



KINGSGATE SPEECH, LANGUAGE & READING

LEARNING TO WRITE BETTER!

Why work on writing?

Writing is considered by many to be the most difficult skill to teach and to learn. It is oftentimes presumed that once a child learns to read, the ability to write will follow naturally. But, according to the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP) only 28% of the 4th graders, 31% of 8th graders, and 24% of 12th graders performed at or above a proficient level of writing achievement for their respective grade levels. Even normally developing children may struggle with writing. And for those students with language and learning challenges, the task of learning to write well may seem out of their reach. Far too often, students receive little explicit instruction in writing. Yet, that is exactly what they need in order to become better.

Writing supports reading comprehension. Both reading and writing share the same cognitive and linguistic abilities including working memory, vocabulary, syntax, morphology, organization, and knowledge of specific text structures. Working on one fortifies skills in the other.

Writing is a tool for learning. When you write about something, it deepens your understanding about the topic and develops critical thinking skills. Specifically in middle school and high school, teachers assign writing projects to extend student's thinking about complicated issues and topics. When a student lacks adequate writing skills, it can impact his academic knowledge development (Graham & Perin, 2006).

Writing is used to judge a student's knowledge about a topic. If he can't express what he knows, it is assumed he doesn't know it.

Writing is a lifelong skill. When students can write proficiently, they perform better on standardized and high-stakes tests. Colleges and future employers make judgments about a prospective candidate based on his ability to express himself orally and in writing. Skilled writing helps students grow to become productive adults who can interact well in the communities and take part in their government.

Learning to approach a writing task with confidence reduces anxiety and fosters feelings of competence.

What do we know about Writing and Students with Learning Disabilities (LD)?

Writing is the most common problem of 9 to 14 year old students with learning disabilities (Morocco, Dalton, & Tivnan, 1992). In fact, while reading disabilities may resolve with good instruction, difficulties in writing tend to last into adulthood.

The writing of students with learning disabilities differs from the writing of their normally developing peers in several ways.

First, they have great difficulty communicating their ideas so they tend to write very little. Therefore, their essays are much shorter.

Second, because they believe that a well-written paper is one with minimal spelling errors, they are apt to focus on correcting spelling in the editing process rather than work on improving their content or organization.

Third, they commonly use simpler and less exact vocabulary either because they can't retrieve the word they want or can't spell it. Their "go to" strategy is to choose a simpler word they know they can spell. Subsequently, their word choice on the whole is less sophisticated than that of their peers.

Fourth, they typically make more errors in grammar and spelling than their peers and have difficulty correcting them.

Finally, it is much more difficult for them to master a writing strategy and it takes them many more practice trials to achieve the same results compared to their peers (Wong, 2000).

But language deficits alone do not account for the wide range of difficulties that students with learning disabilities encounter when faced with writing tasks (Bashir & Singer, (2009). Writing makes a huge demand on many physiological and cognitive processes in addition to linguistic knowledge. It takes an enormous amount of **working memory** (Swanson & Berninger, 1994, Berninger 1996) to keep one's ideas in mind while juggling the many additional skills required such as handwriting, spelling, word choice, sentence structure, grammar, audience, and so forth. Writing also makes huge demands on **attention**. Students with weak attention controls, particularly in **executive functions**, have difficulty with self-regulation throughout the writing process. These students exhibit problems with planning ahead, staying on task, monitoring their progress, overcoming obstacles, and using "self talk" along the way to mediate their progress.

In addition to problems with language, working memory and attention controls, variations in a student's processing speed, content knowledge, grapho-motor skills, spelling, and motivation can all impact writing performance.

What is Expository Writing?

There are two basic types of writing; Narrative, which is writing that tells a story, and Expository, which is writing that gives information. Both are very important. Students in the early grades are most often exposed to narrative writing and writing activities that focus on self-expression such as journal writing or composing short poems and imaginative stories. However, by the time children are in the 4th grade, expository writing makes up the bulk of their writing assignments. Students are asked to demonstrate their knowledge and write everything from short answers on a test to long essays.

What is the Basis of Good Writing?

Learning to Write Good Sentences

Many students are asked to write paragraphs or even full reports before they have learned to write good sentences. Problems with sentence-writing include:

Long, confusing run-on sentences

Sentence fragments or incomplete sentences

Short, choppy sentences lacking in variety, interest, or complexity

What Helps?

Too often, classrooms attempt to improve sentence-level writing by drilling grammar. However, this has been shown to be an ineffective approach in making real changes in student's writing (Graham & Perin, 2006). Instead, targeted practice in developing what is referred to as *Sentence Sense* (Moats, 2005) can be especially helpful in providing the student with the practice he needs. These exercises have proven to be effective in creating syntactical complexity of student's writing as well as laying the foundational skills for revising and editing.

Students will receive oral and written practice in:

- *Sentence Combining*
- *Sentence De-Combining*
- *Differentiating between Sentences and Fragments*
- *Identifying Run-On Sentences*
- *Expanding Sentences*
- *Putting Sentences in different Tenses (Past, Present, Future)*
- *Formulating different Sentence Types (Statements, Questions, Exclamations, Commands)*

Learning to Write Good Compositions

The ability to write a coherent, well-constructed paragraph is foundational for writing longer, well-written essays. Therefore, it is time well spent teaching students to write a solid paragraph. Students should be taught to:

- *Write good topic sentences and introductory/thesis statements*
- *Elaborate on and support their topic with facts, reasons, examples and details*
- *Sequence their ideas in a logical order*
- *Use sentences that vary in length and sentence structure*
- *Use transition/signal words to tie their ideas together*
- *Write good conclusion statements/concluding paragraphs*

Students must follow the five step process of composing:

- Plan
- Organize
- Write
- Edit
- Revise

What Helps?

The Oral-Written Connection

Again, as when practicing at the sentence level, many of the elements of a good paragraph can be practiced both orally and in writing. The oral-written connection is very powerful in fostering good writing skills but is often overlooked in the classroom. Lively oral discussions prior to having the students begin writing helps the students activate prior knowledge, generate ideas, brainstorm topic and concluding sentences, and practice linking ideas with transitions.

Oral practice with genre-specific language is also hugely beneficial for students who lack experience using these syntactical structures. For example, students can practice making sentences using cause-effect language (*Since many of the colonists of Jamestown refused to work, food supplies soon began to diminish. As a result, many settlers died of starvation when winter came*), or when asked to compare and contrast (*Both the American army and the British army had experience handling guns. The British army had weapons experience fighting wars; whereas, the colonists were used to hunting with their guns.*).

What about Handwriting?

Many students who struggle with writing have problems with handwriting or the physical act of writing. While some children do have motor skills problems, handwriting difficulty is more often a problem associated with orthographic (i.e., letter pattern) and memory processes. Research demonstrates that in children in 1-6th grades, the path from orthographic coding to handwriting was statistically significant, but the path from fine-motor skills to handwriting was not (Abbott & Berninger, 1993 in Berninger, 1998). Handwriting is a language task that requires the retrieval of the letter forms from memory and planning to produce the letters. Rather than a primary motor dysfunction, the student with poor handwriting may have weaknesses in the planning of sequential finger movements. Children who have not mastered handwriting skills and who are not able to quickly produce the letters (as when writing the alphabet), benefit from systematic, explicit instruction that leads to automatic letter writing. Without automaticity, precious energy spent grappling with letter formation and retrieval is diverted away from the business of planning, organizing and generating ideas that is need to write.

For more information about helping your child learn to write better, please contact Kathy Boroughs to schedule a phone consultation. Call (206) 446-1839 or e-mail: kingsgatespeech@aol.com

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