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Strategies for the Reluctant Writer

By: Regina G. Richards (2002)

There are many reasons why students may be reluctant to write. Some reasons include dysgraphia, boredom, poor knowledge of the necessary subskills, and/or lack of interest in the topic.

There are many subskills involved in the writing task and it is important for students to be able to use each of these as automatically as possible. These need to be explicitly taught and will be described more extensively below.

Students who struggle with writing generally dislike practicing writing; however, this is exactly what they need. Sometimes students are just bored because they are used to the fast-paced stimuli of television and video games. Whatever the reason, it is important to be creative and incorporate fun and excitement into students' writing activities. A few examples for incorporating fun in writing activities include the following:

- + Encourage the students to visualize the situation, action, or a specific character
- + Have students role-play the situation prior to organizing the information to be included
- + Provide a humorous word or phrase that the students will use and have them "play" with the meaning of that word
- + Encourage students to draw their ideas prior to organizing the words and phrases
- + Create a silly situation and have students verbally elaborate upon what might happen next
- + Encourage student to compose a song that describes the same events
- + Encourage students' creativity

The subskills for writing

The process of writing is a complex activity and requires juggling a great many components. In his book, *Keeping A Head In School*, Dr. Mel Levine includes a picture of a student juggling a large number of balls (2.) Each ball represents one of the many subskills necessary for writing. Writing does indeed require a juggling and coordination of many skills at the same time. The more automatic each subskill is, the easier it will be for the students to incorporate it with other subskills.

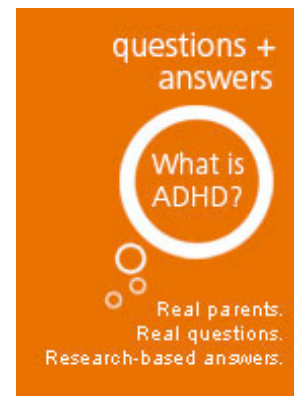
A process approach

Writing should be approached as a process. After selecting the topic, the students need to consider five basic activities. These basic subtasks are:

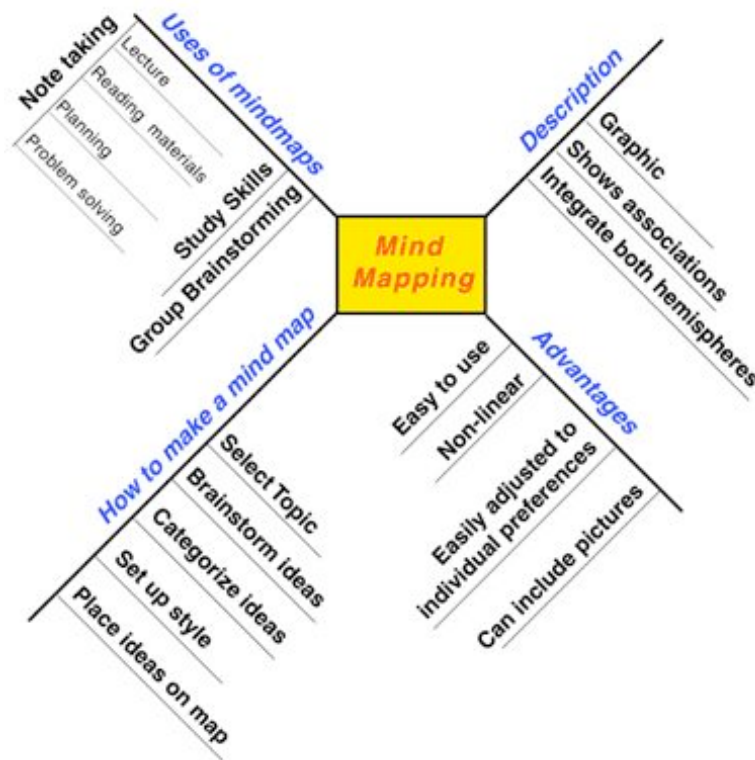
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- + Preplanning and organizing
- + Writing the draft
- + Proofing (looking for errors) and rewriting
- + Editing (elaborate and enhancing the content) and rewriting
- + Writing the final



At each level, students need substantial explicit instruction and modeling, followed by a great deal of practice before the step will become automatic.

For some students it is helpful to divide the preplanning and organizing step into two different activities.

If students enjoy using mnemonics such as a keyword to remember the steps (for example, an acronym), an easy way to remember the basic subtasks for writing is to remember the word *power*. Each letter in the word serves as a reminder for a different step:

- + P - Plan the paper
- + O - Organize the ideas and elaborations
- + W - Write the draft
- + E - Edit the draft: look for errors
- + R - Revise the paper & enhance

Preplanning and organizing

Preplanning is perhaps the most important activity within the writing task. For some students it is also the most difficult, especially if they experience any sort of learning difference.

Many students do well if they can visually organize their ideas. There are a variety of visual organizer strategies that can be used, the most

common of which is sometimes called mind mapping or clustering. In creating a mind map the central idea is placed in the middle or center, and the supporting facts are connected to the main idea in a specific format, as in the example above.

The visual organizer can be arranged for different purposes. An example of categories is shown. Some students may enjoy creating their mind map directly on a computer and these students can use software such as Kidspiration(3) or Inspiration(4.) The advantage of this software is that it allows the student to convert the mind map directly into a traditional outline format.

- + Category
 - + Sub-category
 - + Sub-category
 - + Sub-category

Vocabulary

Some students may have difficulty thinking of the vocabulary word or words they want to use while writing. Other students have difficulty with spelling. When writing, these students tend to simplify their word usage. To help deal with this issue, it is useful to encourage the students to brainstorm and think about the important or key vocabulary words they may wish to use prior to writing. They can then make a list of these words so that they are readily available during the process of writing.

Spelling

Students who struggle with spelling often become frustrated when attempting to express their ideas in writing. It is especially valuable for these students to list some of the key words prior to starting. This way they will be able to write with greater fluency of ideas because they will not become "stuck" trying to think of how to spell a specific word. These students need to learn to be able to sound out words efficiently so that they can spell them with good phonetic logic. This will enhance their ability to read their own writing and will also allow them the opportunity to use an electronic spell checker that works on phonetic principles, such as the Franklin Language Master (5.) This author's personal preference for such students is the Language Master 6000b because of its large font size and good speech clarity. Because the Franklin recognizes words phonetically, students can input words using logic about the way they sound. The Franklin will then help them match the phonetic spelling to the traditional spelling. The use of a speaking component provides multisensory input and also helps decrease the student's confusion in reading similar looking words. The process of decision-making (in selecting the correct choice) helps reinforce the correct spelling of the word. The Franklin can also be used to compensate for sequencing problems in dictionary work.

The proofing component

Proofreading is a very important component and is one that is often difficult for students. There are two main issues involved: the student must be familiar with the necessary skills and the student must have enough active working memory strength to be able to use the skills within the task of writing.

Some of the necessary subskills that must be taught are as follows:

- + Sentence structure
- + Subject verb agreement
- + Verb tense consistency
- + Spelling
- + Capitalization
- + Punctuation

	Editing	
COPS	C-SOOP	STOPS
	+ Capitalization	+ Sentence Structure
+ Capitalization	+ Sentence Structure	+ Tenses
+ Organization	+ Organization	+ Organization
+ Punctuation	+ Overall format	+ Punctuation
+ Spelling	+ Punctuation	+ Spelling

LEARN: Playful Strategies for All Students, p. 91

Each basic subskill should be taught independently and practiced a great deal prior to expecting students to use and incorporate it within their writing. For example, students may begin with basic declarative sentences to practice using a period before moving on to other types of punctuation.

Mnemonics can be very useful to help students remember the steps they need to focus on during the editing process. Use of an acronym will also remind the students to check for each step independently. An acronym is a sequence of letters that may or may not form a word, wherein each letter represents one of the steps to be remembered. Different acronyms are available depending on the focus needed by the student. A common example is COPS(6.) Others may prefer STOPS(7) or C-SOOP(8.)

Writing for a purpose

Very few, if any, students enjoy writing "just because". This is especially true if they consider the assignment boring or useless. However, it is very important for students to practice writing because it is through practice that students will begin to use a generalized their skills. Students will be more enthused about writing if they are writing for a purpose.

Persuasive writing

One type of activity to encourage students to write for a purpose is persuasive writing. Persuasive writing is also important because it helps students develop the skill of supporting their ideas and elaborating upon them by explaining them clearly and thoroughly. The topic for persuasive writing will depend upon the age of the student. The criteria is that the topic chosen should be one that encourages the student to development strong feelings.

Some examples for younger students include:

- + Why we should be allowed to bring stuffed toys to school
- + Why we should have recess every hour

Some examples for older students include:

- + Having greater food choices in the school cafeteria
- + Having school on Saturdays
- + Being allowed to chew gum in school

When encouraging persuasive writing, it is important to help students separate opinion and fact and also to help them learn to recognize unsupported generalities, for example, making bold claims and empty promises without supporting them with facts. To support this development, encourage students to analyze ads from magazines and newspapers. They can discuss the propaganda techniques that are used, focusing on how advertisers use these techniques to get messages across quickly and in small amounts of space.

Activities involved with analyzing advertisements can also be utilized to support development of abstract or figurative language. Many advertisers use the "play on words" to attract attention. As students become more aware of language flexibility, they can be encouraged to be more flexible in their own writing patterns.

Some examples of advertisements that can be analyzed for "play on words" include:

- + A pizza shop slogan - 7 days without pizza makes one weak
- + On the door of a plastic surgeon's office - Hello. Can we pick your nose?
- + In a non-smoking area - if we see smoke, we will assume you are under fire and act accordingly

Creative writing with computer graphics

Students with learning differences who struggle with writing may be very frustrated because they have many creative ideas that they wish to express in a story format. Other students who struggle may have difficulty thinking of ideas. Both types of students benefit by using computer software that encourages them to add graphics, color, and other fun aspects to their story. If the student struggles with spelling, it will be important to provide enough assistance so that the spelling problems do not interfere with the student's ideation and creativity. The goal of the activity is to encourage the student to express ideas fluently using a written format. Some software suggestions are listed in the references (9.)

When should a student use word processing

Word processing facilitates proofreading and editing activities because it eliminates the need for rewriting the paper. It is recommended as a strategy for older students when dealing with longer and/or more complex writing assignments. It is also valuable for younger students who struggle with writing and/or who become fatigued with the process of writing using a pencil or pen. However, caution is advised not to totally eliminate the process of writing with a pencil because this is an important life skill that will be needed throughout life for many different daily activities.

To help develop keyboarding skills to an automatic level, frequency and consistency of practice are imperative. There are very few students who can learn to type efficiently by only practicing one time a week, even if that practice session lasts an hour. It is much more efficient to practice on a daily basis for five or 10 minutes. A short practice session that is repeated on a very consistent basis will have much more benefit for students than a long boring practice session once a week.

It is also valuable to use a variety of typing tutor programs, as this helps decrease boredom. Among this author's favorites are the various versions of Type to Learn(10, 11, 12.) When should a student use voice-activated software

Voice-activated software such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking 13 can be especially helpful within the writing process for students who have difficulty with the mechanical aspects of writing and written expression. However, there are several necessary prerequisites that must be in place before a student will be successful in using voice-activated software. Some of these are listed below:

- + The student *must* reorganize the information in advance
- + The student must be able to state the phrases and sentences fairly fluently, without using filler words such as "um" or "uh"
- + The student must speak clearly without excessive slurring of words
- + The student must have a basic understanding of word processing procedures

It is strongly recommended that the student use the voice-activated program along with the keyboard. This technique is more Multisensory and the student has feedback so that corrections can be made more efficiently. The newer versions of many of these programs include a correction device wherein the student can hear what was originally said. This feature is extremely useful in correcting misinterpretations.

In summary

- + Encourage students to practice writing
- + Ensure that students have the appropriate subskills
- + Encourage students to use a staging or process approach
- + Encourage students to have fun with their writing
- + Encourage students to double check that their writing communicates their message effectively

Other useful information

Lavoie, Richard. How Difficult Can This Be? - FAT City (video) ([LD OnLine Store](#))

Marguiles, Nancy, Maal, Nusa, Wheatley, Margaret J. Mapping Inner Space: Learning and Teaching Visual Mapping (www.amazon.com)

Richards, Regina G. LEARN: Playful Strategies for All Learners (www.amazon.com or www.retctrpress.com)

Richards, Regina G. Memory Foundations for Reading: Visual Mnemonics for Sound/Symbol Relationships (www.amazon.com or www.retctrpress.com)

Richards, Regina G. The Source for Dyslexia and Dysgraphia (www.Linguisystems.com)

Richards, Regina G. When Writing's a Problem (www.retctrpress.com)

Richards, Regina G. and Richards, Eli I. Eli, the boy who hated to write: understanding dysgraphia (www.amazon.com or www.retctrpress.com) ISBN: 0966135334

Schumm, Jeanne Shay. School Power: Study Skill Strategies for Succeeding in School (www.amazon.com)

Sonneman, Milly R. Beyond Words: A Guide to Drawing Out Ideas (www.amazon.com)

Tarquin, Patti, Walker, Sharon. Creating Success in the Classroom: Visual Organizers and How to Use Them (www.amazon.com)

Resources

1. Levine, Melvin. Keeping A Head in School: A Student's Book about Learning Abilities and Learning Disabilities (www.amazon.com or www.retctrpress.com) ISBN: 0838820697
2. Kidspiration ([Available at the LD OnLine Store](#)) for visual organizers; grades K-3
3. Inspiration ([Available at the LD OnLine Store](#)) for creating visual organizers for grades 6 to adult
4. Franklin Electronic Publishers (www.franklin.com)
5. Deshler, Don, et al. Teaching Adolescents with Learning Strategies and Methods. Denver, CO; Love Publishing, 1996
6. Richards, R.G. LEARN: Playful Strategies for All Students, pages 90-91 (www.amazon.com or www.retctrpress.com)
7. Ibid., pages 90-91
8. Software Suggestions:
 - + EasyBook deluxe (www.sunburst.com) creative writing and drawing program for grades 3 to 8
 - + KidWorks deluxe (www.sunburst.com) for grades PreK to 4; multimedia creativity word processor and paint program
 - + Sunbuddy Writer (www.sunburst.com), easy-to-use picture and word processor; grades K to 2
9. Type to Learn 3 (www.sunburst.com); keyboarding grades 3 and up
10. Type to Learn Jr. (www.sunburst.com); keyboarding grades K to 2
11. Type to Learn Jr.: new keys for kids (www.sunburst.com); keyboarding grades 1 to 3
12. Dragon NaturallySpeaking (www.lhsl.com/naturallyspeaking/ or www.broderbund.com)

About the author



Regina G. Richards, MA, an educational therapist in Riverside California, is founder and former director of Richards Educational Therapy Center & Big Springs School, agencies which provide multidisciplinary evaluations and treatment



programs for students with language learning disabilities. She has authored a variety of journal articles and books on visual development, reading, dyslexia, and dysgraphia. She was president of the Inland Empire Branch of IDA for three terms, editor of IDA California Consortium's Resource Directory for 7 years, and remains an active IDA board member. She is President of RET Center Press at www.retctrpress.com and can be reached at regina@retctrpress.com.

By Regina G. Richards, MA Educational Therapist, Riverside CA February 2002

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