

*Teaching***LD**.org

## **HotSheet 5:** **Effective Practices for Written Expression**



*Amy Gillespie, Vanderbilt University*  
*Steve Graham, Arizona State University*

**W**riting is a complex task that involves the use and coordination of many cognitive processes. Because of its complexities, many students, including students with disabilities, often find writing tasks challenging. Proficiency in writing skills is important for success in and out of the classroom (e.g., college, work, daily life). Therefore, it is important to identify writing instruction and classroom practices shown to be effective in scientific studies of writing interventions. In this HotSheet, we (a) define written expression, (b) explain why written expression is important, (c) provide important basic facts about written expression, and then (d) summarize more and less effective practices for providing students instruction in writing.

## **What is Written Expression?**

Written expression serves a variety of purposes. In school, students are typically expected to use writing to help them learn new information (e.g., note-taking, summarizing), to communicate their knowledge and understanding (e.g., short-answer test questions, open-ended essay responses), and to express themselves (e.g., journaling, poetry). To write, students must perform many mental operations, including (a) understanding the writing topic, (b) recalling topic knowledge to address the writing topic, (c) setting goals for writing and developing writing plans to meet these goals, and (d) using writing process knowledge to put thoughts and ideas into written form. Many factors, such as a student's skills in self-monitoring and self-regulation or a student's beliefs about his or her own abilities as a writer, influence how well he or she is able to balance the multiple cognitive demands and processes involved in writing. Additionally, other writing-related skills, such as handwriting and spelling skills, also affect a student's ability to express thoughts and ideas in written form effectively.

## **Why is Written Expression Important?**

Effective written communication is important for success in school. Written products are a primary means by which teachers measure students' knowledge, understanding, and progress. Furthermore, writing is a powerful tool for learning. As students write, they reflect and think critically about new information, which permits them to construct new and deeper understandings of subject matter. Writing also provides a means for students' self-expression. Beyond the school setting, writing is a primary means of communication in daily life (e.g., emailing a friend or coworker, composing a grocery list, text messaging). Effective written expression is also important for success in post-secondary education and the workforce. Employers report that writing is increasingly valued in some form (e.g., emails, memos, presentations) for a number of occupations. Also, written expression skills are taken into consideration when hiring and promoting salaried employees.

## **Written Expression Facts**

1. Writing is an active and multifaceted process, involving the simultaneous use of cognitive processes (e.g., planning and organizing ideas) and writing skills (e.g., handwriting or spelling).
2. Many students with disabilities can generate great ideas for writing, but their weaknesses in transcription (i.e., handwriting, typing, spelling) impede them from getting their thoughts onto paper.
3. Strategies for improving students' written expression skills can be taught.
4. Teachers should instruct students in how to monitor and reinforce their own behavior throughout the writing process.
5. For struggling writers and students with disabilities to become proficient writers, additional time, individualized instruction, and explicit instruction in transcription skills (i.e., handwriting, spelling, typing) is often necessary.
6. With any combination of writing instructional procedures a teacher chooses to use, students must be given ample time to write.

## Written Expression Practices that are Less Effective

| Practice  | Explanation  |
|---|--|
| <b>Provide direct grammar instruction.</b>  | Explicit instruction in parts of speech and the structure of sentences has been shown to have a negative impact on students' writing. Research shows that grammar instruction embedded in authentic writing activities (e.g., using examples from students' writing) is an effective alternative to traditional grammar instruction.   |
| <b>Allow students to figure out the writing process for themselves as they write.</b>                                     | Sometimes teachers expect students will discover the components of the writing process if they are given sustained time for writing. Although some students may be able to figure out the writing process on their own, research shows that students with disabilities typically require direct writing instruction in the elements of the writing process to become proficient writers.   |
| <b>Encourage students to follow a linear process (i.e., plan, draft, revise-edit, publish) strictly when writing.</b>     | Although students should learn the steps of the writing process, teachers should not demand they strictly follow these steps in a linear fashion. Instead, teachers should model that good writers often repeat or revisit particular steps as needed throughout the writing process. For example, a writer may revisit and make changes to his or her initial writing plans during the drafting stage after realizing the text could be made stronger with the addition of new information. |
| <b>Describe and model the writing process without providing support for students to use writing skills independently.</b> | Research shows that it is not enough to describe and model the writing process. Students need scaffolding and guided practice with new writing skills and writing genres before they can be expected to use them independently.  |
| <b>Teach the writing process without providing direct instruction in writing skills.</b>                                  | For many students with disabilities, direct instruction in the writing process is not enough. These students typically need explicit instruction in writing skills, including spelling, typing, and handwriting, in order to become better writers. With improved transcription skills, students are left more room in working memory to devote to the content, meaning, and purpose of the texts they write.  |

## Written Expression Practices that are More Effective

| Practice   | Explanation  |
|--|--|
| Teach students to use the steps of the writing process.          | Explicitly teach students to follow the process of (1) plan, (2) draft, (3) revise, (4) edit, and (5) publish, while writing for authentic purposes and audiences. Also, model that these processes are recursive and can be repeated and revisited throughout the writing process.  |
| Have students choose or set product goals for their writing.     | Provide students goals for their written products, such as add three more sentences, revise to include five more adjectives, or include all parts of a story (or other genre). When students become proficient at meeting instructor-selected goals, they may be given a choice of several goals to meet and eventually should be taught to set their own goals for writing.   |
| Teach students to use word processors for writing assignments.   | Provide instruction in keyboarding and in using a computer for editing (e.g., spell check) written assignments. Many students with disabilities struggle with handwriting and spelling and the use of a computer for writing tasks removes these barriers to writing.  |
| Have students dictate texts into a tape recorder or to a scribe. | Much like word processing, dictation removes barriers to writing text, such as difficulties with handwriting or spelling. Teachers can write down a student's response as he or she speaks it aloud. The student can read what the teacher has written down, revising and editing it as needed. Alternately, a student can dictate his or her response into a tape recorder, using the playback features to listen and write down what was said. |
| Provide feedback to students during the writing process.         | Provide specific and frequent feedback to students as they write on the strengths, quality, and missing elements in their texts. Peers are also a great source of feedback, given they are trained in how to give writing feedback and are paired so that they are able to give helpful insight and advice.  |

*Continued on page 5*

# Written Expression Practices that are More Effective

Continued from page 4

| Practice   | Explanation  |
|--|--|
| Teach students to write for a variety of purposes (i.e., compose a variety of genres). | Provide explicit instruction in the elements of a variety of writing genres (e.g., narrative, persuasive, informational). Model and discuss the elements of each genre, providing cues and procedural supports until students can recall genre elements and text structure independently.  |
| Teach writing strategies.  | Teach students strategies for planning, writing, revising, and editing their writing. Writing strategies should be modeled by the instructor and students should be given time to practice using them, with the ultimate goal of using the writing strategies independently. For maximum effectiveness, explicitly teach students to self-regulate and monitor their own progress in learning and using the writing strategies. See the accompanying narrative about Self-Regulated Strategy Development for a description of a specific method of writing strategy instruction. |

One specific method shown to be effective for teaching struggling writers and students with learning disabilities writing strategies is Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD; Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008). With SRSD, students are provided explicit instruction in genre-specific writing strategies or general strategies for writing (e.g., revising, word choice) through a series of criterion-based lessons. SRSD differs from other approaches to strategy instruction because of its emphasis on the use of self-regulation procedures (i.e., goal setting, self-monitoring, self-reinforcement) during the writing process, its focus on mastery learning (i.e., students must meet a criterion before proceeding to the next stage in instruction), and its ongoing supports for generalization and maintenance of writing strategies and self-regulation skills. For example, students might learn the persuasive writing mnemonic *TREE* (*T* = Topic sentence, *R* = Reasons, *E* = Ending/Explain reasons, *E* = Examine/ending) or the story mnemonic *CSPACE* (*C* = Characters, *S* = Setting, *P* = Purpose, *A* = Action, *C* = Conclusion, *E* = Emotions) through the following stages (source: Harris et al., 2008, p. 13):

- 1. Develop background knowledge:** Teachers read texts to develop the vocabulary, knowledge, and concepts students need for learning the strategy and understanding subsequent instruction. Also, teachers begin discussing the writing strategy and self-regulation procedures that will be learned.
- 2. Discuss it:** Teachers examine students' current writing and self-regulation skills and have students set goals for their future writing tasks. Teachers and students discuss why learning the strategy is important, including its benefits, when it can be used, and how it can be generalized to new settings and situations. Teachers ask students to commit to learning the strategy.



3. **Model it:** Using a think-aloud approach, teachers model how to use the strategy and self-regulation procedures when writing. After students begin to grasp the skills and memorize the strategy, teachers move to collaborative modeling with more input from students to help them write. Teachers continue discussing how to generalize the strategy and self-regulation skills to new settings.
4. **Memorize it:** This stage is typically begun in the beginning of SRSD and reinforced throughout. Teachers require students to memorize strategies and mnemonics so that recall of the steps are automatic. Teachers gradually fade reminders (e.g., posters, checklists on student desks) as students memorize strategies and mnemonics.
5. **Support it:** Teachers scaffold students' strategy use and use of self-regulation procedures. At this stage, some students may require additional teacher modeling and prompting, while others may be nearly ready to use the strategy independently.
6. **Independent Performance:** Students use the writing strategy and self-regulation skills independently. Teachers continue to reinforce plans for maintaining and generalizing the newly learned skills to other settings and situations.

## Summary

No single instructional practice for teaching writing will prove effective for all students with disabilities. Teachers should aim to supplement their current writing practices and curricula with a mix of the effective writing practices described here. The optimal mixture of practices should be tailored to best meet the writing needs of the class as well as the needs of individual students, with instruction in specific writing skills dictated by students' needs and areas of weakness.

In addition to the more specific practices described above, effective instruction for written expression should include (a) teacher modeling of writing skills, writing strategies, and the writing process; (b) guided practice, (c) ongoing support and feedback, and (d) frequent opportunities for students to write. For many students with disabilities, specific skills, such as keyboarding or spelling, may also need to accompany effective writing instruction. Overall, writing cannot be a skill that students are expected to learn on their own or discover through other subjects. Just like reading and math skills, written expression skills should be directly taught to students.

## References

- Baker, S., Gersten, R., & Graham, S. (2003). Teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities: Research-based applications and examples. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 36, 109-123.
- Gersten, R., & Baker, S. (2001). Teaching expressive writing to students with learning disabilities: A meta-analysis. *The Elementary School Journal*, 101, 251-272.
- Gillespie, A., & Graham, S. (in press). A meta-analysis of writing interventions for students with learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children*.
- Graham, S., Harris, K. R., & McKeown, D. (2013). The writing of students with LD, meta-analysis of SRSD writing intervention studies, and future directions: Redux. In L. Swanson, K. Harris, & S. Graham. *Handbook of Learning Disabilities* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford.
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools—A report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved from <http://www.all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf>
- Harris, K. R., Graham, S., Mason, L., & Friedlander, B. (2008). *Powerful writing strategies for all students*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

## Additional Resources

Project Write

Stages of Instruction, Lesson Plans, SRSD Resources

<http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/projectwrite/index.html>

Reading Rockets

Growing Writers

[http://www.readingrockets.org/shows/launching/growing\\_writers/](http://www.readingrockets.org/shows/launching/growing_writers/)

The IRIS Center (Vanderbilt University)

Reading, Literacy, Language Arts

<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/iris-resource-locator/>

What Works Clearinghouse

Practice Guide: Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide.aspx?sid=17>



TLD's HotSheets are produced by the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Visit the DLD Member's Only section of [TeachingLD.org](http://TeachingLD.org) for additional HotSheets. ©2014 Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children. All rights reserved. DLD grants permission to copy for personal and educational purposes. To reprint all or in part in products for commercial purposes, please contact DLD's executive director at [ExecDir@TeachingLD.org](mailto:ExecDir@TeachingLD.org).