



Using Past Papers in the Collins Classroom

One of the most powerful, and underused, techniques for improving writing skills is the use of past papers as a vehicle for practicing and applying new skills. Students are often bored when practicing new writing skills on worksheets and then fail to apply these skills in their own writing later. In *Implementing the Cumulative Writing Folder Program*, John Collins describes the effectiveness of having writers work with past papers.

For whatever writing skill you want to teach, from avoidance of run-on sentences to writing interesting beginnings, have students practice the skill by editing or revising [previous] compositions...These compositions are the best source of practice sheets that you will ever have. Certainly, they are more relevant and challenging than drill lessons from a grammar book. Students can make their edits right on the composition, or if major rewriting is involved, they can rewrite only those sections that are being revised...By the end of the year, they will be impressed to see how well they can edit compositions that they thought were perfect when they first wrote them.

Past papers can be acquired by maintaining student writing portfolios throughout the year, by asking for willing students to volunteer their papers for screen sharing, and by collecting and saving student samples from year to year.

How to Use Past Papers During Instruction

To clarify the FCAs

- When I say, “clever hook,” here are some examples of what I mean. Let’s look at each writer’s hook, identify the type of hook used, and then choose one type of hook to try on our own.
- For our next assignment, one of the FCAs is to “Explain your evidence.” We are going to compare two writing samples. In one, the writer clearly explains his evidence and links it back to his reasoning. In the other, the writer merely repeats his reason without explaining. Let’s discuss and work together to fix the second example.

To model a new skill

- Let’s look at this student’s essay. He has a well-written closing paragraph. Here’s what makes it strong. Once we understand the elements of an effective closing, we will try writing our own.
- See how this writer used transition words and phrases to link ideas smoothly. Let’s circle them and discuss each one. Then we will add at least three new and improved transitions to our last essay.

To correct a problem area in writing

- This writer uses repetitive sentence beginnings, a problem I’m seeing in a lot of your papers lately. Let’s work together to find some ways to fix this problem and incorporate varied sentence beginnings. Then we’re going to fix the same problem in our essays from last week.
- I’m seeing a lot of capitalization errors lately. In this writing sample, circle all the proper nouns you can find. Highlight the capital letter for each and add any capitals that have been forgotten. I found seven errors; see if you can find all of them and label each with the capitalization rule from *Check Mate*. Then we will do the same with our most recent essays.

To practice applying a new skill

- Let’s take a look at this writer’s work. Find two places where you could use a simile or metaphor to describe the setting with more detail. Type Two: In your journal, record two similes or metaphors the writer might use.
- Here is a sample text-based response based on our current novel. The writer did not cite any direct quotes. Now that we are learning how to do that, let’s find one quote for each of the author’s reasons and add them.

To model and practice the revising and editing process

- Let’s read this student’s essay aloud and listen for places that sound awkward. When you hear something that doesn’t sound quite right, raise your hand and I will mark a check (or your initials) in that spot. Once we’ve read the entire paper, I will come back to you to find out what you noticed.
- Read this writing sample aloud to yourself. When you finish, we will do a Type Two writing, and I will ask you to give the writer two tips to improve her writing.