

What Do We Teach, and When Do We Teach-It?

Textbook publishers often repeat everything year after year. Teachers may like it, but it works *against* good articulation.

Sequencing and spiraling of skills is desired by educators in textbook series in most subject areas. The intent of this practice is to ensure the structured learning of new material and the review of previously practiced skills at levels of increasing difficulty. It allows teachers to concentrate on increasingly challenging skills at their respective levels because they can assume that students will be familiar with basic material.

But does it really work this way? I think not. I contend that sequencing and spiraling is license for repetition and boredom. Let's examine one publisher's partial Tables of Contents of four high school language composition texts shown in Table 1.

The listings are identical, except for the addition of a topic in grades 11 and 12. Does this indicate an orderly progression of skills? Possibly—but look at a comparison of actual textbook exercises for one topic, Writing a Description: Descriptive Language, shown in Table 2.



Table 1
Chapter Contents, Grades 9–12

Grade 9	Grade 10
CHAPTER 7: DESCRIPTIVE WRITING Prewriting: Purpose and Audience 128 Prewriting: Sensory Details 129 Prewriting: Overall Impression 132 Writing a Description: Organization and Coherence 134 Writing a Description: Descriptive Language 135 Writing a Character Sketch 138 Revising, Editing, and Publishing Descriptive Writing 139 Review 143	CHAPTER 7: DESCRIPTIVE WRITING Prewriting: Purpose and Audience 128 Prewriting: Sensory Details 129 Prewriting: Overall Impression 132 Writing a Description: Organization and Coherence 134 Writing a Description: Descriptive Language 136 Writing a Character Sketch 139 Revising, Editing, and Publishing Descriptive Writing 140 Review 145
Grade 11	Grade 12
CHAPTER 8: DESCRIPTIVE WRITING Prewriting: Purpose and Audience 141 Prewriting: Sensory Details 143 Prewriting: Overall Impression 146 Writing a Description: Organization and Coherence 148 Writing a Description: Descriptive Language 151 Writing a Description: Mood 153 Writing a Character Sketch 154 Revising, Editing, and Publishing Descriptive Writing 156 Review 159	CHAPTER 8: DESCRIPTIVE WRITING Prewriting: Purpose and Audience 142 Prewriting: Sensory Details 143 Prewriting: Overall Impression 147 Writing a Description: Organization and Coherence 149 Writing a Description: Descriptive Language 152 Writing a Description: Mood 153 Writing a Character Sketch 155 Revising, Editing, and Publishing Descriptive Writing 157 Review 161

In Table 2, explanations and exercises are highly similar, revealing no progression of skills, no progressive increase in difficulty. These typical exercises make me question how anyone could write the same lesson so consistently. Were they written on a word processor with copy and edit functions? Did the editor accidentally zap out the explanation in the grade 11 text? Is this how publishers create sequencing and spiraling of skills? Is this how my child will learn to write?

Although near word-for-word repetition is widespread in most subject series textbooks, it is most evident in K-12 language arts textbooks. The textbook series represented in Tables 1 and 2 is not unusual; it is simply a blatant example.

Why do publishers do this? This mindless repetition exists primarily because every teacher at every grade wants to teach, or have available to teach, everything. Therefore, publishers, who usually produce what customers want, include *almost* every-

“This mindless repetition exists primarily because every teacher at every grade wants to teach . . . everything.”



thing in every book. What happens to sequencing and spiraling when several teachers within a district begin each year on page one and proceed sequentially through the book, completing only half to two-thirds by June?

“Therefore, publishers, who usually produce what customers want, include almost everything in every book.”

Table 2
Writing a Description, Grades 9–12

Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
WRITING A DESCRIPTION: DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE	WRITING A DESCRIPTION: DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE	WRITING A DESCRIPTION: DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE	WRITING A DESCRIPTION: DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE
<p>Effective descriptive writing uses exact and vivid language.</p> <p>If you want your readers to know how the subject you describe looks, sounds, smells, tastes, or feels, you will have to choose your words carefully and place them exactly. By exercising such care in choosing and placing words, you will make your description vivid. In addition, the precise words you choose will place your individual stamp on your writing.</p>	<p>Effective descriptive writing uses exact and vivid language.</p> <p>In order to pinpoint just how your subject looks, sounds, smells, and feels, you need to pick and place your words exactly. As a result, your writing will become vivid almost automatically, for precise language gives descriptive writing an individual spark and twist.</p>	<p>Effective descriptive writing uses exact and vivid language.</p>	<p>Effective descriptive writing uses exact and vivid language.</p> <p>In order to describe your subject exactly as you experienced or imagined it, you need to select and place your words exactly. Your writing will thereby become vivid almost without conscious effort, because precise language gives descriptive writing an individual flavor and twist.</p>
<p>When it comes time to choose between two similar words to use in a description, keep the following suggestions in mind. If you want to know more about any of these suggestions, refer to Chapter 5.</p>	<p>Keep in mind the following points when you are choosing between two similar words for descriptive writing. For more information about any of these points, see Chapter 5.</p>	<p>Remember the following points when you are choosing words for descriptive writing. For more information about any of these points, see Chapter 5.</p>	<p>When you are choosing between two similar words for descriptive writing, keep in mind the following points. For more information about any of these points, see Chapter 5.</p>
<p>1. Always choose the most specific word.</p> <p>GENERAL: The <u>building</u> stood on the <u>place</u> like a silent sentinel.</p> <p>SPECIFIC: The <u>castle</u> stood on the <u>cliff</u> like a silent sentinel.</p>	<p>1. Always, always, always pick the most specific word.</p> <p>GENERAL: I would start out in the <u>boat</u> in the long shadows of the <u>trees</u>.</p> <p>SPECIFIC: I would . . . start out in the <u>canoe</u> . . . in the long shadows of the <u>pinetrees</u>.</p> <p>—E. B. White</p>	<p>1. Always pick the most specific word.</p> <p>GENERAL: The <u>bird</u> soared over the grove of barren <u>trees</u>.</p> <p>MORE SPECIFIC: The <u>eagle</u> soared over the grove of barren <u>maples</u>.</p>	<p>1. Always select the most specific word.</p> <p>GENERAL: The <u>people</u> were splendid <u>artists</u>.</p> <p>SPECIFIC: The <u>Egyptians</u> were splendid <u>portraitists</u>.</p> <p>—Ariane Ruskin</p>
<p>EXERCISE 9. Using Descriptive Language. Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact and vivid language. Use figures of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine any sentences as you see fit.</p> <p>Paul stopped rowing to look at the sunset. It was as pretty as a picture. A group of birds moved just over the water one last time before going to their roosting places. Shadows of the trees were on the water of the lake. Behind the trees the sun looked beautiful. A shiny fish came out of the water near Paul's boat. It scared him. Everything was so quiet. When it got dark, Paul took the boat back to shore. He had a good feeling.</p>	<p>EXERCISE 10. Using Descriptive Language. Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact and vivid language. Use figures of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine any sentences as you see fit.</p> <p>Our group climbed to the mountain top. Fred and I moved ahead of the others, yelling our heads off when we caught sight of the mountain top. The view that we saw at the top of the mountain was very colorful. The clouds below us looked nice. The sky around us was blue. We all enjoyed the experience a great deal.</p>	<p>EXERCISE 11. Using Descriptive Language. Rewrite the following paragraph using more exact words and vivid language. Use a figure of speech in at least one sentence. Combine any sentences as you see fit.</p> <p>Our rubber raft went quickly down the fast river. Cliffs of the surrounding gorge sped by like blinking lights. The current carried us rapidly. The raft moved up and down over the foamy waves and rocks. Then we entered a quiet piece of still water. The peace was nice. Finally we were as safe as a doorknob.</p>	<p>EXERCISE 11. Using Descriptive Language. Rewrite the following paragraph by using more exact and vivid language. Use a figure of speech in at least one sentence. Feel free to combine sentences as you see fit.</p> <p>Camping out was a good experience. First we set up our tent and put some things into it. We then got some wood and made a fire. Next we cooked dinner, which turned out to be very good. After our meal we sat around the fire, sang some nice songs, and shot the breeze for a while before turning in.</p>

“... what do students learn when, each year, they get a different book with essentially the same content?”

And what do students learn when, each year, they get a different book with essentially the same content? Do they learn clarity, brevity, and accuracy? Or do they learn repetition, redundancy, or worse—that writing is boring?

Let's look again at Table 2. Consistent with most 7-12 or 9-12 language textbook series, the grade 12 book is the “complete program.” The grade 12 book usually includes what the other grades may only imply. Furthermore, it is often better written.

Therefore, if sequencing and spiraling of skills is the reason your district purchases a series, wouldn't it be more honest to purchase only one book—the best book—for all students? Incoming seventh-graders could be given the grade 12 book—the complete program—and told it would be theirs for six years, grades 7-12. They would know what they were supposed to learn. They could mark their book just as college students mark texts. And at graduation each student would be given the book. After all, the life of most textbooks is six years. Perhaps, by using one book for six years, students would get to know it and use it when writing in other subjects (writing across the curriculum). Articulation between grades

and between teachers would be guaranteed. Sequencing and spiraling, if desired, would have to be directed by the district's curriculum guide, not the publishers' series.

There is another option. Three publishers whose textbooks I examined did not follow this practice. These books are thin, containing about half the number of pages as some of the best-sellers. Students in these programs are required to think, to use

their own words, their own ideas. They experience the word manipulation struggle every writer faces in an attempt to transfer images and concepts from one mind to another. However, these books don't sell well. They don't try to provide everything at every grade. □

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Call for Manuscripts

The May 1988 issue of *Educational Leadership* will focus on “Families, Values, and Schools.” We welcome articles dealing with the effects of schools on students' values and the relationship between parents and educators in

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