

EmPOWER™ - A Scaffold for Effective Writing Instruction

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In *Writing Next*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Graham and Perin (2007) review the research on effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in grades 4-12. Through the application of meta-analysis, they identify eleven elements of writing instruction that are effective for teaching students to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning.

EFFECT SIZE Interpretation Guideline

.20 = small or mild effect
.50 = medium or moderate effect
.80 = large or strong effect

In meta-analysis, effect size measures the **strength** and the **consistency** of an instructional practice's effects. The following summarizes the major findings of the study and illustrates how EmPOWER™, an explicit method for teaching expository writing, addresses each of these key elements of effective instruction.

WRITING STRATEGIES

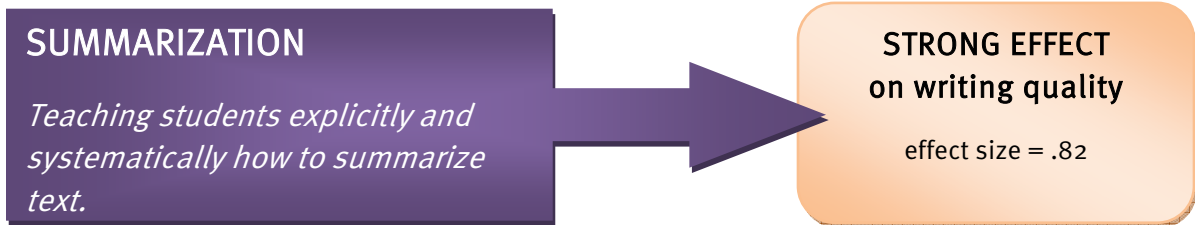
Teaching students explicit and systematic strategies for planning, revising, and editing their writing.

STRONG EFFECT on writing quality

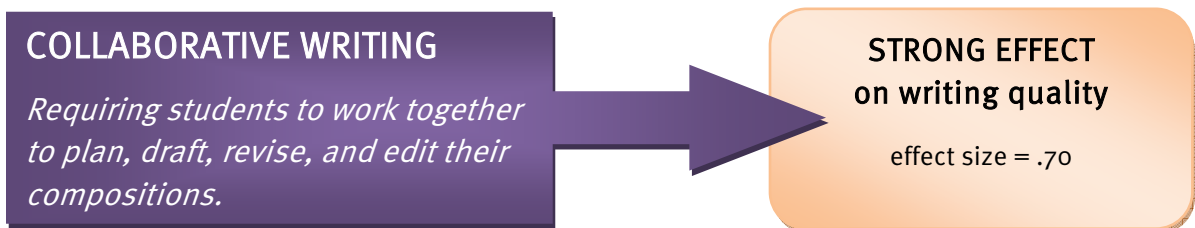
effect size = .82

The central goal of EmPOWER is to provide teachers with a common method for teaching strategies related to planning, developing, revising, and editing written text consistently – across all grade levels and all curriculum content areas. Using an explicit and systematic instructional routine, students learn a set of strategies specifically designed to support them with:

- Analyzing assignment demands;
- Developing plans and writing goals;
- Organizing ideas;
- Mastering various text structure elements and rhetorical structures; and
- Evaluating their writing for effective revision and editing



Within the EmPOWER method, teachers and students use summarization strategies throughout the writing process by stating and revisiting assignment demands and honing the rhetorical structure of the text they are producing. Specific strategies are taught to guide students with distilling essential ideas from texts they read and composing well crafted summaries.



The EmPOWER method is rooted in a dialogical model of instruction, meaning that it anchors teaching in teacher-student *discussion* – discussion about what various writing tasks involve, how best to organize ideas, how to forge text from written plans, and what makes for good vs. ho-hum vs. confusing writing. Insights about *what* students will write and *how* they will develop their texts are born from this dialogue. By following a sequence of questions, the answers to which shape and guide the student’s composing process and writing choices, teachers and students work together to do the problem solving that composing requires.

All of EmPOWER’s concepts and strategies are introduced within a gradual release of responsibility model of instruction, which affords numerous opportunities for students to work together to develop texts. Routinely, students work together to analyze assignments, organize their ideas using a set of graphics called Brain Frames[®], work their ideas into text structure templates and drafts, and evaluate and improve various aspects of their compositions. Once learned, EmPOWER lends itself to peer tutorial models.



Within the framework of EmPOWER, students establish reachable goals at each stage of the writing process. These include larger text goals as well as intermediate goals for attaining a desired outcome. In that sense, EmPOWER scaffolds the development of macro-level as well as micro-level goal setting and attainment.



Research shows that students in general make a greater number and more effective revisions to their writing when they compose on a computer than they do when they compose by hand. This finding is even more striking in underachieving writers. EmPOWER can be used with any output media, whether that be word processing programs or paper and pencil. Within classrooms, teachers can make use of computers to support students with all aspects of EmPOWER.



EmPOWER is not designed to teach sentence structure or grammar per se, but within the routine of EmPOWER, students have numerous opportunities to craft and hone precise sentences that capture their intended meaning (e.g., thesis statements, topic sentences, elaborative comments, and summative statements). EmPOWER allows teachers to integrate instruction in sentence structure with instruction in composition.



The first four steps of EmPOWER (Evaluate, make a Plan, Organize, and Work) guide students through a series of pre-writing strategies designed to help them understand task demands, identify their purpose for writing (e.g., persuade, give information, retell), and generate and organize their ideas using a set of six graphics called Brain Frames[®]. Each Brain Frame is dedicated to a *specific* purpose for communicating (i.e., telling, comparing/contrasting, sequencing, showing causes/effects, categorizing, and showing relationships). In contrast to traditional graphic organizers, which are fill-in-the-box, circle, or bubble worksheets, students draw (or “frame”) what’s in their brain, thereby creating their own graphics. They determine *how* to represent the relationships between their ideas so as to best capture what they know and understand. Because students generate their own Brain Frames, patterns of language and thought become internalized, and students have a “place holder” for their ideas. With a picture of their ideas, students then do the Work of importing relevant ideas into text structure paragraphs, multi-paragraph essays, reports, etc.. Collectively the pre-writing strategies in the Evaluate, make a Plan, Organize and Work steps provide students with multiple opportunities to set goals as well as generate, organize and “store” words and ideas so that they free up cognitive resources for expressing ideas creatively when they draft.



EmPOWER is designed to guide the development of expository text. To that end, students engage in inquiry activities designed to integrate material they have derived from both primary and secondary sources and represent their knowledge and understanding in writing. Teachers who use EmPOWER are given free rein to craft assignments that require inquiry and formal research.

PROCESS WRITING APPROACH

Interweaving a number of general instructional activities in a workshop that affords students extended opportunities for writing and stresses writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing.

**MODERATE EFFECT
on writing quality**

effect size = .32

Using EmPOWER, students work through all stages of the writing process in response to school-sponsored writing assignments. Within the classroom, the framework of EmPOWER encourages students to share their writing at various stages of development, affording them the opportunity to learn from each other and provide authentic feedback to their peers.

STUDY MODELS

Providing students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing.

**MODERATE EFFECT
on writing quality**

effect size = .25

Teachers using EmPOWER are encouraged to help students explore various genres of text and the features of writing that exemplify high quality composition. Insights gleaned from examining well vs. poorly structured text strengthen students' understanding of what constitutes effective writing and, in turn, shape students' own compositions.

WRITING FOR CONTENT LEARNING

Using writing as a tool for learning content material rather than writing skill development.

**MODERATE EFFECT
on writing quality**

effect size = .25

EmPOWER is designed to support the development of expository text within the content areas. Students learning EmPOWER are encouraged to apply it to their writing across the curriculum, importing the strategies to support their academic success in all content classes.

EmPOWER™

THE BOTTOM LINE FOR THE CLASSROOM

Graham and Perin's research identifies eleven instructional elements that have positive effects on composition quality *in isolation*. Logically, instruction that *weaves these elements together* in service of curriculum and state standards is bound to have even greater effects.

EmPOWER™, a systematic method for teaching expository writing, offers teachers a platform for incorporating all eleven research-based instructional elements that improve writing quality. Used in a classroom, it improves writing in school and empowers writers for a lifetime.

INSTRUCTIONAL ELEMENT	EFFECT	EmPOWER
Writing Strategies	.82 = strong	✓
Summarization	.82 = strong	✓
Collaborative writing	.75 = strong	✓
Specific product goals	.70 = strong	✓
Word processing	.55 = moderate	✓
Sentence combining	.50 = moderate	✓
Pre-writing	.32 = moderate	✓
Inquiry activities	.32 = moderate	✓
Process writing approach	.32 = moderate	✓
Study of models	.25 = mild	✓
Writing for content area learning	.23 = mild	✓