



**Cecil, Nancy Lee. (1999). *Striking a Balance: Positive Practices for Early Literacy*. Scottsdale, Arizona: Holcomb Hathaway.**

In *Striking a Balance*, Nancy Lee Cecil, a professor of Education at California State University at Sacramento, attempts to answer the question: "Is it possible for educators to teach young children the underlying skills necessary for literacy acquisition, while at the same time instilling a passion for the reciprocal activities of reading & writing?" Cecil theorizes, based on current research, interviews, and her own observations, that a balanced literacy program "focuses more on reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking as interrelated communication processes" and that basic skills should be taught "within the context of rich and varied reading and writing experiences."

To help pre-service and in-service teachers accomplish this, Cecil has highlighted teaching methods and examples which represent the most effective practices in early literacy instruction. In 11 chapters, such as "Emergent Literacy," "Phonics Instruction," "Reading-Writing Connections," and "Informing Instruction," she describes the pertinent issues involved in teaching reading and how to help students become literate. Each chapter provides suggestions for classroom activities, asks questions for discussions and lists other possible projects to be incorporated into a lesson plan or curriculum. The last chapter, "Early Literacy" focuses on a well-respected teacher's classroom, describing a typical day in the classroom and illustrating how to incorporate and integrate into teaching all the techniques and practices mentioned in the previous 11 chapters. Classroom design and environment are also discussed. Appendices that list recommended children's references, teacher references, assessment instruments, and informal checklists and assessment devices are included.

Cecil tries to reduce years of literacy teaching and a multitude of literacy theories into 320 pages, which necessarily makes discussions on some topics very cursory. However, *Striking a Balance*, does provide a well-thought-out overview of early literacy practices as well as some very practical suggestions about teaching practices and creating an environment that will help students develop literacy skills. Experienced teachers would probably pick up a few ideas from this title, but it will be of most assistance to pre-service and new teachers.

Pages: **320** Price: **\$32.95** ISBN: **1-890871-21-4**

**Reviewed by Shellie Jeffries, Wayne State University**

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**Pfenning, Nancy. (1998). *Chances Are... Making Probability and Statistics Fun to Learn and Easy to Teach*. Waco, TX : [Prufrock Press](#).**

According to its Preface, this book could introduce probability and statistics to students ranging from gifted fourth graders through entry level college. Pfenning

uses simple examples to demonstrate concepts; students on a bus, cards in a deck, numbers on dice. She believes that mathematical symbols and real-life data sets add too much confusing complication to math courses. This course presents only the bare necessities. Much of the material has been used successfully by the author with gifted fourth through sixth graders in a special program at Carnegie Mellon.

This material is not earth shaking or revolutionary. It is page after page of mathematical problems and experiments that demonstrate increasingly advanced concepts. The novice teacher may feel that Pfenning has left out as much as she has included. There is very little stage setting here; no explanations of why concepts are presented in this order or depth, no discussion of typical student response, or how to build on common questions to strengthen learning. In short, while the content is aimed at beginning students, the program the book presents would best suit a fairly experienced teacher. Experienced teachers who agree with Pfenning's premise about the importance of selecting easily understood examples will find the world on a silver platter between these pages.

Pages: **176** Price: **\$24.95** ISBN: **1-882664-35-3**

**Reviewed by Kate Corby, Michigan State University**

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**Snowball, Diane & Bolton, Faye (1999). *Spelling K-8: Planning and Teaching*. York Harbor, ME: [Stenhouse](#).**

Spelling is no one's favorite subject, but none can accuse Snowball and Bolton of not trying their best to change it's image. This latest offering is an intensive course on classroom technique for elementary spelling teachers.

They begin with an overview of their whole school spelling approach. If understood and adopted by a school or a district, support for spelling improvement would be integrated throughout the curriculum in a consistent manner. Next follow several chapters on various spelling instruction concerns such as phonics, sounds, compounds plurals, prefixes and suffixes. Each of these is treated in depth, with helpful suggestions for classroom practice and examples of activities in use in the classroom. The examples generally showcase what could only be called ideal practice. Modeling good practice is an important learning tool, but readers may find it unlikely that their students could be so unfailingly interested and their teaching responses so unfailingly insightful. The book would have been stronger if the authors had shown a little more of their own struggle with spelling instruction and gave their readers a bit more information about their development as spelling instruction gurus. This is a minor criticism however. There is so much here that will be immensely helpful in the classroom, it would be folly not to recommend the book.

Pages: **267** Price: **\$20.00** ISBN: **1-57110-074-1**

**Reviewed by Kate Corby, Michigan State University**

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**Soven, Margot Iris. (1999). *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Needham Heights, MA : [Allyn & Bacon](#).**

As she proved in her popular 1992 book, *Writing Across the Curriculum*, Soven is herself an excellent writer. She has thought about the writing process in depth and is able to express her insights clearly. While this book is aimed at new and preservice teachers, there will be much here that strikes a cord with experienced teachers as well. Soven begins by providing a background of recent writing instruction practice. Her sections on specific topics in writing instruction include, the writing process, sentence structure, evaluation techniques, writing about literature, and designing specific assignments and entire curricula. She closes with chapters about the teaching profession, urging teachers to remain active researchers, writers and participants in their professional organizations.

The chapters on specific writing instruction challenges are particularly good. She brings deeper understanding to her readers by spending a page or two discussing the problem, it's extent and the reasons why it plagues many writers. She then moves on to a discussion of the types of responses that have worked for many teachers. Most of her recommendations are based on experience and research. There are citations for further reading throughout. The aim is clearly to give readers an understanding that will allow them to plan classroom activities and respond to issues as they arise, rather than prescribe a formula to be followed.

Pages: **312**   Price: **\$40.00**   ISBN: **0-205-18897-4**

**Reviewed by Kate Corby, Michigan State University**

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