

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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Research Monograph #49

How can teachers help students overcome writing difficulties and enhance their motivation to write?

Research Tells Us

Teachers can give struggling writers a sense of success by helping them overcome difficulties in learning to write.

Teachers can build on this success by providing:

- writing options and background experiences
- opportunities to talk with peers and their teacher throughout the writing process
- ways to engage with and write for real-life audiences

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Supporting Struggling Writers

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Writing is central to learning and to social interaction. Through writing, students not only demonstrate their learning but also deepen their understanding of new concepts, as they reflect on thoughts made visible on a page or screen. Sadly, some students struggle in their attempts to communicate what they have learned and to interact with others through writing. Research provides many strategies for addressing these students' specific writing difficulties and enhancing their motivation to write.

Key Difficulties in Learning to Write

Teachers can use a range of strategies and approaches to help students overcome difficulties in learning to write – from the motor challenges of handwriting, to the thinking processes involved in writing, to conforming to writing conventions.

(a) **Support students who struggle with handwriting.** Handwriting involves both fine motor skills and the ability to recall letter shapes.¹ When students are preoccupied with the demands of handwriting, they are not able to give as much attention to thinking about ideas, audience, sentence construction and so forth.

Supporting students who struggle with handwriting could involve taping alphabets to students' desks, providing tactile opportunities for students to fashion letters out of clay or string or making word processors available for composing. Word processors reduce eye-hand coordination challenges, provide models of the letters to aid students' recall and allow for easy revisions. Studies of struggling writers in Grades 1–12 show that students write longer, higher quality compositions with fewer mechanical errors when composing on computers, as compared to composing by hand.²

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Start with where your students are at ...

“Teachers should accept whatever struggling writers are able to write independently and then provide feedback and explicit instruction to help them elaborate on their initial efforts.”

(b) **Provide support for the stages of writing.** The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model is an example of an evidence-based strategy designed to provide students with a repertoire of planning, goal-setting and drafting strategies for writing.³ Teachers following this model plan, set goals and draft a text in whole-class or small-group lessons, modelling strategies and voicing their decision-making as they carry out each writing process. In follow-up student-teacher conferences, students compare and contrast their writing processes with those demonstrated by the teacher. They then plan for ways to enhance what they do as writers.

(c) **Help students improve the written product.** Teachers should accept whatever struggling writers are able to write independently and then provide feedback and explicit instruction to help them elaborate on their initial efforts. To begin, these students could be invited to communicate using a combination of drawings and written letters, words, phrases and sentences. Teachers could also ask students questions to provide ideas for elaboration, or could take turns scribing with individual students – initially writing as the student dictates and then inviting the student to write the next phrase, sentence or paragraph. Beginning English language learners could write what they are able to in English and write the rest in their mother tongue, in order to express themselves in meaningful ways and not be limited by their beginning knowledge of English.⁴

Learning and applying spelling, punctuation and grammar conventions places an additional cognitive burden on struggling writers. This is especially true for English language learners who are learning vocabulary along with the writing conventions of a new language. Teaching should focus on what students’ writing indicates that they need to learn, rather than on a predetermined schedule of objectives. As such, reading students’ writing and identifying patterns of errors should be the starting point for teaching spelling, punctuation, and grammar.⁵

Students could also be encouraged to take an inquiry stance to learn writing conventions. In guided reading sessions, teachers could model the technique by demonstrating how to notice spelling, punctuation and grammar patterns and rules. After examining the patterns across a wide range of texts, students would be able to incorporate what they have learned into their own writing.⁵

Struggling writers benefit from ongoing opportunities to talk with peers about their writing and to get feedback from their teacher. The classroom seating arrangement can facilitate this, allowing students to ask for a word or spelling that eludes them, read a sentence to a peer to confirm that it makes sense or invite suggestions on how to get a character out of a sticky situation. The ongoing feedback students receive from their teacher/peers as they prepare their drafts is much more likely to enhance students’ writing than written comments accompanying a grade on completed writing.⁶

Ways to Motivate Struggling Writers

Students are more likely to engage in writing tasks that they find personally meaningful and that allow them to experience success.⁷ Research indicates that struggling writers are more motivated to write when teachers offer choices,⁸ provide background experience and knowledge,⁵ afford opportunities to write for an authentic audience⁷ and foster a view of writing as a social tool.⁹ Simply put, both the motivation to write and writing success can be supported through abundant opportunities for students to talk with each other and their teacher about their writing.¹⁰

(a) **Offer choices.** Getting started is often a big hurdle for struggling writers. They may find wide-open choice overwhelming; conversely, they may feel restricted if given only one topic, especially if they feel that the topic is uninteresting or that they have nothing worthwhile to say about it. Ideally, struggling writers should be given an array of choices that are interesting to them (such as a selection of topics, genres, characters or points of view).

(b) **Provide background knowledge and experiences.** Background knowledge of genres will help students make effective choices for their writing. Together with explicit instruction (e.g., mini-lessons on the elements of an autobiography or report), teachers should introduce students to real-world examples of the genres. Students and teachers could examine, for example, the ways that structure and tone varies between genres. Most importantly, students should consider why the authors wrote the texts and how their choice of genres facilitated their aims.¹¹

Classroom activities that provide students with both vicarious and concrete experiences will also help them to give substance to their writing. Teachers could read books and online texts to students, show videos and photographs, or facilitate drama activities¹² to provide vicarious experiences. They could provide concrete experiences by arranging field trips or bringing real-life objects into the classroom. Talking about these experiences in class encourages reflection and brings to the forefront new ideas and information that enrich the students' repertoire of possibilities for their writing.¹⁰

(c) **Afford opportunities to write for an authentic audience.** Before coming to school, children learn to talk in settings where they have real-life purposes for communicating with other people. Correspondingly, to foster students' perception of writing as a meaningful way to communicate, teachers should provide opportunities for students' writing to be read by authentic audiences. Students who anticipate the enjoyment of sharing a piece of writing that they care about with a real audience are more likely to sustain their commitment through the drafting, revising, and editing processes.⁷

(d) **Foster a view of writing as a social tool.** Most often, students' peers are their preferred audience. There is nothing more motivating for struggling student writers than to experience peers reacting favourably to and asking questions about their writing. Indeed, research shows that students often use their writing to build on friendships or to gain social status within the classroom by including characters with the names of their friends or by creating plays that they can perform with peers.⁹

Some Practical Suggestions for Classroom Educators

Helping students to overcome difficulties ...

- When teaching mini-lessons on spelling, focus not only on letter-sound patterns, but also on meanings and spellings of suffixes and prefixes and, in the middle grades, on the Latin and Greek roots of words.¹³
- Allow students to use a spell-checker because it highlights misspellings that students might not otherwise recognize.² Teach students how to spell-check through mini-lessons on choosing the correct spellings from an array of choices, and help students to realize that sometimes correct spellings are not offered when the student's misspelling is not recognized by the spell-checking program.²
- Teach keyboarding skills using software such as <http://www.sense-lang.org/typing/class/> or http://www.customtyping.com/typing_tutor-schools.htm, as typing problems present a barrier to fluent writing.³

Success breeds success ...

"Students are more likely to engage in writing tasks that they find personally meaningful and that allow them to experience success."

Motivating Students ...

Motivation has three aspects ...

1. providing students with an array of writing choices (such as point of view, genre, and form)
 2. enhancing their background knowledge
 3. offering them opportunities to write for an authentic audience
- Introduce a discussion of effective characters with a reading of Shane Peacock's *Eye of the Crow* (Tundra Books, 2007).
 - Invite students to then write a mystery, using either characters from the book or of their own creation.
 - Help students get started by discussing which qualities make characters interesting protagonists or antagonists. Often, when students know their characters well, the story events readily fall into place.
 - As part of a science unit on life cycles, offer students a choice of topic and form, encouraging multi-media and visual images, as well as print. Students could choose to write:
 - a script for an interview with an insect about its life cycle,
 - an advice column from the perspective of the adult insect to the larvae and others that are part of its life cycle,
 - a blog from the point of view of an adult insect reflecting on its past phases,
 - a PowerPoint presentation explaining the various stages of the insect's life cycle.
 - Provide opportunities for students to write for an authentic public audience, in addition to a peer audience. Upload students' writing to a website, blog or other digital forum, or distribute print forms to appropriate places in the community (e.g., my Grade 2 students' handbooks on caring for pets were well-received by the local veterinarian, who displayed them in his waiting room).

In Sum

Research highlights a range of strategies to help struggling writers to overcome the physical challenges of handwriting, understand the various stages of the writing process, and adhere to spelling, punctuation and grammar conventions. The sense of success students experience through learning these strategies is motivating. Teachers can enhance this motivation by providing students with writing options, background experience and knowledge and opportunities to talk with peers and their teacher throughout the writing process. The opportunity to engage with and write for real-life audiences offers struggling writers a truly rewarding and motivating experience.

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