

Effective practices for teaching students who have difficulty with writing

Amber Ray and Steve Graham explain that effective writing does not develop naturally but that we can teach it. They explain their approach to teaching writing called SRSD, which teaches students to write with a plan, to use text structure, to monitor their work, and write with confidence.

Becoming a skilled writer brings many advantages including being more successful at school, at work, and in the community. Good writing involves many demanding tasks including planning ideas, converting plans into a piece of writing, and evaluating writing (Harris & Graham, 2013). Students who struggle with writing are at a disadvantage, including students with learning difficulties (LD). Effective practices can help them to meet the complex challenges of writing.

Students with LD can bring many strengths to academic settings. They are often smart and may have a great deal of knowledge about topics. However, when compared to their typically developing peers, students with LD usually score

lower on many writing outcomes. They produce writing that is lower in quality and is less complete (Graham, Collins, & Rigby-Wills, 2016). They have difficulty organizing their writing and they write less (Graham et al., 2016). Their writing is not as sophisticated in terms of sentence fluency and use of vocabulary (Graham et al., 2016). They struggle with the mechanics of spelling, grammar, syntax, and handwriting (Graham et al., 2016).

Even though writing is a cognitively demanding task, for many students with LD their main concern is generating specific content rather than focusing on the overall structure of the text. They write each sentence building directly off the previous one, which leads to a piece of writing that is lacking in cohesion (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). This is a single process approach rather than a multiple step approach where they would generate ideas, plan what they want to say, compose an essay, and revise their writing for content and clarity. Moreover, when students with LD do revise their work, they typically focus on surface level features such as fixing spelling, grammar, and mechanical errors (Graham, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1995) rather than improving the text structure. Finally, students with LD are less motivated and feel less confident about writing than their peers (Graham et al., 2016). To help them become better writers, there needs to be effective writing instruction at all levels of their education.

Effective Writing Instruction for All Students

Writing does not develop naturally but we can teach it (Graham & Harris,



2015). Teachers can approach teaching writing with a positive attitude, believing that all students will learn to write, ensuring that students write frequently, and teaching them how to write. The more time spent writing and teaching writing, the more likely it is that students will become better writers (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015).

As students begin to engage in the writing process, they will need to develop fluency with basic writing skills, such as handwriting, typing, spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and mechanics, early in the developmental process (Graham et al., 2015). Teaching these skills is important because if not mastered they can interfere with other writing processes. As students develop mastery of them, they are able to spend more time focusing on other aspects of writing like planning, evaluating, and revising.

Students need to develop knowledge that they can use for writing, such as knowledge of text structures. They will benefit from spending time writing in these genres for different audiences. Expanding their knowledge of content and vocabulary related to the topic that they are writing about will also improve their writing. For example, when writing about the rainforest, learning about animals and plants found in rainforests can lead to better writing.

Teachers can support students in many ways during the writing process (Graham & Longa, in press). In the early stages of writing, students can engage in pre-writing activities such as generating ideas as a class or with peers and by having students gather ideas from readings or other sources. Teachers can set clear expectations by providing students with a rubric, exemplar texts, or explicit goals for their writing. Students also benefit from feedback about their writing including constructive comments on students' papers or writing conferences to discuss what the student does well and how to improve their writing. Constructive feedback can target a few specific aspects of their writing, giving students the opportunity to address the feedback without feeling overwhelmed.

Support for writing

Beyond effective writing instruction in the classroom, there are three ways to support writing development. The first is to use research-based interventions in writing shown to be effective with these students. A second strategy is to adapt writing and writing instruction to meet their needs, such as using 21st century writing technologies. Third, extra instruction can be given on how to self-regulate the writing process.

Writing interventions. Teachers can improve the writing of all students, including those with LD, by teaching writing strategies; that is, step-by-step approaches to complete a writing task that cover planning, writing, revising, and editing (Gillespie & Graham, 2014).

Teaching students a process writing approach can improve their writing (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). Students are encouraged to plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish their writing. They compose with peers, establish ownership of their writing, write both longer and shorter pieces, and learn that writing is recursive (e.g., revising can occur at any time during the writing process, and so can planning).

Accommodations and adaptations. This involves adapting writing lessons, writing assignments and expectations, and the way we teach writing. For example, students with LD will find it particularly useful if teachers help them to break a large writing assignment into manageable pieces. This helps students set achievable goals and create a plan to achieve their goals.

Technology provides students with access to various composing tools such as word processors, spelling checkers,

word prediction software, and speech recognition software, which can help them write longer and higher quality papers (MacArthur, 2009). Applications on tablets, such as iPads, that improve skills such as handwriting, spelling, and composing, can benefit them (Berninger, Nagy, Tanimoto, Thompson, & Abbott, 2015). Beyond transcription, technology tools such as computer based graphic organizers (Ciullo & Reutebuch, 2013) and video modeling (Miller & Little, 2018) provide support for planning, evaluating, and revising.

While technology can enhance students' writing, providing students with technological supports does not necessarily mean that they will be able to use them effectively (Daley, Hillaire, & Sutherland, 2014). Students with LD benefit from explicit instruction on how to apply new technology to improve their writing.

Self-regulation skills. Goal-setting can improve the writing of students with LD (Gillespie & Graham, 2014) by having them set writing goals, providing them with a set of writing goals to choose from, or by teachers assigning specific writing goals. The self-regulated strategy development model (SRSD; Graham, Harris, & McKeown, 2013) described below is an evidence-based effective way to teach writing (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2015).

The self-regulated strategy development model (SRSD)

SRSD involves teaching students strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and/or editing. It also teaches self-regulation procedures (e.g., goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instructions, and self-reinforcement) for managing the writing process, including how to combine them with 21st century technologies (Wijekumar, Harris, Graham, & Meyer, 2017). SRSD consists of a) six stages of instruction, and b) self-regulation strategies (see Figure 1).

Writing strategies. Writing strategies can be general or genre specific. For example, the strategy POW stands for (a) Pull apart the prompt, (b) Organize my notes, and (c) Write and say more. It is a general strategy for almost any type of writing to organize how students approach the writing task.

Writing strategies can be genre specific, aimed at informative, persuasive, and narrative writing. Teachers can combine these with general strategies like POW. For informative writing, the strategies represented by POW and TIDE can be used together (see Figure 2). TIDE stands for Topic, Important Evidence, Details to Support Evidence, and Ending.

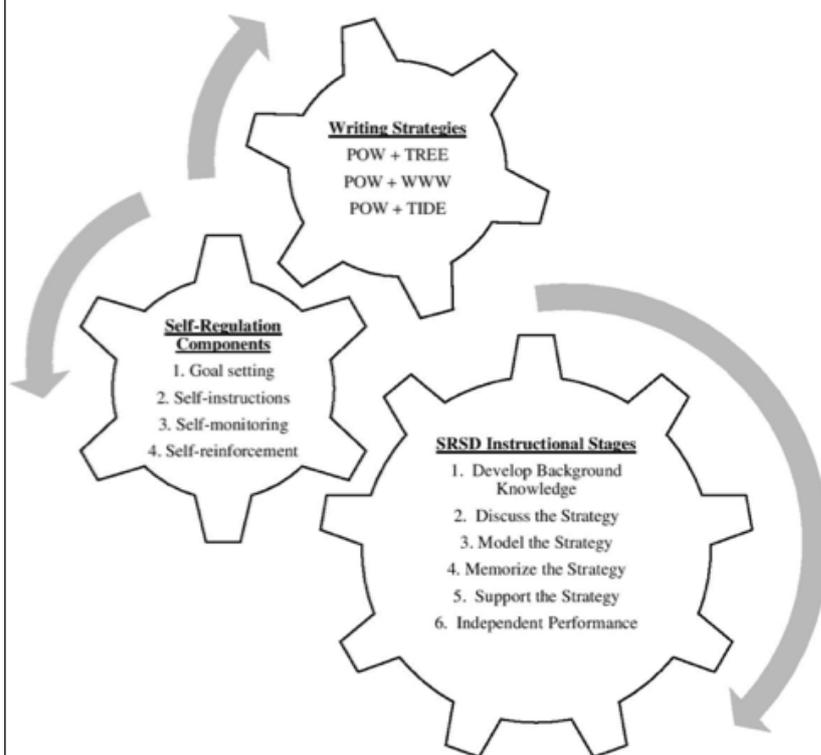


Figure 1. SRSD Model of Instruction

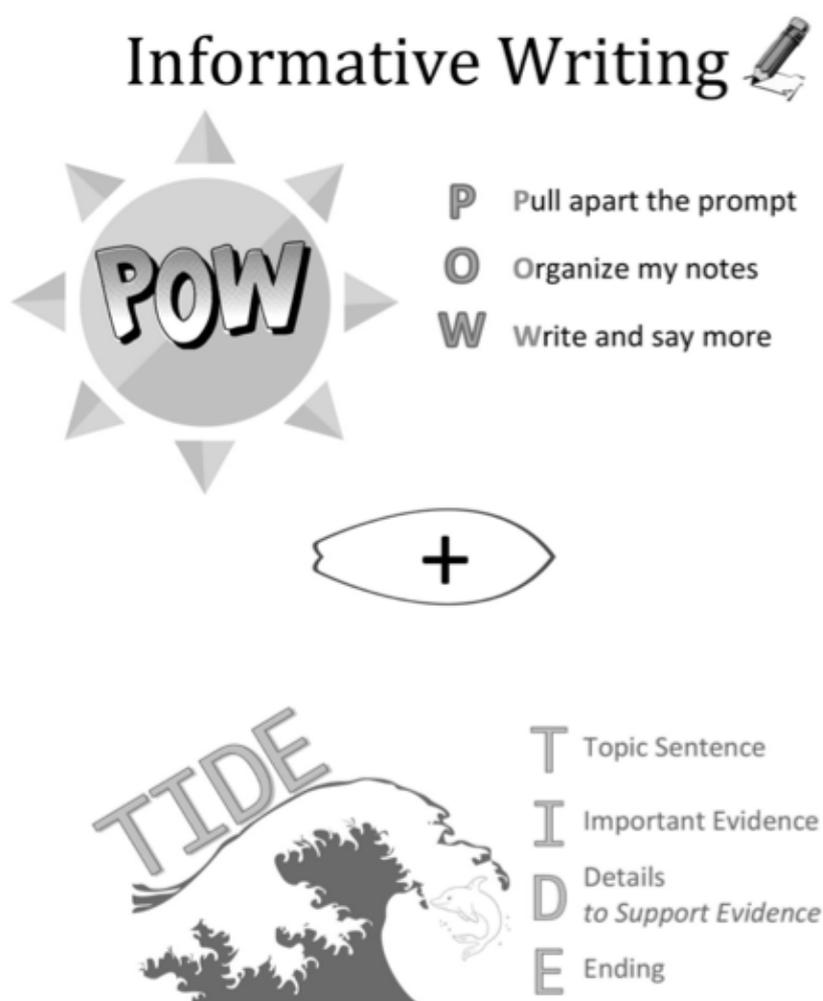


Figure 2. POW + TIDE Mnemonic

When teaching persuasive writing, the teacher can combine strategies POW and TREE. TREE reminds writers to organize writing notes for their Topic, Reasons, Explanations, and Ending. For narrative, teachers can combine POW and WWW What = 2 How =2 that reminds students to plan their story by first considering Who the story is about, When and Where it takes place, What do the characters plan to do?, What happens next and the characters' responses?, How does the story end?, and How do the characters feel?

Six stages of SRSD instruction.

Stage 1 is *Developing and Activating Background Knowledge*. During this stage, the focus is on determining what students already know about the genre and then building upon this knowledge. Students also learn relevant vocabulary associated with the genre. For instance, when teaching informative writing, students learn the meaning of "inform" and the difference between a fact and an opinion. Reading and discussing examples of writing within the target genre helps to build knowledge.

Stage 2 is *Discuss It*. The teacher discusses with students their approaches to writing and then introduces students to writing strategies (e.g., POW + TIDE). The teacher emphasizes the importance of student effort in learning and using these strategies. The teacher and students then read and analyze essays written in the genre and identify the aspect of the writing relevant to the strategies. They begin by reading and discussing exemplar essays to develop an understanding of how to use the strategy when writing. Next, they read and talk about essays that are missing one or more key elements emphasized in the writing strategies. They discuss and make notes on how to improve the essay through using the strategy.

Stage 3 is *Model It*. The teacher models how to use the writing strategies and self-regulation procedures like goal setting while thinking aloud to help students understand how these procedures work. The teacher models the entire writing process by analyzing the prompt, organizing notes using the

strategy, and writing the essay. During this process, the teacher introduces a graphic organizer that corresponds with the genre specific strategy. The teacher models self-regulation procedures like staying on-task, overcoming difficulties, checking your work, and self-reinforcing. Finally, the teacher models self-assessment of the essay they wrote and graphing progress.

Stage 4 is *Memorize It*. When introducing the writing strategies, students discuss the meaning and importance of each step. They work to memorize the steps of the strategy with partner practice using flash cards, responding chorally to the teacher, or writing out the strategy and its meaning on scratch paper. They begin to create their own graphic organizers on scratch paper.

Stage 5 is *Support It*. The teacher and students collaboratively work through the writing strategies and self-regulation procedures. As students become more proficient with these procedures, responsibility shifts to them. This shift involves reducing their use of prompts, guidance, and collaboration.

Stage 6 is *Independent Performance*. Students independently use the taught writing strategies and self-regulation procedures. The teacher monitors and supports students as needed. The teacher and students discuss how to use the strategies in a variety of contexts and how to maintain continued use of these procedures.

Self-regulation strategies. SRSD instruction incorporates self-instructions, goal setting, self-assessment, and self-reinforcement. The teacher models using self-instruction by thinking aloud during the writing process. For example, when focusing attention on planning and using a strategy the teacher might say, "I need to make a plan. I can use TIDE to plan my essay." To model self-control when writing a teacher could say, "I need to take my time when writing." Students then develop their own individualized self-instruction to help them through the writing process.

Students are taught to set writing goals. A goal for increasing the number of genre elements in an essay might be, "I can write an informative essay using the different parts of TIDE." Once students have completed writing, they self-assess their work to identify the number of parts of the genre specific strategy that they incorporated in their writing. Students then graph their progress on a bar chart. Students learn to use self-reinforcement to celebrate their success through coloring in their

bar chart and using self-instructions such as, "I'm getting better at this!"

Overall, the SRSD approach consists of several writing strategies, six stages of instruction, and several self-regulation strategies. It is rich in discourse and includes explicit, interactive learning of strategies to improve students' writing abilities. The self-regulation strategies help build students' self-efficacy and motivation for writing.

Conclusion

To summarize, all students can benefit from the writing practices described in this article. These are particularly important for students with LD because they do not acquire writing competence as easily or quickly as their peers. Students with LD will gain from extra instruction that a) enhances their foundational writing skills and b) gives effective strategies to present relevant content in writing. Teachers can adapt writing instruction using technology to help students circumvent problems with writing not easily solved such as difficulties with handwriting or spelling. This is no small task, but it is doable if classroom and specialist teachers work together.

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