

# Writing: Why kids struggle and what to do about it

Bonnie Singer, Ph.D.

We all have experienced that moment when we sit to write and nothing comes...not even a word. We sit and stare at the page, wondering what to say, searching for language, trying to find a way to communicate with the unseen reader. Finally it comes, and we say, "Yes! That's it. That's what I wanted to say." For many students, writing is an arduous task that seldom yields this feeling of relief and pride.



Writing is hard because it demands the integration and regulation of many different processes simultaneously -- thinking, organization, memory, language, visual-spatial, handwriting, and even emotions. In that sense, it's a juggling act - a difficult and precarious situation in which several things must be maintained at the same time. Each of these processes makes its own unique contribution to the process of writing as well as the text that is produced. When one or more process challenges a writer and demands more of their attention, the smooth execution of the others is interrupted.

Research shows that students who struggle with writing can have difficulty with any (or all) of the following:

- \* *Reading their assignments and knowing what they have to do*
- \* *Getting started with writing tasks*
- \* *Planning, organizing, expressing, and/or elaborating their ideas in writing*
- \* *Completing all of the parts of their assignments*
- \* *Responding in writing on tests*
- \* *Managing all of the writing demands of school independently*
- \* *Staying motivated and interested in writing*



## WHY DO SO MANY STUDENTS STRUGGLE?

Educators are highly trained, but most teacher preparation programs do not include classes on how to teach writing. As a result, dedicated teachers are left to their own devices when designing their writing curriculum, and they turn to a range of different sources for ideas.

Across the grades and different content areas, teachers are not necessarily coordinated in how they teach students to write. Mrs. Smith teaches writing one way in third grade, and Mr. Thompson does it slightly differently in fourth grade. Mr. White requires outlines in English, but Mrs. Finnegan wants students to use different strategies in Social Studies. Students receiving special education services are often required to respond to even more diverse instructional approaches and strategies, as the nature of instruction they receive outside of the classroom can vary from that used by their various classroom teachers. In the end, the instructional target is always moving for students, and the strategies they are asked to use often change from one subject to the next and from year to year.

## No wonder they get confused!

Research is clear – some students are particularly vulnerable when it comes to academic writing. For students with identified language disorders, visual-spatial processing disorders, multi-faceted learning disabilities, attention deficit disorders, and executive function weaknesses (i.e, trouble with planning, organizing, and self-regulating thinking and problem solving), we can predict the ways in which they will have difficulty with writing.



Not all students who struggle have disabilities, however. Some bright and very academically capable students have trouble writing for no obvious reason. We can only surmise that they lack an understanding of critical aspects of the writing process, have not yet developed some of the basic writing skills they need, or have received instruction that is not well suited to their learning styles.

Just a brief conversation with any student who finds writing difficult reveals that they are quick to adopt the opinion that they are “not that good at writing.” Then they begin to really dislike it. With dislike often comes avoidance, and with avoidance, they fall even further behind.

Effective instruction is critical if students who are struggling are to learn to integrate and regulate the various skills and processes that academic writing requires. They need insights and strategies that allow them to juggle all of the balls.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

For students to be successful, they must learn that the basic dance they do with a blank page and a pen, pencil, or keyboard involves many of the same moves over and over. That’s the principle behind a method called EmPOWER™, which Dr. Bonnie Singer (Founder of Architects For Learning) began to develop 20 years ago and has since been studying and refining.

## Evaluate

make a

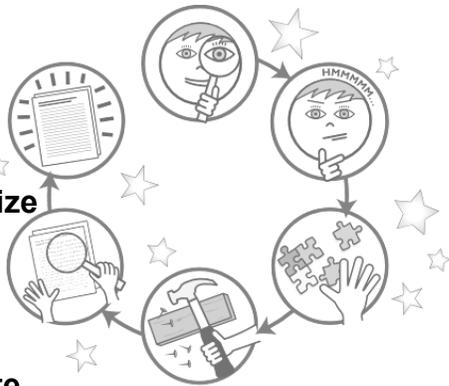
Plan

Organize

Work

Evaluate

Re-work



EmPOWER is an acronym that specifies six distinct steps of the writing process.

Following these steps, students ask themselves 10 key questions, each of which prompts them to use various strategies for organizing their thinking and deciding how to develop and refine their text.

The EmPOWER steps and strategies are designed to be used in all grades and all content area classes. Students can use EmPOWER and its embedded strategies at any point in their academic career – into college and beyond.

## WHAT DOES EmPOWER DO?

Research shows that students using EmPOWER are able to:

- ✓ Read their writing assignments, know what to do, and get started
- ✓ Create clear plans that structure and guide their thinking prior to writing
- ✓ Write well structured, elaborated texts that convey their ideas clearly
- ✓ Achieve success with writing across the curriculum and on high stakes tests
- ✓ Self-assess and self-advocate when they are having difficulty
- ✓ Feel confident and capable as writers

## WHERE CAN STUDENTS LEARN EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES?

Architects For Learning provides individualized instruction in a range of research-based methods for K-12 and college-age students who need to develop their writing skills.

We specialize in developing essential skills, strategies, and habits for academic success. If students need help with executive function, listening, speaking, reading, writing, memory, note-taking, and study skills, we can help.

*Our vision is that students know how to tackle what comes their way in school and in life to the best of their abilities.*

Beverly: 100 Cummings Center, Suite 328G

Needham: 160 Gould Street Suite 203

office@architectsforlearning.com

Phone: 781-235-8412