

Writing, Grades 4-6

English Learner

Learning to speak English can be a long and complicated process. Learning to write English is even more complicated. English Learners have special challenges in learning to write English. They generally understand more English than they can produce, and finding the words and using the correct English grammar are special challenges for them.

Some English Learners will come to school knowing different alphabet or character systems than those used in English; encourage these students to share what they know about other writing systems and try to use their knowledge of other languages as a tool for teaching them this new linguistic system. At first, English Learners may wish to draw or cut out pictures to express themselves. As students gain confidence as English readers, they will be ready to begin to write.

Although language barriers may prevent English Learners from clearly expressing themselves, they will certainly have ideas that they want to communicate. Encourage them to express themselves in oral or written form. In a safe environment that rewards effort and good ideas rather than error-free English, students will take risks with their new language. The vocabulary that students will acquire and retain most quickly and with the most ease will be that which strikes their interest—the words they are curious about. Therefore, early on, students must learn how to ask about anything they don't understand and anything they want to know. As soon as possible, teach students to use the phrases, "What is _____?" and "Please explain _____." Encourage students to ask questions and use their questions as a teaching guide to make any necessary clarifications, to assess your students' grasp of the materials, and to learn about their interests.

Pairing English Learners with native English-speaking students can be very productive. Have students work together, discuss their writing plans, and help each other develop writing ideas.

One way to ease English Learners into writing is in group-writing activities, such as the following:

- Explain the subject of the writing activity.
- Have each student suggest a sentence on that subject. Give examples of appropriate sentences to help students get started. Work with students to extend sentences. Depending on your students' writing abilities, take one of the following approaches:
 - -Write notes on the board and have the students write sentences from the notes.
 - -Write sentences on the board for the students to copy onto sheets of paper.
 - -Have the students write out sentences as members of their group suggest them.
 - -Write sentences on paper for the students. (You may wish to write in light pencil and make photocopies, so that students can trace over the sentences with ink or colored pencils, either later in class or as homework.)
- Each group can build a piece of writing together, using the list of sentences they have developed.
- The piece of writing may be considered complete at this point. Or the students can use what they wrote as a group in class as a template for an independent writing project, changing words or ideas here and there. They can also illustrate the piece. These activities may be done as homework.