham et al., 2012) there is a recommendation to create a community of writers. An example is the teacher leading interactive writing with students, where

the children are on the carpet, and together you're crafting a story. The other is providing students opportunities to collaborate with each other when they're drawing or adding words. The classroom environment should be supportive and comfortable, where writing is valued even though it can be difficult. This can be started in preschool too, but certainly in kindergarten. This is where learning centers happen – you have an area of writing with all kinds of crayons and markers, different kinds of papers, and tape and staplers. This can feel like play for students.

Earlier we were talking about lists. Let's say the kindergarten classroom has a Grocery Store Learning Center, where students have a blank list where they write their list of foods to put in their shopping cart. Whether it's through oral or written words on paper, language can be part of any play activity. I think it's actually easier to incorporate writing into play than into reading.

AM: I've observed some teachers in the early grades jumping right into having students write paragraphs or a narrative. Can you explain the semantic and sentence-level skills needed for K-2 teachers to teach?

JS: As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons older students, grade 4 and up, struggle in writing is they still can't write a solid sentence, or can't elaborate on a sentence, or always start a sentence the same way. Sentences are an essential building block for writing, and older students will never be able to write well until you go back in and fix that. So, as teachers, let's take care of it early on in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade. You have to teach them what a solid sentence has: it has a subject and a predicate. You can actually use those terms with kids. Or, you can simplify it, "The who – did what?" There's a whole bunch of activities you can do for sentence

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structure, but you have to have those two parts.

This can start with looking at a read-aloud. Let's say you're reading a story to the kids about turtles. You can start with the turtle. That's the "who." Then, ask "did what?" What did the turtle do? You need that part, and can say, swim or swims or went swimming. You can have subject and predicate cards to match, or ask the students to add something to a subject or something to a predicate. This is the kernel sentence (Haynes & Jennings, 2018) from which students can elaborate.

One way to help students expand and elaborate their sentences is to use words. Teachers ask who, where, when, what, how, why. Back to the example, The turtle swims. Where? The turtle swims in the weeds. Why? The turtle swims in the weeds to get food. All of this can be done verbally if your kids can't yet write those kinds of sentences.

People ask me all the time – well, what is the best order to teach the skills and strategies in The Writing Rope? The answer is, we should teach all the strands in the rope across all the grades, with the exception of transcription which is more the focus of grades K to 3. For example, with sentences, young students need instruction for basic sentence structure, but sentence instruction continues as they move into 4th, 5th, and 6th grade with a focus on increasingly sophisticated sentence elaboration.

AM: In your book, The Writing Rope, you state, "a collective responsibility for developing students' writing skills is met when teachers of all subjects incorporate source-based writing prompts on a

regular basis" (p. 130). My question is, what does a student's school day look like in a school embracing this approach?

JS: Students should be writing, writing, writing all the time in every subject. Take argumentative writing. Content writing is used to build an argument to question a historical thesis or science experiment. That's just one example. But it's just not happening. Teachers are not assigning enough writing. They're not teaching writing, and students are not doing enough writing. Now, the research says that it's not enough to just have kids write a lot – they need explicit instruction. But explicit instruction doesn't work if they don't get to practice it. That's why this is a responsibility of everybody. We have so many kids who can't write on grade level – you're not going to solve this in one, 50-minute English block a day. Every teacher has to play a role, and more importantly, in middle and upper grades, where the content teachers know the writing needed in their subject. In many schools, a systemic change needs to happen! And that's where leadership comes in.

AM: Would you speak to your findings on teaching vocabulary and background knowledge? I know that you have an entire book devoted to the topic, The Key Vocabulary Routine (2025). What are your findings on vocabulary and background knowledge?

JS: First of all, let's talk about the role of vocabulary and background knowledge, which are very much related, in reading comprehension. We've known for decades that students with low vocabulary will have low comprehension. This goes for adults, too. If we're reading something, and we don't have familiarity with about 90 to

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95% of the words in that text, comprehension will be weaker (Reading Rockets, 2026). This is why it helps to preview words before students read. We have to keep growing our students' vocabulary to keep up with the demands of comprehension.

There's also background knowledge. Familiarity with the topics you're reading plays an important role in supporting comprehension. However, in my opinion, some educators have taken it a step too far when claiming that comprehension problems stem mainly from kids not having enough background knowledge, suggesting that if we just teach enough science and history to develop background knowledge, their reading comprehension problems will go away. Teachers do need to work on developing and activating students' background knowledge and vocabulary. But they also need to explicitly teach kids about text structure and comprehension strategies.

What does this have to do with writing? Vocabulary relates to writing. If students are writing on a topic, they need sufficient vocabulary and background knowledge in order to express themselves, to either report information or take it to a higher level with their critical opinion. Vocabulary is tied to the thinking stage, the first stage of the writing process.

In the past, much of the writing children have been encouraged to do in the early grades was personal narratives, because they knew what they wanted to say. They could talk about their vacation, their dog, their cat. Students would naturally have the background knowledge and probably a fair amount of vocabulary to complete these personal narratives. But most of the academic writing that's currently required of students is informational or opinion (argumentative). In the elementary grades, students should be writing equal parts of each genre. As they shift into middle school, the amount of narrative writing is limited, and they need the two writing areas that require background knowledge. This is where many of the skills and strategies associated with the critical thinking strand emerge, such as note-taking, paraphrasing, and summarizing. These writing skills are tied to reading comprehension. The more vocabulary learned related to the topic for the writing task, the more background knowledge they can build in an organized way and the better their writing will be.

AM: Oftentimes educators lament over students' poor oral language due to a lack of exposure to the world outside of school. How does this approach address this concern?

JS: We need to be teaching more than just reading and writing. Everybody forgets that there are four literacy components: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. A lot of research shows we need more effective classroom discussion. In my new adolescent literacy book [*The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy: Integrating Evidence-based Reading and Writing Instruction in Grades 5-12*, (2026)], I devote a whole chapter to classroom discussion. You need to teach kids speaking, listening, and discussion skills. "Accountable talk" is a research based model that has been around for a while now. It includes teaching sentence frames used during discussion (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Sentence frame for classroom discussion.

I hear what you're saying about _____, but I disagree with _____. Another thought I have on this is _____.

Text courtesy of Joan Sedita

We need to make these available to students as scaffolds during discussions. I've seen this work with 3rd and 4th graders – the language they use is amazing. These sentence frames can be on classroom posters or cards at the student's desk. This is also teaching students how to respond in a complete sentence. My point is we have to start addressing speaking and listening skills.

In addition, developing students' syntactic awareness

and sentence skills will support their writing because sentences are building blocks for paragraphs and essays. Syntactic awareness activities include sentence combining, deconstructing parts of speech and sentence clauses, and anagrams (sentence scrambles).

AM: The Writing Rope consists of five areas in ascending order. We've got transcription, writing craft, text structure, syntax, and critical thinking. Why were the strands organized in this way?

JS: I'm going to actually correct you. You use the term "ascending order," because this is the layout of the graphic, but there is no particular order to them. It's just the order I group the skills into. I suppose, because transcription is so foundational, I put it at the bottom. But the other four strands – text structure, writing craft, critical thinking, syntax – could have been in any order.

Often people will say to me, first you do this strand, then you do the second, but no! All those strands are being taught at the same time. For example, in K-1 you teach complete sentences using oral language, and you're teaching them elaboration by adding more information in 2nd and 3rd grade. But sentence elaboration keeps growing, right up through high school, as students write longer, more complex sentences, such as a thesis statement, which is one long sentence.

Text structure is taught across all the grades, too. Just because a 5th grader can write a nicely structured paragraph doesn't mean that same student in 10th grade doesn't need support and guided practice in writing a really challenging paragraph, such as explaining a science experiment. I guess the only skill that I would say wouldn't be taught up through the grades is spelling. We really would like spelling as a transcription skill to be fluent by the end of grade 3. Otherwise, all of the strands should be taught across grades and subjects.

Figure 3

Anagram or Sentence Scramble for Middle-school Students

Image courtesy of Dorinne Dorfman

gave	a	substantial	famous
the	donation	.	actor



AM: In *The Writing Rope*, you state that students should learn manuscript or print beginning in kindergarten and keyboarding in grade 5. In many schools, computer-based local and state assessments require students typing as early as grade 1. Given these various expectations, what do you recommend for writing instruction?

JS: First, I'm not the world's expert on handwriting. Second, there is no solid research about print versus cursive. We have a lot of research that says teaching kids to handwrite, whether it's print or cursive, is important (Graham et al., 2012; Santangelo & Graham, 2016). But also I want to make a correction. What I explained about keyboarding was in terms of physical, developmental eye-hand coordination, which means students cannot do touch typing until after 4th grade. That doesn't mean that we can't teach young children keyboarding. They're just going to be doing it by pecking. A recent finding is that (Graham et al., 2024) when we're teaching writing, we have to teach 21st-century technology. And that certainly means teaching them how to type on a keyboard. It's just going to be pecking rather than the dexterity needed for the full keyboard.

AM: When you say *pecking*, is there a specific teaching method, or it's more like they just hunt and peck?

JS: Everybody learns it differently. The point is, students learn where the letters are. They access them through their fingers, whatever their fingers are able to do developmentally. They're just not going to be able to do the reach of formal typing. One of the things that I find fascinating is all the texting that even young children do. Some have phones at only 5 years old and they're learning the keyboard – where to find the letters. And they're pretty fast!

AM: My next question is about poor writing skills. Like in much of the country, in Vermont, the majority of students cannot write on grade level. What does effective whole-class instruction look like, which is really remediation, since they need to address below-grade level concepts and skills? What does this look like in terms of teaching, time, and systems, so that we can close learning gaps?

JS: We're getting into assessment here. There are different types of writing assessments, and they can be used for different purposes. But research shows that the most effective writing assessment for improving students' writing is formative assessment focused on identifying students' strengths and weaknesses (Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2015; Graham et al., 2016). Then teachers give corrective feedback to students to improve their writing. This doesn't take a fancy writing assessment task. At the beginning of the year, teachers can ask their students to complete a very simple writing task. You pose a question on a topic, maybe something they just read about or learned in class, and ask them to write two paragraphs about it. Then you look at those writing samples. You can use *The Writing Rope* as a guide for this.

Begin by looking at the sentences. Are the majority of the students writing complete sentences or not? Are the sentences written by the majority of kids all static or short, or are they elaborated? If you discover that most of the kids are not writing good sentences, then guess what? You start teaching and integrating the practice of writing quality sentences. Begin this teaching by grabbing what they're reading and pull out a couple of good mentor text samples of really cool sentences that are nice and long. And for homework that night, have the students write about what you're teaching them in social studies, but have them write five elaborated sentences

Figure 4 Sentence Combining for Two Sentences and Four Sentences

1. Antarctica is the coldest of the seven continents.

2. Antarctica receives very little precipitation.

Combined: **Antarctica is the coldest of the seven continents and receives very little precipitation.**

1. Antarctica is the coldest of the seven continents.

2. Antarctica's average annual temperature in the interior is below -50°C.

3. Antarctica receives very little precipitation.

4. Antarctica is technically a desert!

Combined: **Antarctica, the coldest of seven continents, with an average annual temperature below -50°C in the interior, receives very little precipitation and, therefore, is technically a desert!**

Source: Sedita, J. (2026).
The essentials of adolescent literacy. Brookes.

that are as long as the mentor text. You're teaching content and focusing on sentences.

Next, look at their paragraphs. Are they all over the place? Do they have a main idea? Do they have supporting sentences? If most of the kids don't, then start working on paragraphs and sentences needed for a paragraph. It's really that simple.

Then determine whether they know the difference between information, opinion, and narrative. You can do that by having them read the text used in class and pause and ask, "Was that informational? Was that narrative? Was that an opinion? Why?"

Look at the different elements in The Writing Rope based on your students' samples and start with the simplest things that are problematic. That's what I meant when I said you don't have to have a writing program with a detailed script. For intervention with our most struggling readers, students with writing in their IEP, the interventionist will have pull-out or in-class support or a writing class. They will do the same thing for analyzing writing samples, using The Writing Rope framework. Similar to reading intervention, we should look at which components are missing, and then drill down and fill in the gaps.

AM: I hear you saying, Joan, that writing should be integrated with the content that they're learning.

JS: Of course, because then you kill two birds with one stone. By writing about what they are learning, they think critically about that content while at the same time practicing writing skills.

AM: That addresses the time and the systems piece.

JS: In writing about reading [text] and writing to learn, we have many different activities. The Writing to Read research guide (2010) suggests having students take notes and write summaries when reading text in any subject. I train content teachers in Quick Writes (Barbour, 2019), which are short, simple writing pieces that can be done at any point in a lesson. Teachers don't even have to plan these in advance. They're anything from students writing words and phrases in graphic organizers to exit tickets. Another example is a "brain dump." For example, you say to students, "You've got three minutes; write down all the words you can remember that we talked about." You don't need to grade them. Quick Writes are perfect opportunities for students to write a lot more in all of their subjects. If

the area where students need to improve is sentences, then require three complete sentences with at least eight words each in the Quick Write. That's the answer I give when teachers say, "I didn't sign up to be a writing teacher," or "I don't have time to teach writing." I tell them, "Assign Quick Writes and use writing to teach your subject area."

I mentioned sentence combining earlier. This is a well-researched learning activity. Back in 1979, when I was working on my Master's Degree, I wrote a paper on sentence combining. We were teaching this to our older, struggling readers at Landmark School at the time, and we saw this improved their writing and comprehension. Teaching students to combine sentences has been shown to improve students' writing from kindergarten through college (Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Saddler, 2012; Strong, 1986).

So what is it? You take two short sentences, say, ***The book was good. The movie was good.*** Can you combine them? ***The book and the movie were good.*** That's a really simple example, but later you can combine 3 or 4 sentences (see Figure 4). Take learning about whales in science. The teacher creates a bunch of short, simple sentences about whales, which students combine into longer sentences for homework. Guess what? The kids just had to remember everything they were learning about whales, and they also practiced developing elaborated sentences.

AM: In your book, you discuss a study from 20 or 30 years ago, which was cited in Writing Next (2007), that found teaching parts of speech alone will not improve student writing and it may even be regressive for them. In IDA's Syntax Comes First issue of Perspectives (2025), there's a section devoted to the eight parts of speech that students need to learn. These are not taught in isolation; instead these are in the context of simple, compound, and complex sentence instruction and practice. But those labels are considered to be very important conceptually for students to learn. That's a big change educators need to know. Honestly, I've had people tell me that teaching parts of speech hurts kids.

JS: If you go back and you look at Writing Next (2007), Graham and colleagues were pretty vague there. They talked about how some studies showed that teaching sentence combining and parts of sentences is far better than traditional grammar instruction, in terms of improving student writing. I've asked Steve [Graham] about this. He said that just teaching students to define or label parts of speech in a sentence is not enough.

With the young ones, when teaching sentence structure, we say, "You need a subject. You need a predicate," and you can use that term. "What's a subject? Oh, it's the person, place, or thing." But if you say, "What's the predicate?" and answer, "the verb," that doesn't help them write sentences. They need the ***who*** and the ***does what?*** We can change the subject or predicate, or remove one, and ask what's missing, the subject or predicate? Now this is within a sentence, which is where grammar instruction begins. One of my sons took Latin in high school. A lot of his quizzes and tests were things that he could memorize – give me the six versions of the verb ***to be*** in Latin – he could rattle them off. But if you gave him a sentence in Latin, he couldn't make any sense of it. He couldn't write a sentence in Latin. That's the way I describe it to people. Grammatical terms, that is formal grammar instruction, needs to be embedded in real writing.

AM: My last question is, what else would you like to share about *The Writing Rope* or literacy instruction with Vermont educators?

JS: Looking at the big picture, the message I always lead teacher training with is, Don't make any assumptions. Especially with the older kids, don't assume that they have basic skills, especially sentence and paragraph writing. These are absolutely foundational to writing, along with spelling and handwriting.

My second message is, Writing instruction is not just the purview of the English teacher or writing teacher. Every teacher plays a role. In fact, some kinds of writing are unique to a discipline, and it's the content teacher who's in the best position to teach it.

My third point is about writing beliefs. In our training, we talk about writing beliefs – sharing a few basic things that we all agree on. An example of a writing belief is, Writing is hard. Writing's hard for everybody. It's hard for me as a teacher. It's hard for the kids who are getting A's in the classroom. Students should know they're not the only ones who have trouble writing. Another example of a writing belief is, ***Everybody can learn to write.*** You will learn how to write, or write better. Another important belief is, ***Writing matters.*** Writing allows us to communicate with the people we care about, to be a member of society, and to have a voice. Writing in our community matters, and that's why we all need to get better at it. These are writing beliefs.

Another message concerns research related to giving students opportunities to collaborate with their peers and the teacher at all stages of the writing process. If they have opportunities to collaborate, they're going to be more motivated to write. Give them opportunities to take notes together, to look at each other's papers and give advice, or when they're younger, give advice on their drawings to each other. Now remember, we have to explicitly teach them how to do that. Like everything else, you don't just say, "Edit your friend's paper." You have to give them checklists with guidance and very specific things to look for.

Students are also motivated by writing to an authentic audience. Many kids think that the only person who's ever going to read their paper is their teacher. But when we can create a real or even imaginary audience, students will be more engaged in writing. Let me give you an example of a teacher who showed the difference. Students were studying French history, and the teacher always gave the assignment to write an essay about Napoleon Bonaparte's strengths as a leader. The kids never did well on this. Instead, the teacher changed the audience. He said to his students, "You're Napoleon Bonaparte, and you're writing to the people of France to convince them why you are a strong leader. What would you say to them?" The students' writing was much better. This worked so well that the whole school started having students write to authentic audiences. In one class, students wrote to an official at Google about searching online. Two months later, that person wrote back to the class and quoted different kids' papers. They were so psyched. The point is, if teachers can, they should give writing tasks that address a real audience, whether that audience is going to read it or not. Instruction must be direct, explicit, and systematic. This means showing kids how to do a skill or a strategy, modeling it, thinking aloud, giving guided practice, providing lots of scaffolds, and using mentor text models. It's all gotta be explicit.

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About Joan Sedita, M.Ed.

Joan is an experienced educator, serving in the roles of teacher, school administrator, teacher trainer, and literacy consultant since 1975. She has provided literacy professional development to thousands of educators and related professionals at schools, colleges, clinics, and professional conferences. Joan received her Masters in Reading Education from Harvard University in 1980, and her B.A. from Boston College in 1975.

From 1975 until 1998, Joan worked at the Landmark School in Massachusetts, a pioneer school in the development of reading and writing intervention programs as a teacher, supervisor of tutorials, English language arts department chair, and high school principal. She was also the founder and director of the Landmark College Preparation Program and director of the Landmark Outreach Teacher Training Program.

From 1998 to 2007, Joan trained teachers and consulted with schools throughout the country, and was involved with several literacy projects. She was one of three Lead Trainers in Massachusetts for the Reading First Initiative and a consultant to the state's Secondary Reading Initiative. Joan was a national LETRS author and trainer (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling), a member of the ETS Praxis National Reading Advisory Committee, and a member of the LD Worldwide Board of Directors. During this period, she developed the comprehension and vocabulary training programs that were the basis for Keys to Literacy's signature programs, The Key Comprehension Routine and The Key Vocabulary Routine.

In 2007, she founded Keys to Literacy and is currently a Senior advisor to Keys to Literacy and its parent company K12 Coalition. Joan continues to develop literacy professional development programs, mentors the Keys to Literacy staff and national literacy trainers/consultants, presents at literacy conferences, and consults with state departments of education and districts throughout the country.

Joan is the creator of The Writing Rope framework for writing instruction, and the lead author of the Keys to Literacy professional development materials and online courses, including Keys to Adolescent Literacy, The Key Comprehension Routine, The Key Vocabulary Routine, Keys to Content Writing, Keys to Early Writing, and Keys to Beginning Reading. She has authored many books including *The Writing Rope: A Framework for Explicit Writing Instruction in All Subjects* (2023), *The Essentials of Adolescent Literacy*, *The Landmark Study Skills Guide* (1st ed. 1989), *Study Skills: A Teaching Guide* (2nd ed. 2001), *Active Learning and Study Strategies Using Kurzweil 3000* (2003), and *Writing: The Road to Reading Comprehension*, Module 11 of the LETRS reading training series (2004). She has also authored several book chapters and articles, including the "Adolescent Literacy" chapter in *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills* (J.R. Birsh, Ed., 2011) and the "Learning to Write and Writing to Learn" chapter in *Fundamentals of Literacy Instruction and Assessment: 6-12* (M.C. Hougen, Ed., 2014).



Meet the Team

Dr. Andra Mills has more than seventeen years of experience as an educator. She has worked as a classroom teacher, special educator, and math and reading interventionist. She is Associate-level trained in Orton-Gillingham. She has also held certificates as an educational therapist from the National Institute for Learning Development and as a dyslexia therapist from the International Dyslexia Association. Andra was a Professional Learning Facilitator for LETRS, teaching teachers how to teach reading across the United States, and completed a doctorate in Higher Education Leadership and Organizational Studies at Bay Path University. Andra has a passion for serving children and teachers to enhance literacy instruction and the vital connection between theory and practice. Currently, Andra is working at two PreK-8 schools in central Vermont as a literacy coach and teaching a graduate-level class in the education department at Gordon College.



Andra Mills, Ed.S., Ed.D.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction*.

