A Stable Foundation for Every Writer

The research-informed foundations of explicit Tier One teaching, GRADUATE, and OnRAMP

THE WRITING ACADEMY®, LLC

Abstract

Access to writing instruction requires more than placing every learner in the same classroom. It requires teaching that makes expert thinking visible, returns to essential learning over time, and responds to evidence of individual progress. This paper examines three complementary foundations of The Writing Academy®, LLC: Ebbinghaus' forgetting curve, distributed learning, and the gradual release of responsibility commonly expressed as "I do, We do, You do." It explains how Randi Whitney's GRADUATE Infinity Learning Cycle organizes these principles into a recurring instructional process and how OnRAMP (Recognize And Map Progress) connects instruction to five Thinking Levels, also called Reference Performance Level Descriptors (RPLDs). The Writing Matrix series extends this approach through teacher literature addressing multiple entry points across writing stages and genres. Together, these elements provide a coherent rationale for explicit Tier One, whole-group teaching with differentiated access. The central proposition is that a stable instructional foundation and responsive next steps are complementary responsibilities, not competing approaches.

Key Terms at a Glance

- **Tier One:** The universal instructional foundation available to all students, not a particular level of student ability.
- **Forgetting Curve:** Ebbinghaus' finding that memory declines substantially after initial exposure, justifying deliberate opportunities to revisit learning.
- **Distributed Learning:** Learning opportunities separated over time rather than compressed into a single encounter (also called spaced practice).
- **Gradual Release ("I do, We do, You do"):** Movement from teacher modeling through guided practice toward student responsibility and self-monitoring.
- **GRADUATE Infinity Learning Cycle:** Gather, Reveal, Attempt, Discuss, Use, Award, Target, Explain. A recurring instructional process designed by Randi Whitney.
- **OnRAMP (Recognize And Map Progress):** Five Thinking Levels (Foundational, Emergent, Visible, Independent, Reflective), also called Reference Performance Level Descriptors (RPLDs).
- **The Writing Matrix Series:** Teacher literature addressing multiple entry points across writing stages and genres.

SECTION 1

Access Begins with a Shared Instructional Foundation

A dependable writing approach must answer three questions: How will students understand what writers do? How will they retain and reuse that learning? How will instruction respond when learners need different next steps? The Writing Academy®, LLC brings these questions together through a supplemental support system designed to provide additional instruction and additional practice alongside an existing reading-language arts core curriculum. Its whole-group commitment establishes a shared instructional foundation; its GRADUATE and OnRAMP frameworks organize continued learning and differentiated progress within that foundation (Whitney, 2026).

Tier One refers to the universal instructional foundation available to all students, not to a particular level of student ability. The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports (2025) identifies explicit sequences, varied opportunities to respond, corrective feedback, accessible materials, and instruction responsive to student evidence as important features of strong Tier One teaching. Whole-group instruction can deliver those features, but "whole group" does not mean identical scaffolds, identical responses, or a prohibition on partner work and flexible grouping.

Explicit teaching is an access practice. Archer and Hughes (2011) describe instruction that clarifies the learning purpose, demonstrates a skill, provides supported practice, and gradually withdraws assistance as performance improves. In writing, that means making decisions visible: why a writer selects one detail rather than another, how evidence supports an idea, and what a revision accomplishes for a reader. Showing a finished paragraph is not the same as teaching the thinking that produced it.

This distinction is consequential for learners who do not yet recognize the unstated expectations of academic writing. A teacher might compare two explanations, think aloud about their differences, and invite every student to improve one sentence. Students can share a common purpose while using different supports. CAST's (2024) Universal Design for Learning Guidelines similarly emphasize multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression. In practice, access might include an accessible passage, oral rehearsal, clear visual organization, an assistive tool, or a carefully chosen sentence starter, without unnecessarily reducing the intellectual goal.

> *"Universal access remains a design commitment, not a promise that one lesson will eliminate every barrier."*

Some students will also need targeted or intensive support. Strengthening whole-group teaching should preserve that support, not replace it. The relevant question is whether each learner can participate meaningfully, demonstrate current understanding, and receive instruction that moves learning forward.

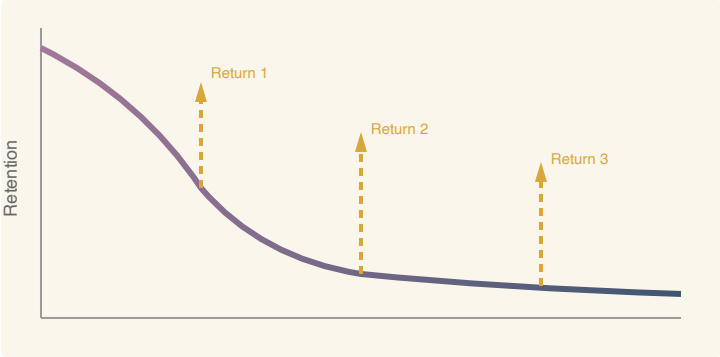
SECTION 2

Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve: Teaching Beyond First Exposure

Hermann Ebbinghaus' *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology*, originally published in 1885, established an experimental approach to studying learning and forgetting. Working largely with himself as the participant and with lists of nonsense syllables, he measured retention through "savings": the reduction in effort required to relearn previously studied material. His results showed substantial early loss followed by a slower rate of forgetting across longer intervals (Ebbinghaus, 1885/1913).

The familiar forgetting curve is therefore a useful warning against equating presentation with lasting learning. It is not a universal percentage schedule for every student, subject, or classroom. Murre and Dros (2015) replicated the broad pattern using a similar savings procedure, while also identifying features more complicated than a perfectly smooth decline. Teachers should use this research to justify deliberate opportunities to revisit learning, not to claim that every student forgets a fixed percentage after a fixed number of minutes.

For writing instruction, the practical implication is straightforward: a skill introduced once must become a skill available again. Knowing the definition of evidence during Monday's lesson does not establish that a student can select and explain evidence in Friday's composition. The instructional design should invite the learner back to the distinction between evidence and explanation, the purpose of each, and the relationship between them.



Ebbinghaus' forgetting curve with spaced returns to learning

KEY IDEA

The instructional response to forgetting is not blame. It is a planned return: retrieve, check, clarify, and apply. Students should encounter these returns as ordinary features of learning rather than as evidence that they are deficient.

Retrieval research strengthens this application. Roediger and Karpicke (2006) found that recalling studied prose improved delayed retention more than repeated study in their experiments, even when repeated study produced stronger immediate performance. Retrieval is not simply another name for rereading. It asks learners to bring something back to mind. In a writing lesson, students might explain a strategy before reopening their notes, identify the revision move used yesterday, or reconstruct the purpose of a paragraph from memory before checking a model.

The goal is not to promise that forgetting will stop, but to make important knowledge more available when writing demands it.

SECTION 3

Distributed Learning: Returning to the Process While Building the Paper

The "distributive learning process" is more commonly termed distributed practice or spaced practice in the research literature. It refers to learning opportunities separated over time rather than compressed into a single encounter. In a large quantitative synthesis, Cepeda and colleagues (2006) found a substantial research base for spacing effects in verbal learning. Their later study showed that effective spacing depends partly on how long information must be retained; there is no single optimal interval for every instructional purpose (Cepeda et al., 2008).

Spacing and retrieval are related but distinct. Spacing concerns when learning is revisited; retrieval concerns what the learner does during that return. A teacher can space repeated explanations without asking students to recall anything. Conversely, several retrieval attempts in one sitting do not provide the same temporal distribution as returning on later days. A strong writing design uses both: scheduled revisiting and purposeful reconstruction or application.

For The Writing Academy®, LLC, the application is cumulative writing instruction rather than a sequence of disconnected units. An isolated planning unit, followed by an isolated drafting unit, followed by an isolated revising unit risks obscuring how these processes work together. The Institute of Education Sciences writing guide explicitly describes writing as flexible and recursive, with writers moving among planning, drafting, evaluating, revising, and editing. Its recommendation to teach the writing process for multiple purposes carries a strong evidence rating (Graham et al., 2012/2018, pp. 12-17).

A teacher can therefore focus a lesson on one component without severing that component from the whole. When teaching elaboration, students return to their purpose, reread the claim, inspect the evidence, and add an explanation that advances the paper. When teaching revision, they may discover a need to gather more information or adjust the original plan. The process remains visible while the instructional spotlight moves.

Consider a proposed sequence: students establish an idea and plan a response; return later to retrieve the plan and draft; revisit the draft to add and explain evidence; then evaluate and revise for a reader. In subsequent lessons, they recall the same decision-making process while composing

about another topic. These are illustrative scheduling choices, not a scientifically mandated timetable. Their value depends on successful practice, feedback, and later performance.

> *"Distributed learning should build a reusable process, not dependence on a familiar example."*

Repeatedly reciting the names of the writing-process stages is insufficient. Students need to explain what each stage accomplishes and decide when to use it. Likewise, reusing one passage can support continuity, but later writing with a new passage is necessary to examine transfer.

SECTION 4

I Do, We Do, You Do: Making Independence Possible

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The gradual release of responsibility provides an instructional response to the question of how learners move from observing a skill to using it independently. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) described movement from teacher modeling through guided practice toward student responsibility, including self-monitoring. Their account emphasizes that the teacher's eventual withdrawal depends on the guidance provided along the way.

I do: reveal the thinking. The teacher demonstrates a writing decision and makes its reasoning audible. For example: "This detail is interesting, but it does not support my reason. I will choose the detail that helps my reader understand my point." The model teaches selection and justification, not merely the appearance of a finished response. Students should have a clear feature to notice as they observe.

We do: build a bridge through participation. Teacher and students work through a comparable decision together. The teacher asks for an explanation, offers a cue when needed, and corrects misunderstandings. Partner discussion can increase participation, but collaboration needs a clear task and individual accountability. Fisher and Frey (2021) distinguish focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent application; this fuller model helps prevent the oversimplification of gradual release into demonstration followed immediately by unsupported work.

You do: demonstrate and extend ownership. Students apply the strategy while the teacher gathers evidence about what they can do with reduced assistance. Independence does not mean abandonment. It means the learner increasingly carries the responsibility for selecting, using, and evaluating a strategy. When evidence reveals confusion, the teacher can return to a model or guided attempt.

These phases should not be treated as three fixed blocks that every student must leave simultaneously. Rosenshine (2012) emphasizes manageable instructional steps, checks of all students' understanding, guided practice, and monitored independent practice. Applied to writing, these principles support a responsive release of responsibility. A student may need a model for integrating evidence while independently organizing a paragraph. Another may be ready to evaluate competing explanations while classmates practice constructing one.

> *"The resulting commitment is shared opportunity with responsive support: everyone receives access to expert instruction, and assistance is adjusted according to demonstrated need rather than a predetermined pace."*

SECTION 5

Eric Jensen: Meaning, Reorganization, and the Learning Brain

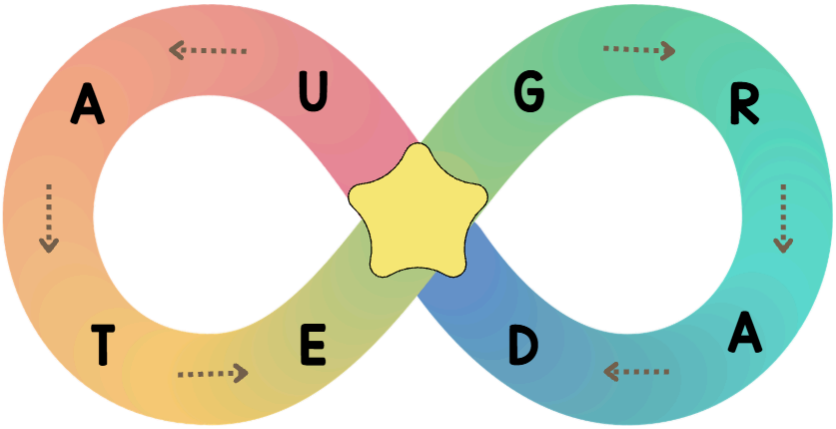
Eric Jensen's *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* offers a professional-learning perspective on designing instruction with attention to learning, meaning, and recall. In the original edition, Jensen writes, "We better recall material when we have reorganized it again and again" (1998, p. 110). On that same page, he recommends opportunities for students to organize ideas, discuss learning, summarize in their own words, and teach portions of what they have learned.

This observation connects naturally to writing instruction. A learner who reorganizes a plan, explains a revision, and teaches a partner how a detail supports an idea encounters the learning through several purposeful acts. The point is not to add unrelated entertainment. It is to ask learners to work with the meaning of what they are learning.

Jensen's contribution is best used alongside empirical learning research rather than as a blanket neurological endorsement of an approach. A classroom routine does not need an unverified claim about a particular brain region to justify its value. The more defensible explanation is instructional: a routine directs attention, elicits retrieval, supports explanation, or makes progress visible. For The Writing Academy®, LLC, teaching with the brain in mind means respecting learning as an active, revisited, meaning-making process while evaluating its results through student work.

SECTION 6

GRADUATE: An Infinity Cycle for Teaching, Learning, and Next Steps



Randi Whitney's GRADUATE Infinity Learning Cycle brings these foundations into a recurring sequence: Gather, Reveal, Attempt, Discuss, Use, Award, Target, and Explain. The cycle is an instructional framework for organizing instruction and learner participation, not a separate scientific law. Its contribution is to give teachers and students a common language for moving from readiness and modeling to application, reflection, and renewed learning (Whitney, 2026).

Gather: prepare attention and reconnect learning. The teacher establishes the purpose and brings relevant prior learning into view. A brief prompt might ask students to recall the difference between a reason and supporting evidence. Gather can also reveal a missing prerequisite before the next task begins. Its function is preparation, not an extended warm-up disconnected from the writing goal.

Reveal: make expert decisions visible. The teacher explicitly models what to do and why it works. A think-aloud, annotated example, or comparison of a strong and weak response can expose a decision students might otherwise miss. Reveal carries the central "I do" responsibility while inviting learners to notice the feature they will soon practice.

Attempt: begin purposeful, supported action. Students try a manageable version of the task with appropriate support. The attempt may be guided or collaborative and should generate evidence of each learner's thinking. A useful first attempt makes misunderstanding discoverable early, when instruction can respond, rather than allowing a misconception to persist through an entire paper.

Discuss: explain, compare, and question. Students examine the reasoning behind their choices, compare alternatives, and revise an interpretation when warranted. Discussion should make thinking more precise, not simply fill time. The teacher listens for what needs clarification

and helps students connect feedback to the writing goal. Attempt and Discuss together provide substantial opportunities for "We do" learning.

Use: apply learning with increasing ownership. Students use the strategy in their own work or in a meaningfully changed task. This is the central "You do" opportunity. The teacher checks whether students can make the relevant decision rather than only reproduce a displayed example. Use should gradually include new topics, passages, audiences, and purposes.

Award: recognize demonstrated learning. Students identify a specific success and the evidence for it: "I explained how my evidence supports my reason." Award is strongest when it names a controllable writing action, not a fixed personal trait or an empty compliment. Hattie and Timperley (2007) distinguish useful task-, process-, and self-regulation feedback from praise directed mainly at the person. Here, recognition should help students understand what to repeat.

Target: identify the next best step. Students and teacher select an actionable goal or identify a question that remains unresolved. "Make my paper better" becomes "Add an explanation that connects this evidence to my reason." The target is small enough to guide action and important enough to improve the writing. Zimmerman's (2002) account of self-regulated learning connects goal setting, performance monitoring, and reflection within a continuing cycle.

Explain: articulate and share understanding. Students explain what they learned, how they used it, and why it matters. They might teach a partner, justify a revision, or describe a strategy they will use again. Research on elicited self-explanation supports the value of generating connections rather than passively receiving information (Chi et al., 1994). The teacher still checks accuracy; fluent explanation alone is not conclusive evidence of transfer.

KEY IDEA

GRADUATE goes beyond the abbreviated three-part slogan by explicitly naming preparation, discussion, recognition, targeting, and explanation. The infinity principle becomes instructional when Explain informs the next Gather and Target influences the next Reveal or Attempt. The cycle returns with new evidence and a more precise purpose, not with an automatic repetition of the same lesson.

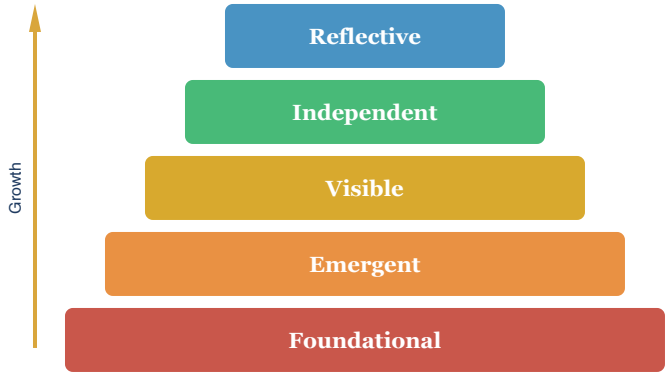
SECTION 7

OnRAMP: Recognize And Map Progress Across Five Thinking Levels

GRADUATE organizes the learning experience. OnRAMP identifies the learner's next instructional move within it. Randi Whitney's OnRAMP means Recognize And Map Progress. It honors differentiation by connecting current evidence to a direct, sustainable next step across five Thinking Levels: Foundational, Emergent, Visible, Independent, and Reflective. These levels are also referred to within the approach as RPLDs, or Reference Performance Level Descriptors (Whitney, 2026).

Recognize begins with evidence rather than assumption: a writing sample, an oral explanation, a response to a model, or a revision attempt. Map Progress connects that evidence to a specific target, an appropriate scaffold or challenge, and another opportunity to demonstrate learning. The descriptors should identify what a learner is showing in relation to a particular task. They are not fixed identities, intelligence labels, or substitutes for a complete assessment of writing.

The following examples illustrate how OnRAMP can guide a lesson on using evidence and explanation. They are task-specific applications of the five level names, not additional official descriptors or validated score boundaries.



OnRAMP Five Thinking Levels (RPLDs)

Table 1. OnRAMP in an Evidence-and-Explanation Task

Thinking Level	Illustrative Evidence	Next Instructional Move
Foundational	Recognizes a relevant detail with a clear model and substantial support.	Model the link between the question and one detail; guide a supported selection.
Emergent	Selects a useful detail with prompting; the connection is incomplete.	Use an oral rehearsal or focused prompt to develop the connection.
Visible	Shows relevant evidence and a developing explanation that can be examined.	Compare explanations and revise the part that does not yet clarify the reasoning.
Independent	Selects and explains evidence effectively with reduced instructional prompting.	Apply the strategy to a new passage and evaluate the strength of the choice.
Reflective	Evaluates alternatives, explains revisions, and adapts reasoning to purpose.	Synthesize evidence or adapt the explanation for a different audience; justify the change.

Note. Level names follow Whitney (2026); examples are illustrative instructional applications.

A student may demonstrate Independent thinking when organizing a familiar narrative but need a Foundational entry point when working with a new argumentative task. Even within one composition, evidence selection and explanation may require different next steps. Therefore, the five levels should guide flexible instruction rather than permanent groups. A first observation should remain open to revision as the teacher collects more evidence.

The same caution applies to GRADUATE: no Thinking Level excludes a learner from any part of the cycle. A learner who needs substantial support can still discuss a choice, recognize progress, set a goal, and explain new understanding through an accessible response. A highly independent learner still benefits from modeling when encountering unfamiliar content. Both the cycle and the progress map serve the learner; the learner should not be constrained by the labels.

Sustainable access also requires careful decisions about support. An instructional sentence frame may be gradually faded as the learner takes ownership of the language. An accessibility accommodation may remain necessary and should not be removed merely to make a task appear independent. CAST (2024) supports options for participation and expression; the relevant assessment question is what thinking the learner demonstrates with clearly documented conditions.

> *"OnRAMP shifts differentiation from 'different work for different groups' toward 'the most useful next teaching move for this learner.'"*

The common learning purpose remains visible, and progress is mapped through increasingly capable, purposeful performance.

SECTION 8

The Writing Matrix Series: Professional Literature for Multiple OnRAMPS

The Writing Matrix series of teacher literature extends Whitney's approach across the many OnRAMPS involved in learning to write. Its role is to address entry points and next steps throughout the writing process and across genres, rather than reserve differentiation for students who are already struggling. The series connects attention to current performance with the teacher's responsibility to know what to model, practice, discuss, and assess next (Whitney, 2026).

The instructional need changes by stage. During planning, one learner may need help identifying an intended message while another needs to select a structure that serves an audience. During drafting, one may need oral rehearsal to turn an idea into language while another needs a more developed line of reasoning. During revising, the relevant OnRAMP may involve adding a necessary detail, reorganizing a paragraph, clarifying an explanation, or reconsidering the entire approach. Editing requires its own diagnostic attention; a conventions difficulty should not automatically obscure a writer's strength in ideas.

Genre also matters. Narrative writing calls for decisions about relationships, events, perspective, and significance. Informative writing requires organized explanation of a subject. Opinion and argument require support for a position, with the demands of reasoning adjusted to the task and grade. Poetry requires purposeful language and form; correspondence requires attention to recipient, purpose, and format. Research-related writing adds demands for gathering, evaluating, and integrating information. These are illustrative instructional distinctions, not a claim that one uniform formula can serve every genre equally well.

The Writing Matrix series can consequently function as teacher-facing literature for recognizing both continuity and difference: continuity in the need to communicate clearly and work recursively; difference in what effective communication requires in a particular genre. Its connection to OnRAMP is the insistence that teachers need more than a level label. They need a usable path from the student's present performance to a stronger next performance.

SECTION 9

Bringing the Frameworks Together in Whole-Group Practice

Consider an illustrative whole-group lesson in which students explain an idea using a shared science passage. The teacher begins by asking students to retrieve a previously taught distinction between evidence and explanation. After checking responses, the teacher models one decision, guides an attempt, and invites discussion about why a selected detail supports the idea. Students then use the strategy in their own response.

The common task generates different OnRAMP information. One student selects an unrelated detail and needs another comparison of relevant and irrelevant evidence. Another selects a useful detail but needs support explaining its connection. A third is ready to compare the strength of two plausible choices. The teacher can respond through a brief conference, a purposeful pairing, a cue, or a more demanding question without removing anyone from the shared instructional purpose.

Award makes a successful move explicit; Target names the next one; Explain requires students to articulate their learning. A later lesson revisits the same strategy, and a subsequent task changes the passage or purpose. The sequence combines explicit teaching, retrieval, spacing, gradual release, reflection, and differentiated follow-through. None of these features alone establishes success; together, they create a design that makes success more teachable and progress more visible.

KEY IDEA

Research supporting component practices provides an evidence-informed rationale for GRADUATE, OnRAMP, and the Writing Matrix series. It does not, by itself, establish the effectiveness of the complete system or validate the five-level descriptors as a measurement instrument. A responsible implementation should examine student work over time, delayed use of strategies, application to unfamiliar tasks, and consistency in teachers' interpretation of performance.

Instructional stability therefore means consistency of purpose and responsiveness of action. Teachers retain a shared vocabulary and dependable routines while changing the next move in response to learners. The system remains stable because it is coherent, not because it is rigid.

> *"Every learner belongs in meaningful instruction, and every learner deserves a path toward more capable, independent, and reflective writing."*

SECTION 10

Randi Whitney: A Professional Foundation Rooted in Early Childhood

Randi Whitney earned her teaching degree in 1996 from the University of Houston, with a major in biology and early childhood. This preparation joins an interest in living systems with a commitment to how students develop and learn. She currently owns Strawberry Fields of Learning, an early childhood preschool in Kemah, Texas. The preschool's own history identifies Whitney as its owner and describes the use of her instructional approach and its emphasis on relationships and a love of learning (Whitney, 2026; Strawberry Fields of Learning, n.d.).

Whitney describes this setting as a place where these philosophies "come alive every day in every way." In an early-childhood application, their meaning is concrete: an adult models language or a task, students try it with support, familiar ideas return through purposeful experiences, and the teacher notices what each student is ready to attempt next. Shared storytelling, drawing, dictation, and conversations about an observation can provide age-appropriate opportunities for such a cycle. These examples illustrate the philosophy rather than prescribe a formal writing routine for every young student.

The continuity from preschool to later writing instruction is not that every age should receive the same lesson. It is that every learner deserves intentional teaching, meaningful participation, repeated opportunities to learn, and a next step that respects current development while inviting growth.

SECTION 11

Conclusion: A Shared Foundation, a Responsive Path Forward

Ebbinghaus' work explains why initial exposure should not be mistaken for durable learning. Distributed practice supports purposeful return over time. Gradual release provides a structure for teaching toward independence. Jensen's emphasis on meaning and reorganization adds a complementary professional perspective. Randi Whitney's GRADUATE Infinity Learning Cycle organizes these ideas into a visible, recurring instructional process; OnRAMP connects that process to individual evidence and the next best step. The Writing Matrix series extends the framework through teacher literature across writing stages and genres.

The central strength of The Writing Academy®, LLC is the coherence of this instructional commitment: teach explicitly, return purposefully, recognize progress, and make the next step accessible. Whole-group instruction establishes the common foundation. Differentiation makes movement from that foundation possible for individual learners. Neither responsibility should displace the other. Together, they express an enduring expectation: every learner belongs in meaningful instruction, and every learner deserves a path toward more capable, independent, and reflective writing.

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