

Writing: Why kids struggle and what to do about it

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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!” For many students, writing is an arduous task that seldom yields this feeling of relief and pride.

Writing is hard because it requires you to integrate and regulate many different processes -- thinking, organization, memory, language, spatial skills, handwriting, and even emotions. In that sense, it’s a difficult and precarious juggling act. Our brains and bodies must coordinate so many things at the same time.

Each of these processes makes its own unique contribution to the process of writing as well as the text we ultimately produce. When one or more process challenges a writer and demands more of their attention, the smooth execution of the others is interrupted.

Young writers may struggle with many aspects of writing

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



Why do so many students struggle?

Across the grades and different content areas, teachers often are not coordinated in how they teach writing. 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 her students to use different strategies in Social Studies.

Students who get help from specialists outside of the classroom see even more varied approaches and strategies.

The instructional target is always moving for students.



No wonder they get confused!

Research is clear – some students are vulnerable when it comes to academic writing. We can predict the ways in students with language disorders, visual-spatial processing disorders, learning disabilities, and attention and executive function challenges will have difficulty with writing.

Not all students who struggle have disabilities, however. Some bright and academically capable students have trouble writing for no obvious reason. We can only surmise that they lack insight into of key 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 matched to how they learn.

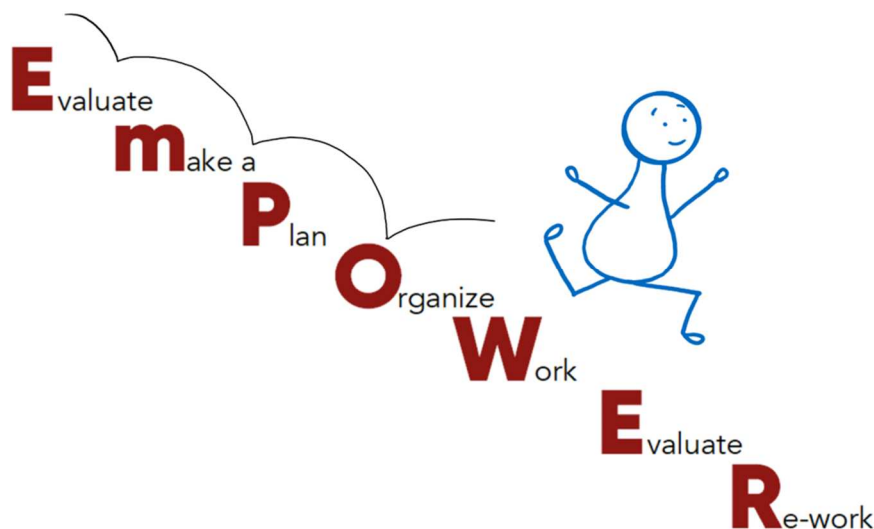
A brief conversation with any student who struggles reveals that they are quick to adopt the opinion that they are “not that good at writing.” Then they begin to really dislike it. With dislike often comes avoidance, and with avoidance, they fall even further behind.

Effective instruction is critical if students who are struggling are to learn to take charge of all 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. Making those moves visible is the principle behind a method called EmPOWER, which was developed over 20 years ago by Drs. Bonnie Singer and Anthony Bashir.

EmPOWER is an acronym that specifies six distinct steps of the writing process. Students ask themselves 9 key questions, each of which prompts them to use a strategy to problem solve and move forward with the writing process.



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.

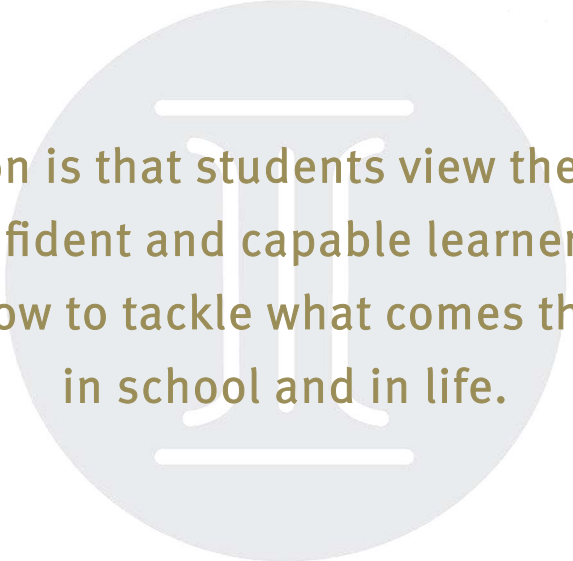
Does it work?

Research shows that students using EmPOWER are able to:

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

Architects For Learning provides research-based instruction for K-12 and college students who need to develop their writing skills.

With instruction that's individualized to them, they develop the essential skills, strategies, and habits they need for success.



Our vision is that students view themselves as confident and capable learners who know how to tackle what comes their way in school and in life.