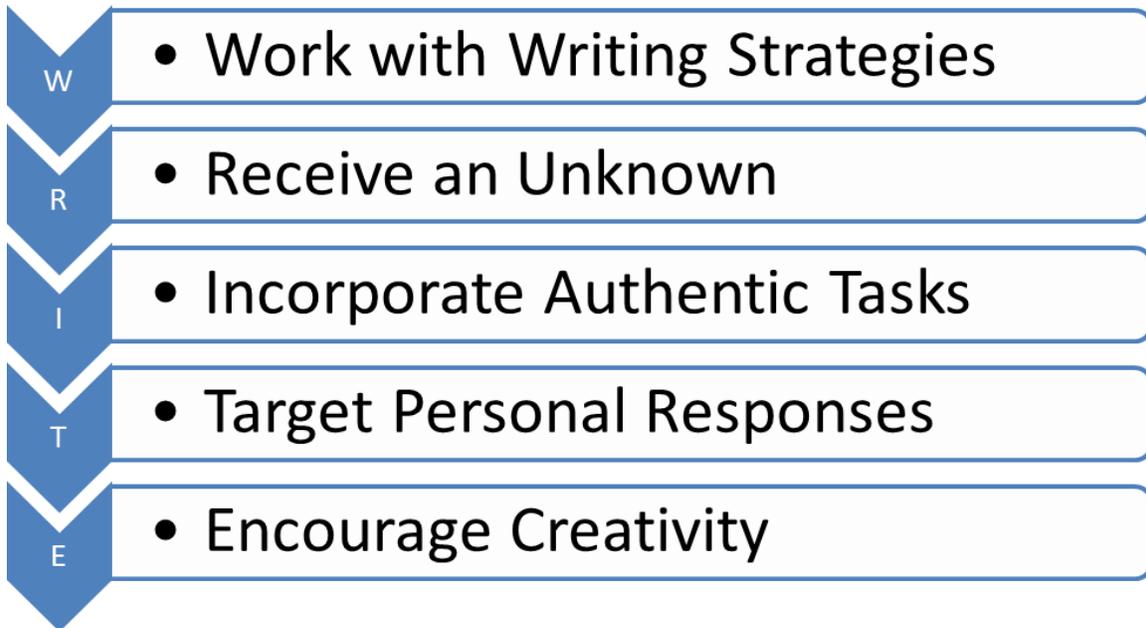


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## Improving Students' Writing: Five Techniques for Success

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<http://promotelanguage.com/write>

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## Written Communication in the Classroom: Supporting Research and Literature

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### **1) Set a purpose for writing in the classroom.**

Reichelt (2001) asks us to consider the role and purpose of writing in the target language within the classroom. The purpose may be influenced by the context outside of the classroom, a specific learning goal (e.g. reinforce new vocabulary) or skills such as reading or listening in the classroom, among others. With a set purpose in mind, Reichelt argues teachers are able to make better pedagogical decisions about writing instruction. Writing in the classroom can be done in numerous forms, with different purposes that are introduced in varying ways. For example, Miyazoe (2010) demonstrates how to use forums, blogs, and wikis in a blended learning environment and shows how those writing tools positively impact students' L2 progress. Roddy (2009) describes a semester-long project involving several tasks in his intermediate German class in which groups of students collaborate to design a rock band tour throughout German-speaking countries. Yasuda (2011) explores genre-based writing in a study where Japanese students use e-mail messages in authentic tasks and improve their L2.

### **2) Encourage students to use strategies.**

A few studies suggest that providing strategy training in world language classrooms improved students' grammatical competence and overall writing (Aziz, 1995, Klohs, 1994). Strategy-based instruction is thought to lead to more learner autonomy, to foster metacognition, and to facilitate students' thinking about their own learning processes (Chamot, 2005). According to Chamot (2009), the first step in explicit strategy instruction is to help students understand what strategies are and to assist them in identifying strategies they are already using. Metacognition is crucial according to Ruiz-Funes (2001) whose research emphasizes that FL students interpret a similar task differently and therefore write with a different purpose. She also found that writing syntactically complex structures does not equate sophisticated compositions, nor does grammatical accuracy equate elaborated ideas. In the classroom, she recommends to stress the process of writing (interacting with a text, transforming it, elaborating on it) rather than accentuating linguistics accuracy.

### **3) Focus on process approaches to writing.**

Pedagogical practices associated with process instruction generally lead to positive outcomes (see Reichelt, 2001 for a review of related literature). Process instruction is described in various ways but usually includes prewriting, writing and rewriting; circling out and circling back; or drafting, revision, and editing. The process may involve teacher or peer review as well. For example, Ferris (1995) shows that teacher feedback is more effective on preliminary drafts of papers than on their final draft. Students pay more attention and thus respond to such corrections, which helps to improve their writing skills (see Bitchener (2009), Ferris (2010), and Hartshorn (2010) for discussions on written corrective feedback and its many approaches). Process instruction can be done in single projects, or in projects tied together in the long-term: for an entire term, or even an entire curriculum (Byrnes et al 2010).

### **4) Connect to what students think, feel, and experience.**

Calkins (1994), in her well-respected book regarding writing in the elementary school, argues students are motivated to write based on the stories, memories, ideas they each bring to the classroom. She argues our job as teachers is to listen to students and help them listen to what they know well. Students want to write about personal and authentic topics that matter to them instead of make-believe topics. For example, Brown and Brown (2009) show that emphasizing argumentation and debate in a content-based type of instruction significantly improves learners' writing skills. In addition, Skill Acquisition Theory as described by DeKeyser (2007) predicts that declarative knowledge (i.e. what a learner knows) is necessary for the development of procedural knowledge (i.e. what a learner can do). This proceduralization requires much intense and intentional practice based on rules and applications, because knowledge doesn't transfer well. However, it transfers better with frequent and authentic practice.

For more information on L2 writing theories and a complete list of references visit our website.

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# WRITE

## Work with Writing Strategies

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### Writing Freely: Brainstorming

Students, especially in a second/other language, often have difficulty “getting out of their own heads” and focus so much on a perfect written product that they often have trouble writing anything at all. As a brainstorming activity, ask students to get together in pairs and discuss their family, what they did on vacation, or another familiar topic writing down appropriate vocabulary words that they can later use when they are writing. Then, ask the students to sit down in front of the computer, open the appropriate word processing program, turn off the monitor and free write. Ask the students to focus only on their thoughts and ideas and to forget about grammar and spelling (at this stage). Once 10-15 minutes have passed, ask the students to turn on the monitor and make appropriate changes/additions and discuss their ideas with a partner.

### Exercises of Style

This is based on French surrealist writer Raymond Queneau’s essays “Exercices de Style”, in which he rewrites the same short story 99 times in a different style each time. Teacher provides models, either from Queneau’s book (see handout) or makes own models. Students read the models then write their own. They can write variations of a given story, or write their own story and then make variations. Variations are the most fun when they are truly surrealistic. For example: Base sentence - “In the morning I wake up, drink my coffee, and go to school.” Adverb variation - “Quietly in the morning, I quickly wake up, drink my coffee slowly, and happily go to school.” Geometric variation - “In the round morning, I wake up a square, drink my oval coffee, and go to school walking straight.”

### More and Less

The following activity focuses on two different strategies a) Strategy for writing concisely: Avoid saying the same thing twice so remove repetitive wording and b) Strategy for descriptive writing: Visualize, with your eyes closed, a picture with as much detail as possible. Give pairs of students a few descriptive sentences. Ask them to remove non-essential words to maintain grammatically correct sentences and content (more concise writing). Take the same original story and add more detail (more descriptive writing). Conclude by asking students to write their favorite elaboration on the board.

### Writing Round-Up

This activity will help students to free-write and focus their topic. Remind students that they will be free-writing and should not be considered with grammar, spelling, or other language concerns; the goal is to let the ideas emerge. Give students about five minutes to begin writing then ask them to stop and circle any key ideas or points that they’d like to develop more (they may consult with a partner if they choose). Give them another five minutes to elaborate on the topics they circled and repeat the process several times. To conclude, ask them to create an outline and/or writing plan for the next time they work on writing.

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# wRITE

## Receive an Unknown

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### Figurative language is like sprinkles on a cupcake.

Before class, the teacher prepares several of interesting images. A different image is placed on different pieces of paper (one per group).

In class, the teacher first explains the difference between similes and metaphors. Students are put into groups of two or three. Groups are given the images and asked to write a simile and metaphor to describe the image. After 2-3 minutes, the groups pass their paper to the next group. This continues until groups receive practice writing at least 4-5 different metaphors and/or similes. To check the assignment, the teacher selects one of the images from the class to display and groups describe it with metaphors and similes.

This activity is an excellent warm-up and is a great way to allow students to think about incorporating figurative language into an upcoming descriptive essay.

**Activity One:** Based on the picture below, write one metaphor and one simile to describe Profe Salazar.



Profe Salazar

<b>Simile</b>	
<b>Metaphor</b>	

### Destination Unknown

Before class, the teacher should write down travel destinations of the country/region being studied (or more generally, international cities/sites) on small slips of paper and place them in a hat. In class, the teacher asks each student to draw a piece of paper out of a hat without showing it to anyone. Then the students write down three to four descriptive clues starting from hardest to easiest. They should then fold the paper accordion style so that only one clue is showing. Then the students pass the paper to another student. The student should read the clue and write down a guess of the destination. Next, they should pass the paper to another student who reads another clue and writes down a guess. Finally, the paper should be returned to the writer who reads the clues and reveals the correct answer to all students. This is a stimulating, quick way to review places and accompanying vocabulary.

## **Story Building**

The teacher presents a basic layout for a story (e.g. introduction, character development, plot climax, dénouement) then gives students a sheet of paper with each category and a prompt on it. The students write the first section (e.g. setting: “a kingdom:), sketch an image of their writing, then fold the paper so the writing is not seen. The paper is then passed to the next student who writes in the second piece (e.g. describe main character: “a princess”) and so on until the story is complete. The paper is then passed back down the row of authors so each can read the completed “surprise” story.

## **Wiki Story**

Wikis are online tools enabling anyone to modify an internet page created for a collaborative purpose (e.g., [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Using a wiki as part of a course allows teachers and learners to make instant changes to the same document, visible to all online. This technology can help stimulate writing by providing material to which to respond in multiple ways. For example, have students choose a famous person or character from the target culture. Students then collaborate to write their persons’ journal as if they were living today. They can also record their reaction to material they come across as they explore the world. With Napoléon Bonaparte, for instance, student A may include a picture and a small backstory on Napoléon and how he came to travel to today. They can summarize a newspaper article about Lady Gaga’s concert in Paris and Napoléon’s reaction and belief she is the leader of the world. Then student B updates the journal and explains how Napoléon figured out that Lady Gaga isn’t ruling on the planet and summarizes the current political situation in France. Student B includes a story of how Napoléon went to a restaurant and discovered the cake mille-feuilles. The recipe is included. And so forth. At the end of the term, stories can be printed into a little souvenir book.

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# WRITE

## Incorporate Authentic Tasks

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### Text Me

Appeal to students' digital literacy by teaching them SMS language (i.e. texting abbreviations; for Spanish example, see: <http://www.zadorspain.com/spanishblog/?p=112>). Create a cell phone image on a piece of paper with a large screen. Student A sits with desk facing Student B and the teacher gives them each a task (e.g. make plans to get together for Saturday night). Now the classroom becomes a texting only/no talking environment and each writes a greeting on their "phone." The papers are then swapped and replies are written until the plan is finalized and/or time is called. Students may then orally share their plans with the class along with any questions or comments about the SMS language. [For greater discussion of texting in the classroom, see González-Bueno and Pérez-Sotelo (2009), *Language Educator*, 4 (5).]

### Taking a Trip

Developing creative material for an authentic, real-world task can be highly motivating for students. Explain to the students that they will be, in small groups, creating a promotional flyer for the Office of Tourism in the (target country/city). They should begin by doing research on their country/city focusing on landmarks, food, culture, shopping, etc. (It may be easier for each group to focus on only one or two aspects.) and think about why they would want to visit that destination. As a group, they should then create an attractive promotional flyer with photos, links, copy, etc. to show to the class. The class will vote on the best promotional flyer, which will then be sent to the Office of Tourism in the (target country/city).

### Letter Writing with Classroom Stationery

There is nothing more rewarding than writing a class newsletter or a letter to someone on homemade stationery. Give each student a small post-it note. Ask them to write down adjectives that describe language class or draw an image of something that reminds them of Spanish class. Stick the post-it notes around the border of an 8 x 11 sheet of paper with the name of your class/school at the top. Then, photocopy the sheet to create your polished class stationery. With the stationery, let each student write a letter to their parents explaining what they have been learning in Spanish class or to a Spanish pen-pal in another class or city. Teach them how to open and close letters in the target language. Give them writing frames if necessary to assist them with letter writing.

### Group Résumé

Writing a résumé is a useful skill to have in any language. But depending on the country, cultural practices vary and students need to be taught both the preferred format and the specialized language. In addition, students may have very little work experience, and therefore filling up a blank page, or comparing one's experience with someone else's, can be intimidating. This activity helps students practice writing a résumé more easily. First, teacher can show a model résumé from the target country and from the students' home country. Students can compare both and learn what a résumé should be like. Students are then directed to an authentic list of job ads and asked to select one for which they'd like to apply. Then they reflect on what skills they should emphasize if they were to apply. Finally, students are organized in groups of 4 or 5. Each group selects one job ad and builds a group résumé. For example, if in a group of 5 every one has had 1 year of French, they should write "5 years of French" in their résumé. Between 4 or 5 students, there should be enough varying experiences to write an interesting résumé. At the end, job ads and résumés are displayed. Groups must read them and decide if they would hire the candidate for the position.

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# WRITE

## Target Personal Responses

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### Reverse Fill In the Blank

To prepare for a vocabulary test, students look at a list of words, pick four or five words, and write a coherent, meaningful paragraph about themselves leaving a blank where those words would be. Teacher collects the anonymous paragraphs and (1) students fill in the blanks to review vocabulary, (2) students guess who those paragraphs are describing. Those paragraphs can be corrected together in class. They can be used throughout the semester as quick review exercises and to see if students still remember to whom they belong. That helps create a sense of community in class.

**Activity Three:** Among the following list of words related to professional conferences, choose five words and include them in three sentences that describe you.

luggage rental car shuttle name tag banquet presentation technology handouts	fast forgetful prepared late serious funny expert organized
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### Feature Yourself

Students first spend time viewing front page newspapers from the target region on

<http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/>

Students study the typical layout, organization, and format of the front page of a newspaper. Next, they create their own front page featuring stories from their life. The front page they create must contain relevant images, personal stories, and an advertisement with a cultural product. They feature themselves writing the front page of their lives. To close this project, have students read a partner's newspaper and then ask at least three questions about why they choose that particular story or event. This activity comes from Best of Puntocom (Koch, Hlas, Larson, 2011) [www.bestofpuntocom.net](http://www.bestofpuntocom.net)

### **Baby Face**

Have students create a poster featuring a baby photo of themselves and then ask them to write what they were like as a baby/young child as well as a memorable event. Tell them not to use their names or key identifying details (e.g. sibling names). Under each poster, include a blank sheet of paper and ask students to write the names of the classmate they think the baby is. Alternately, students may select a culturally-relevant individual (e.g. Frida Kahlo, Claude Monet), find an image of them as a child, share their biography and a key moment in their life.

### **How am I doing?**

Around the fifth week of class or so, ask the students to do a self-assessment. They should take out a piece of paper, write their name on it, and fold it in half vertically. On the left side of the paper, they should write down (in complete sentences: optional) in what areas of language learning they are improving. They should consider: listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (and anything else they would like to include). On the right side of the paper, they should write down the difficulties/challenges that they are having. Then, it should be folded and put into an envelope. The teacher should read (and comment: optional) over the strengths and challenges and tailor the curriculum as appropriate. After another 4-5 weeks, the students should again self-assess. They may find that their challenge is now an improvement. This self-assessment can be done 3-4 times a semester or as appropriate.

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# WRITE

## Encourage Creativity

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### Calligrammes

A “calligramme” is a poem written in such a way that it becomes a visual representation of the poem’s subject. For example, if you write about an apple, your lines will be shaped to look like an apple. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire created this portmanteau word by merging “calligraphie” (*handwriting*) and “idéogramme” (*picture*). Examples of Apollinaire’s calligrammes can be found here: <http://www.guillaume-apolinaire.fr/calligrammes.htm>. Teacher can model some calligrammes, some simple and others complex. Then students can use their imagination to create their own. Poems may follow given patterns and rhymes, or may be totally free form. They can be displayed around the classroom.



**Activity Four:** Write your own calligramme in a language of your choosing. First think of an object or an animal that is easy to draw. Next think of themes or words you would like to associate to the topic you selected. Finally, draw and share!

### Gallery Walk

Using a large sheet of paper, have pairs of students write a brief story with a cliffhanger ending. The story is then illustrated and hung on the wall with a blank sheet next to it. There should be multiple stories around the classroom. Have the students travel in a circle around the room in pairs to write a unique last sentence on each story, finally returning to see what endings were written for their own story. It may be helpful to play music to prompt them to move on to the next station.

## **Songwriter**

In pairs or small groups, students are asked to write a tune to a familiar song such as *Frère Jacques* or *Blue Moon*. This activity works well for writing songs to review grammar and vocabulary for an upcoming test or to simply narrate events from the weekend. When completed, encourage students to perform their song to the class, have class sing-alongs, or make a music video.

An example song:

*Sung to tune of Frère Jacques.*

*WRITE at ACTFL*

*WRITE at ACTFL*

*Five strategies*

*Five strategies*

*We hope you find this useful*

*We hope you find this useful*

*Let's move on*

*Let's move on*

## **Greetings**

Students learning a second/other language often want to know what to say if a friend or classmate has a birthday, is ill, is graduating, lost a family member, etc. First, teach students culturally appropriate expressions for a variety of situations like: happy birthday, in deepest sympathy, congratulations, etc. (You may also want to teach them anything culturally inappropriate.) Then, ask students to choose a type of greeting card that they would like to make. They should then design the card with photos, clip art, colors, etc. and add appropriate expressions. The students should share the finished greeting cards with the class.

# Appendix

## Texting Shortcuts

English	SMS
AAR8	at any rate
ASAP	as soon as possible
BC	because
B4	before
BBS	be back soon
BRB	be right back
BTW	by the way
C	see
CUL8R	see you later
DUCWIM	do you see what I mean?
F2F	face to face
FWIW	for what it's worth
G2G	got to go
H8	hate
IDK	I don't know
IMHO	in my humble/honest opinion
IRL	in real life
JIC	just in case
JK	just kidding
K	okay
L8R	later
LOL	laughing out loud
MMA	meet me at

English	SMS
NP	no problem
OIC	oh, I see
OMG	oh my gosh
OTOH	on the other hand
PLZ	please
OIC	oh, I see
Q	question
RU	are you
SRY	sorry
SYS	see you soon
TBH	to be honest
TIA	thanks in advance
SYS	see you soon
TY	thank you
U	you
U2	you too
UR	you are
WFM	works for me
Y	why
ZZZ	tired/bored
?	question/what?
*bucks	Starbucks
2	to/too/two

## U R Txtng!

**Activity Two:** You are going to use the phone below to have a texting conversation with your partner. Use as much shorthand as possible. **Situation:** You are both delayed and have an extra day in Denver. Plan what you will do with the time together including activities and dining.

