

# Tool Kit for Parents: Tips for Helping With Writing Tasks

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A student in elementary school describes his feelings about writing as follows:

"Writing was definitely the worst task of all. It was just way too hard to remember all the things he needed, like periods and capital letters. And then, it was almost impossible to think about how to spell words when he was busy trying to think about the story."

So Eli figured it was easier to write just a few sentences. That didn't hurt his hand so much either. His teachers complained, but Eli just kept writing very short stories. After all, teachers didn't understand what it was like to struggle and struggle to write, and still have the paper turn out sloppy and full of mistakes.... They couldn't understand how hard he "tried." (1)

Let's examine some of the issues that frustrate Eli about writing.

- . working memory
- . story size
- . sloppiness
- . understanding

## **Working memory**

Working memory is a form of multi-tasking . Many refer to it as "active working memory" to emphasize the role of active involvement. This type of memory has five main purposes:

- . Holding an idea in mind while developing, elaborating, clarifying, or using it
- . Recalling information from long-term memory while holding related information in short-term memory
- . Holding components of the task together in memory while completing that task
- . Keeping a series of pieces of information together so that they remain meaningful
- . Holding a long-term plan while thinking about a short-term need (2)

## **Story size**

Story size relates to active working memory. When a student deals with or manipulates a larger chunk of information, he also needs to hold together more pieces or components of that information. To compensate for less efficiency in this area, students often shorten what they write. An example of a student struggling to hold an idea in

mind while elaborating upon it is when he writes a story that begins about one topic but switches topics several times throughout the story. Research demonstrates evidence of significant failure to develop students' positive beliefs and motivation towards writing in many of today's writing programs. Students who experience a limited amount of written language success often force writing with a hurried pace, a lagging confidence, and a lingering malaise. Although many students acknowledge that writing is important and directly related to success in school and life, the thought of writing too often evokes negative reactions such as feelings of anxiety and dread, lack of control, and avoidance. (3)

### **Sloppiness**

The issue of sloppiness or neatness also relates to active working memory. Some students may be able to write very neatly when their total concentration is upon the writing mechanics. However, when at the same time they need to think about the content or what they are writing, their working memory system becomes overloaded. They are no longer adequately able to hold together all the components of the task, and therefore, the neatness of their letterform deteriorates. When working memory falters, most often the component that gets "lost" is the one that is less automatic and/or most difficult for the student.

### **Understanding**

The situation described at the beginning identifies Eli's frustrations with what he perceives as lack of understanding by his teachers. Students are able to perform more efficiently when they understand their issues and when they feel that their parents and teachers understand them.

### **What to do?**

The writing task places many demands on a student's active working memory system. To be successful when writing, students need to manipulate multiple components simultaneously and successfully. They also need patience, persistence, and flexibility. They must constantly switch their attention between different goals and subtasks: the ideas, elaboration, descriptions, sentence structure, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and more.

Pediatrician Mel Levine, in his book for teenagers, describes writing as "the awesome juggling act." Under a picture of a boy juggling eight balls, each representing a necessary component for writing, he states, "To juggle, he has to keep all of these balls in the air at the same time. To write well, you have to keep all of the parts of writing in your memory while you are writing." (4)

## Chunking

This is an important strategy for all students. Chunking, a computer term meaning, "bundles of information," refers to the strategy of breaking information or a task into smaller manageable parts.

As parents, we can help our children appreciate these important aspects about the chunking process:

- . we store and organize information more efficiently in small chunks
- . everything begins with one small step
- . the small steps then lead up to a bigger accomplishment

### Power

When dealing with writing, chunking is critical. **POWER** is a mnemonic strategy to encourage students to proceed through the writing task in small steps. This strategy gives students power to succeed when writing by encouraging them to use an organized, systematic process.

(5)

In mnemonic strategies such as **POWER**, each letter stands for a single step the child needs to perform. When introducing the strategy, model (show your child) how to do with the step and then encourage her to do it herself. Be sure your child understands each step before moving to the next. After all of the steps, show your child how they come together to create the full strategy and explain how each letter in the mnemonic serves as a memory hint or hook to trigger each step.

### **POWER: P is plan**

This stage includes preparation activities and development of some background experience, with the goal of establishing enthusiasm for the topic. It also involves discussing the basic format and type of writing required by the task, followed by determining the steps needed to complete the task. In doing so, the student plans the focus of the task.

Some suggestions for preparatory activities include reading your child a related story, discussing the book your child has just read, or doing an "experiment" or art project that illustrates a critical concept. Of course, this will vary with the type of task and the child's age.

### **POWER: O is organize**

The goal of this stage is to identify and describe the parts of the task. Visual organizers and use of frames are extremely valuable at this stage. The use of visual organizers was discussed in previous Tool Kit for Parents articles including, [Tips for Understanding What You Read](#), [Making It Stick](#), and [Being an Efficient Homework Helper](#).

Younger students may focus on three primary parts: beginning, middle, and end. Older students may add other relevant components such as characters, setting, problem, solution, and theme.

Some basic criteria to consider in teaching this step of POWER are:

- . Begin with information/tasks that are more concrete and gradually increase the abstract.
- . Begin by including fewer components and progressively add more.
- . Begin with a smaller task or chunk and progressively increase in size.

### **POWER: W is write**

Students write their paragraph/ paper, elaborating the ideas developed in the stage above. Younger students may start with pictures. It is critical to include both adult feedback and self-feedback at this stage. Self-feedback is described below.

### **POWER: E is edit**

In the editing stage, have your student focus on a single component at a time. She proofreads the paper multiple times, each time with a different focus. This step is often the most difficult for students with learning challenges because they tend to "read" what they intended rather than what they actually wrote. A great deal of modeling, scaffolding (helping much more at the beginning, decreasing your help as you progress), and direct instruction is necessary to help students develop appropriate editing skills and to encourage going through the paper more than once.

Specific editing strategies were previously discussed in the article, [Strategies For The Reluctant Writer](#).

### **POWER: R is revise**

Many students attempt to avoid the revision stage. However, it is critical that they learn this as a valuable component of the written expression task. Again, scaffolding, modeling, and direct instruction are very useful in helping them understand how to enhance their writing. Using a self-feedback form to record the number of changes they made provides a concrete record of their progress in revising and enhancing their written products. Of course, changes need to be appropriate and add to the quality of the paper.

In this article, we will focus on some specific strategies for planning and organization.

### **A note about vocabulary and spelling**

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.

### **Vocabulary**

To help deal with this issue, encourage your student to brainstorm and

think about the important or key vocabulary words he may wish to use prior to writing. He then makes a list of these words so they are readily available during the process of writing.

List KEY words FIRST

### **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 because then 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 allow them the opportunity to use an electronic spell checker that works on phonetic principles, such as the Franklin Language Master. ( 7 ) 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. This provides a valuable opportunity for students to think about the words and use the process of decision-making as they select the correct choice. This process helps reinforce the accurate spelling of the word.

The use of a speaking component provides multisensory input and helps decrease the student's confusion in reading similar looking words. Your student may also use the Franklin to compensate for sequencing problems when dealing with dictionary work.

### **Frames**

Ed Ellis of the University of Alabama ( 8 ) developed learning frames as a sensible and powerful approach for developing skills related to understanding and expanding ideas. Learning frames help organize ideas, concepts, important implications and sequences.

"Learning frames appeal to the developing brain by structuring thinking, supporting connections between new ideas and previous knowledge, and developing new patterns for complex thoughts." ( 9 )

A basic frame is a series of boxes organized on a worksheet. The basic concept is the same for learning frames and visual organizers. There is often a box at the top for a key concept and other boxes for specific details. Students may use learning frames to organize a report, summarize a story or expository text, or take notes.

This strategy encourages students to think deeply about the topic

rather than simply to identify facts. It is important that the teacher or parent directly teach each component of the frame to ensure that the student understands what is involved. Each time you use the same frame, supply less of the information and have your child fill in more until he can use the frame independently.

Students can use simple learning frames as early as first grade because it helps them focus on the patterns within ideas.

**Strategies for younger students or students who are "stuck"**

Some students say they can't think of anything to write, but in reality they may have many ideas but are stuck because they do not know how to organize them and bring them together.

### **Using pictures with frames**

LHQ describes this technique, among several others, in two of their tool sets: *The Emergent Tools* and *Primary Writing Tools*. (10)

Give your child a piece of paper with frames consisting of three boxes and several lines, as in Figure 6. Depending on your child's level, you may wish to insert primary spaced lines for his writing.

[View a sample picture frame format](#)

Talk with your child about a "story", discussing beginning, middle, and end. Relate these concepts to stories that are familiar to your child. Be sure your child is able to identify these three concepts in a variety of familiar stories.

Your goal is for your child to write his own story. Therefore, the first task is to identify a topic. Your child may come up with an idea for a topic or you may provide suggestions. Suggestions should involve an exciting happening that your child has recently experienced, such as, an incident or event with his favorite pet, a trip to a theme park such as Disneyland, or a birthday party. It is important that your child have direct experience with the topic, as the topic provides an important context for the child to use in developing his ideas.

As an alternative, you can use a wordless picture storybook as a topic. Go through the book with your child and ask the questions below.

Discuss with your child what happened first in his event by asking, "What happened first?" Have your child draw a picture about that happening in the first large box on the frame.

Discuss what happened in the middle of the event. If this seems too difficult for your child, switch to the end and discuss the last thing that happened. Have your child draw a picture about that happening in the appropriate box on the frame. If you discussed the middle of the event, your child draws the corresponding picture in the middle box. If you discussed the end of the event, your child draws a corresponding picture in the last box. Then, have your child draw a picture for the

remaining happening of the event.

After your child has drawn all three pictures, encourage him to write a sentence about each, using the lines underneath the appropriate box. When your child has finished writing a sentence for each picture, he then has a brief story consisting of a beginning, middle and end. Read the complete story with your child. At this point, it is appropriate and useful to have your child use one of the self-feedback forms, discussed later.

Depending on your child's age, you may encourage him to elaborate on his story.

## **A book report**

### **Preparing for a book report**

Frames provide a valuable way to organize ideas for book reports. Identify the components required for your student's report, as these will vary at different ages and grade levels. Create a frame for each component and help your child work with one frame at a time to complete the report.

[This frame](#) is a sample of the type of frame you may create to help your student with a book report. ( 11 )

The components used in this frame are divided into three portions: the Introduction, the Body, and the Conclusion. Your child will also use an appropriate self-feedback form, which you may provide on the bottom or on another paper.

### **Introduction:**

#### **Hook**

This is a brief statement to highlight something about the story with the goal of "hooking" the reader. For example, a hook for the story, *The Sign Of The Beaver* by Elizabeth George could be, "Can you imagine living on your own in the wilderness for several months?" Another example is a hook for the story *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen: "Can you imagine living on your own in the wilderness with only a hatchet to help you survive?"

#### **Resource**

In this frame, your child writes the name of the book and the author. Depending on his curriculum, he may also add the literary genre.

#### **Quick summary**

Your child writes a brief summary of the story in one, two, or three sentences. Many students may need significant examples, modeling, and scaffolding to develop the skill of writing a concise summary.

## Topic

Your child writes a single sentence, which summarizes the main idea of the story. For example, the topic frame for the book *Hatchet* might be, "Brian survives the Canadian wilderness by creating new ways to view his environment."

## Body:

### Ideas or events

The sample frame illustrates three boxes for "ideas" or "events." You may use this format for a book report having three or five paragraphs. In a three-paragraph report, the paragraphs correspond to introduction, ideas, and conclusion. The student integrates the three primary ideas into a single paragraph. A five-paragraph book report describes each of the three main ideas in a full paragraph.

Using the example of *Hatchet*, the three basic ideas are *fire*, *fish*, and *meat*.

### Supporting details

Your child lists details to support each idea within the box under the corresponding idea. In the example above, your student may list three supporting details for the basic idea of fire:

- . Brian longed for matches.
- . He tried rubbing to stick together.
- . He used his hatchet to create a spark.

## Conclusion:

The conclusion section includes varying components, depending upon what is required at your child age.

### Restate the topic

This section is for a one-sentence summary statement related to the "quick summary" above.

## Theme

A theme is defined as a unifying idea that is a recurring element in a literary work. In this section, your child selects a one-word summary to describe the theme of the story. For the story *Hatchet*, the theme could be "survival".

It is useful to provide students with a list of possible theme topics, making sure that they understand the meaning of each word. Your student can use this list to select a word that matches his story. Some theme words might be:

- . Accomplishment

- . Determination
- . Honesty
- . Affirmations
- . Dishonesty
- . Imagination
- . Anger
- . Diversity
- . Love
- . Community
- . Family
- . Loyalty
- . Compromise
- . Fear
- . Patience
- . Curiosity
- . Friendship
- . Responsibility
- . Courage
- . Grief
- . Survival

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation relates back to the initial hook. The answer to the question posed in the hook in the story Hatchet is "yes!" Your student writes this word in the interpretation and box.

### **Concluding thought**

Your child concludes his book report with the statement that forms a concluding thought. An example for hatchet might be, "sometimes survival means looking at the world with a new pair of the 'glasses.'"

### **Writing the book report**

Give your child another blank copy of the book report frame. For some children, it is useful to print the frame on three separate pages, with one page for each of the following sections:

- . Introduction
- . Body
- . Conclusion

Many children decide that the sections for "hook," "resource" and sometimes "quick summary" remain the same as in the Planning Book Report Frame. If this is your child's decision, she may start with "topic." Your child then completes each box in the frame. However, this time she uses her notes from the Planning Book Report Frame and within each box, she writes elaborate and descriptive sentences for

each component.

After the elaboration, your child completes one of the self-feedback forms to analyze her work.

The next step ("W" in POWER) is for your child to write (or type) the Book Report using good paragraph structure and organization. Again, follow this by using a self-feedback form to analyze her work.

### **Feedback**

Research findings suggest that verbal feedback during and after a learning task are key elements in the error-correction process. There is much value in verbal feedback and discussing a learning process.

However, interfering too soon in the learning process may get in the way of your child's ability to acquire and retain the information.

In providing feedback to your child, tell him what he is doing well and ask provocative questions to stimulate further learning. An example question might be, "This summary statement is very interesting. What else might you say to point out another important idea in the story?"

It is also critical for your child to analyze his own work by providing his own feedback. This process of analysis and decision-making is critical for the learning process. Self-feedback forms provide a framework for the criteria your child needs to evaluate. Some examples of self-feedback forms are in Figures 8 to 13.

### **Using computer programs**

Some options for obtaining ideas for using technology are available from the following sources.

An example of a Clicker4 screen.

- . Readers may find additional suggestions in Perspectives, the magazine of the International Dyslexia Association in the theme issue, "Assistive Technologies: Making a Difference" (17)
- . Older students may wish to investigate use of a voice-activated program such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking (18). Several prerequisites must be in place for success in using such software, some of which 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 valuable for the student to use the voice-activated program along with a keyboard. This technique is more multisensory and provides visual feedback so that the student can make corrections more efficiently. Newer versions of these programs include a correction device wherein the student can hear what was originally said, a feature, which can be extremely useful.
- . Help your student develop efficient keyboarding skills. To develop skills to an automatic level, frequency and consistency of practice are imperative. Very few students can learn to type efficiently by only practicing one time a week. It is more efficient to practice on a daily basis for five or 10 minutes. A short practice session repeated on a consistent basis will have more benefit for students. It is 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 (19 , 20 , 21).
- . Investigate use of a program that will read back to the student what he wrote. One suggestion is [Screenreader](#) ®

### **In summary,**

- . Be positive with your child and reinforce successes
- . Encourage your child to practice writing
- . Teach your child one strategy at a time
- . Ensure your child to practice the component skills to a level of automaticity
- . Encourage your child to use a process approach, focusing on one small chunk at a time
- . Encourage your child to have fun with the process of communicating in writing
- . Encourage your child to use an appropriate self-feedback form to think about the quality of her writing
- . And above all, **Have Fun!**