



Features

- Developing interest and skills in writing for students with disabilities
- Digital Corner
- Current Research

Important Dates

- **August 24, 2009:**
Fall Classes Begin
- **September 8:**
SPED 488
4:00 - 4:50
- **September 22:**
SPED 448
4:00 - 4:50

STEP=UP

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Developing interest and skills in writing for students with disabilities

We focus this issue on writing and helping students with disabilities be successful writing both for school and personal life. High quality writing integrates attention to the topic and content, the genre or category of writing, and mechanics such as grammar and spelling. Recent research findings show that effective writing instruction focuses on a) teaching the steps in the process of writing, b) improving quality through feedback and ongoing conversation, and c) teaching students to understand different text structures and their relationship to writing genres (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003).

The process approach to writing, with focus on both the process of writing and the product, is an effective way for teachers to increase interest, ownership, participation and decision-making for students with disabilities. Topics or themes that motivate students and build on their interests can be identified using interest inventories (with many available on the internet) or in conversation with students. One experienced teacher tells how he focuses writing on students' lives, their friendships, and the questions and wonders they have. Another teacher uses selected pictures or visual images and provides students with a guide (questions). She draws on children's books (non-fiction and fiction) and Google Images. Although helpful for generating interest in writing, these are not sufficient to produce good quality writing.

Skilled writing implies direct instruction and practice in the following crucial steps in the writing process – pre writing, which involves planning and thinking; writing, which involves creating a number of drafts; revising the drafts through ongoing feedback; editing and publishing the final product(s). In a comprehensive writing program, we directly teach students strategies for each step (Tompkins, 2004).

Effective writing instruction emphasizes instruction in planning, organization of ideas, and revision (Baker et al, 2003; Graham, Harris, & MacArthur, 2006; Graves, 1994).

Explicitly teaching those elements using several examples and varying levels of support is very worthwhile. For example, teachers can encourage students to use planning sheets, cards with prompts that can help to organize thoughts, or some other type of mnemonic aid for the planning phase. Those organizers could also provide a source and framework for teachers' and students' conversations about writing and make visible underlying writing processes to students who may lack skills (Baker et al, 2003).

Instruction that includes extensive teacher modeling and thinking aloud (teachers say aloud what they are thinking as they write) can help students learn to actually use the tools as opposed to simply completing worksheets in which their skill use is not authentically integrated into their writing. One experienced special educator, who works with middle school students and uses numerous organizers and skill-building activities, talks aloud while she writes so they hear how she organizes her thoughts and produces an initial draft. Teachers can also model self-questioning strategies, such as using words like who and where and when. In recent research, teachers used actual examples of problems students faced, and then put them into small "discussion groups that focused on the decisions students made and on possible alternative solutions." (Baker et al, 2003, p. 112).

Peer dialogue and student/teacher dialogue around the content and structure of writing is another way of improving it. Talking about writing -- missing elements, observed problems, specific strengths and targeted prompts or questions -- can provide concrete and appropriate

suggestions and feedback. While teaching students specific strategies and providing feedback is essential, students also need to have ample opportunities to use them in practice. We need to create an environment in which students can try out their new skills. A high school special educator gives the following example where he motivated his students to use Alpha Smart as a tool for typing their work. He helped students move beyond fine motor challenges and, for others, spelling challenges and instead focus on developing an effective overall piece of writing.

Students will need to write differently for varying purposes. So another key aspect of writing is to make the structures (forms), purpose, and varied possible audiences explicit to students. Giving several examples and models helps here, too. Though text structures differ in their essential components, students also need to learn them all and learn flexibility in order to construct a range of texts to fit with the purposes of their writing. Here are a few ways to develop such abilities.

Allow students to discuss what makes a good essay or report, and why. Create a wall chart or web with those ideas as a reference for students. (Graham et al, 2006). Teachers can extend the learning by allowing students to recognize differences between different types of writing, the needs of audiences who will read it, and how that could affect their writing purposes.

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(2), 109-123.
- Graham, S., Harris, K., & MacArthur, C. (2006). Explicitly teaching struggling writers: Strategies for mastering the writing process. *Intervention in school and clinic*. 41(5), 290-294.
- Graves, D. H. (1994). A fresh look at writing. Portsmouth, NH. Heinemann
- Tompkins, G. E. (2004). Teaching writing: Balancing process and product (4th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Digital Corner

Co:Writer (www.donjohnston.com/products/cowriter/) is a powerful word completion and prediction program created for struggling writers to help expand their vocabulary and improve written expression. It can be used within any word processor to produce grammatically-correct and topic-specific sentences. On typing the initial letter(s) of a word, the program offers a list of word choices for the user to select based on spelling, word relationships, grammar, and/or frequency of use. Co:Writer can also predict with the grammar feature turned on (predict words based on context) or off (predict words based on spelling only). Users can also add words and import other dictionaries.

Natural Reader

(www.naturalreaders.com/) is a free Text to Speech software with natural sounding

voices. An easy to use software, it can convert any written text such as a Word file, webpage, pdf files and emails into spoken words. It can also convert any written text into audio files such as MP3, or WAV for a CD player, or iPod. It can be a useful tool for writers to improve their content by listening to the written text. It supports several different speeds for listening.

Cmap Tools (<http://cmap.ihmc.us>) is a program that allows users to construct and share knowledge models represented as concept maps. Among many other features, it allows users to construct Cmaps in their personal computer, share them on the internet, automatically create web pages of their concept maps, and search the web for information relevant to a concept map. The program has been translated into 17 different languages (so very helpful for ELLs) and is free for use by anyone.

Research Corner

Castellini, J. & Jeffs, T. (2001). Emerging reading and writing strategies using technology. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. 33(5), pp 60-67.

Williams, S.C. (2002). How speech-feedback and word-prediction software can help students write. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. 34(3). pp 72-78.

Both articles focus on the potential and possibilities of using technology to support students with disabilities in writing skills with respect to content, word usage, and spelling.

Castellini & Jeffs (2001) share research-based strategies that help teachers use the internet effectively in classrooms for writing and reading instruction. They also provide three reasons for investing in the internet as a literacy tool – finding high interest and motivation, accommodations and modifications, and interactive and multi-modal instruction.

The two articles also share information on several tools such as word prediction software, text reading software, and graphic organizer software.

Williams (2002) also makes the case that the effectiveness of the tools is dependent on the way they are used and the need to make the selection of assistive technology on a case-by-case basis for students.