

WRITING

WHY KIDS STRUGGLE AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

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WHAT'S SO HARD ABOUT WRITING?

We have all experienced that moment when we sit to write and nothing comes...not even a word. We sit and stare at the page, wondering what to say, searching for language, trying to find a way to communicate with the unseen reader. Finally it comes, and we say, "Yes! That's it. That's what I wanted to say." For many students, writing is an arduous task that seldom yields this feeling of relief and pride. For students with language, visual-spatial, attention, and/or executive functioning challenges, writing can be a life long struggle.



Why is writing so hard? It demands the integration of diverse cognitive, memory, linguistic, motor, and affective systems, each of which makes its own unique contribution to the writing process and the text that gets written. Writers must juggle all of these systems simultaneously. Naturally, if jugglers focus on how they are throwing and catching only one or two of five balls, they are likely to drop the others. The key to keeping all the balls in the air is to understand and master the many foundation skills required for juggling so that they can be integrated fluidly. The same principle holds for writing.

Students may struggle with virtually all of the skills that support written expression. If they lack an inner dialogue to guide their work, they may devote precious cognitive resources to managing only some of what needs to be managed in order to produce text. Often, this results in inefficient and ineffective writing as well as frustration and diminished feelings of self-worth. We can see this clearly in students who have difficulty with one or more of the following:

- *Reading their assignments and understanding what they have to do*
- *Knowing how to get started with writing tasks*
- *Planning, organizing, expressing, and elaborating their ideas in writing*

- *Responding in writing on classroom and state-wide tests*
- *Managing all of the writing demands of school independently*
- *Staying motivated and interested in learning to write*

HOW IS WRITING TAUGHT?

Currently, the most widely used approach to teaching writing is referred to as the *writing process approach*. Developed from the work of Lucy Calkins, Donald Graves, and Nancy Atwell (some of the great teachers and researchers in education), the writing process approach appreciates that text composition is a *process* to be learned, not an isolated *skill* to be taught. Text emerges from identifiable *stages* of production. Accordingly, teachers must teach writing within stages, each of which has a slightly different purpose. The instructional approach guides students through three stages of text development: *planning*, *drafting*, and *editing/revising*. Some teachers add a fourth stage: *publishing*.

WHY IS MY CHILD FAILING?

Over the years, and in keeping with the general principles of the process approach to teaching, many accomplished teachers have adopted unique instructional methods and strategies for teaching writing within their subject area or grade level. The result is that Mrs. Smith teaches writing one way in third grade, and Mr. Thompson does it slightly differently in fourth grade. Mr. White teaches writing one way in English, but Mrs. Finnegan wants students to use different strategies or methods in Social Studies. Students receiving special education services are often required to respond to even more diverse instructional approaches and strategies, as the nature of instruction they receive outside of the classroom can vary from that used within their various subjects. As a result, the instructional target is always moving for students, and the strategies they are asked to employ often change from one subject to the next as well as from year to year.

Some students are particularly vulnerable when it comes to learning to write. They include students with language disorders, visual-spatial processing disorders, multi-faceted learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and “executive function” difficulties (i.e, trouble with planning, organizing, and self-regulating thinking and behavior). Other students struggle with writing for no apparent reason – or at least not one that will qualify them for special education support. In my experience, none of these students feels empowered as a writer. Many prematurely adopt the opinion that they are incapable. In turn, they begin

to hate writing. With dislike comes avoidance. With avoidance comes further regression of skill and insight about text. Effective instruction is critical if students who are struggling with writing are to learn to integrate and regulate the various systems that contribute to text production.

For students to be successful, the writing process must be taught **EXPLICITLY** and **CONSISTENTLY** across different grade and curriculum content areas. This means that teachers must adopt consistent methods and strategies to support students with acquiring basic insights and competencies as writers. In turn, students must learn that the basic dance they do with a blank page and a pencil (or keyboard) involves the same moves over and over. With experience and practice, these moves become more internalized and smoothly executed.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

EmPOWER™ is an approach for teaching writing that was developed by Bonnie Singer, Ph.D. and Anthony Bashir, Ph.D. over many years of working with students, teachers, and schools. Our goal in developing EmPOWER™ was to demystify the writing process— to break it down into its most essential elements so that teachers could teach those elements systematically and students could understand and gain control over all that writing involves. By analyzing and identifying where our students were breaking down as writers, we began to identify what they did not understand and/or weren't being explicitly taught. This allowed us to develop a stable framework that students AND teachers could use to learn and to teach the very complex task of writing.



By viewing writing as a multifaceted, problem-solving process that is mediated internally with language, EmPOWER™ breaks down the writing process into six specific steps:



Evaluate

Pick apart the assignment to find out what I have to do



Make a

Plan

Decide how I will approach the task and what strategies I'll use



Organize

Show and organize my ideas visually



Work

Do the work of writing my paper



Evaluate

Reflect on and judge the quality of my work



Re-work

Make any necessary adjustments

Within each of these steps, EmPOWER™ provides explicit prompts (much like a script) that are designed to a) help students “talk themselves through” each stage of the writing process, and b) remind them to use a set of strategies to manage its many components. Thus, students are supported with EmPOWER™ to understand and internalize the many steps and routines necessary for expressing themselves in print.

Language and thinking are inextricably intertwined (Vygotsky, 1962). The goal of the writer is to capture one’s thinking with words, which is an enormously complex process that relies heavily on one’s ability to juggle and organize ideas, thoughts, and words. All of us, at one time or another, have struggled to organize our writing. For some students, this is a chronic challenge. Disorganized thinking looks like disorganized language, and disorganized language suggests disorganized thinking. Therefore, disorganization can have far reaching effects for students in all academic areas, especially as schools push for more writing across the curriculum.

To support students with representing (in writing) what they know and understand, educators must help students sort out their ideas and determine how to capture them linguistically. Research shows that graphics can be effective tools for helping students organize ideas; however, not all graphic organizers are created equally. In fact, some graphics that are commonly used in schools do more harm than good, and that is why many students avoid using them when left to their own devices. Within EmPOWER™, a set of six graphics (called Brain Frames®) are taught explicitly to assist students with organization. Each Brain Frame is designed to show an underlying pattern of language and thought. By helping students to “see” their ideas visually and recognize that they can organize their language in different ways, students are armed with a set of graphic tools they can take to any grade, any content area, and any piece of writing. *If they are thinking, they can show it. And if they can see it, they can organize it. And if they can organize their ideas, they can figure out how to express what they know and understand.*

WHAT DOES EmPOWER™ DO?

Clinical and action research shows that students using EmPOWER™ are able to:

- Read their writing assignments and know what to do
- Create clear plans that structure and guide their thinking prior to writing
- Write well structured, elaborated texts that convey their ideas clearly
- Achieve success with writing across the curriculum and on high stakes tests
- Self-assess and self-advocate when they are having difficulty
- Feel confident and capable as writers

With all of the EmPOWER™ steps, prompts, and strategies, students learn that they must do and say (to themselves) certain things EVERY time they sit to write. They are provided with a consistent approach that they can use from year to year and within all subjects in school. Similarly, teachers recognize the essential components of the writing process that must be taught explicitly and supported consistently. This then empowers them to design their instruction so as to take their students where they want them to go as writers.

HOW CAN I GET EmPOWERed?

Individualized instruction in the EmPOWER™ approach is offered to students at Architects For Learning in Wellesley, MA. Students can also learn the EmPOWER™ approach from a teacher or speech-language pathologist who holds Level I Certification. Teacher Workshops in using graphics and Level I Certification Training are provided nation-wide to teachers and school districts by Architects For Learning®.

*For more information about intervention and/or professional development opportunities, please call **Architects For Learning®** at **781-235-8412**.*