



Prioritizing Elementary School Writing Instruction: Cultivating Middle School Readiness for Students With Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Helping elementary students with learning disabilities (LD) prepare for the rigor of middle school writing is an instructional priority. Fortunately, several standards-based skills in upper elementary school and middle school overlap. Teachers in upper elementary grades, specifically fourth and fifth grades, have the opportunity to provide evidence-based writing instruction that will provide readiness for middle school writing. In this article, three key writing standards are highlighted and then paired with an evidence-based instructional approach for teaching genre-based (i.e., informative, persuasive, narrative) writing instruction, revising and editing, and note taking to students with LD. Teaching procedures and resources are included.

Keywords

intervention, academic, writing, learning, disabilities, LD

Considerable attention has been given to instruction aimed at improving student written expression for college and career readiness (National Governors Association, 2010). Assessment results substantiate this need across grade levels and student populations. For example, only 30% of high school seniors were proficient in writing on the National Assessment of Education Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The National Assessment of Education Progress 2012 outcomes were lower for students with disabilities, with only 6% of 4th graders, 5% of 8th graders, and 5% of 12th graders with disabilities at the proficient level. These outcomes suggest that writing intervention for students with disabilities in elementary school is key to developing and promoting long-term writing proficiency.

A Critical Instructional Window

In upper elementary school, many students are not learning to write but are *writing to learn* by utilizing writing to enhance knowledge acquisition and to demonstrate an understanding of different topics (Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011). By fourth grade, students are expected to write more

frequently and for various purposes (e.g., to inform, to persuade, to tell a story). This article focuses on writing instruction for students with learning disabilities (LD) in fourth and fifth grade for two reasons. First, writing for various purposes and in different genres is emphasized in Grade 4 and beyond to a greater extent than in kindergarten through third grade. Second, the unfavorable writing performance of students with disabilities in middle school and high school suggests that intervention in upper elementary grades is necessary to foster proficiency in writing-based activities that are expected when students reach middle school.

Essential Skills. As shown in Table 1, Common Core (National Governors Association, 2010) key writing standards in Grades 4 through 8 overlap. Therefore, standards

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Table 1. Key Upper Elementary and Middle School Writing Standards and Corresponding Strategies.

Writing Skill	Common Core Standard	Strategy Presented in Article
Genre-specific paragraph and essay writing—writing for a variety of purposes	CCW4.1–CCW8.1 Expository, narrative, and persuasive writing Using evidence to support opinions and arguments CCW8.3 Transitioning, sequencing, organization of ideas, coherence, etc.	Self-regulated strategy development instruction for teaching writing across purposes including to inform, to persuade, and to tell a story
Revising and editing	CCW4.5–CCW8.5 Editing and revising Authentic writing	Capitalization, organization, punctuation, and spelling strategy Sentence combining
Note taking	CCW4.8–CCW8.7/8.8 Gathering information, note taking, categorizing	Guided notes

and skills associated with success in middle school should be prioritized in Grades 4 and 5 to improve upper elementary writing performance and middle school readiness. In this article, three critical standard-based skills are aligned with evidence-based instructional approaches for supporting students with LD:

- writing genre-specific paragraphs and essays for a variety of purposes,
- revising and editing, and
- note taking.

Evidence-Based Practice. Researchers have made strides in identifying instructional techniques that improve written expression for students with LD (Gillespie & Graham, 2014; Graham & Harris, 2003). However, survey research suggests a gap between research and practice. For example, the use of evidence-based writing instruction occurs infrequently in Grades 4 through 6 (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Elementary school teachers have reported that their preparation for teaching writing was less robust than their preparedness to teach all other subjects (Brindle, Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2015). Given these findings, step-by-step instructional implementation that has been established as effective for elementary school students with LD in systematic reviews of research (Gillespie & Graham, 2014) and by expert recommendations in the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide for elementary writing (Graham et al., 2012) are provided for genre-based writing instruction, revising and editing, and note taking.

Genre-Based Writing Instruction

Writing conventions, style, and proficiency do not necessarily generalize across genres (Olinghouse & Wilson, 2013). Each genre must be taught systematically and practiced across subjects (e.g., literature, science, social studies), writing tasks (e.g., short and long written responses), and

formats (e.g., essay, report, letter). Students who have been taught to self-regulate writing across contexts and genres know how to write for different purposes such as writing

- an informative science summary,
- a persuasive social studies essay, or
- a narrative story (Mason, Reid, & Hagaman, 2012).

In the following section an evidence-based instructional approach, self-regulated strategy development (SRSD; Graham & Harris, 2003), is described.

Self-Regulation for Genre-Based Writing

Genre-specific writing strategies are effective when they are taught using an instructional framework that supports students' self-regulation of strategies throughout the writing process (Graham & Harris, 2003). The strategies in SRSD instruction that are germane to upper elementary writing instruction, and that are described in this section, target informative, persuasive, and narrative writing. SRSD is an evidence-based strategy that has been replicated extensively in high-quality research studies across grade levels and student populations, including students with LD in upper elementary school (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009).

Meet the Strategies! A generalizable three-step writing strategy, POW (**P**ull apart the prompt, **O**rganize notes, **W**rite and say more), can be paired with any of the genre-based writing strategies presented in this article. The POW strategy prompts students to carefully review the writing prompt/questions, to write notes using a genre-specific strategy, and to utilize these notes to write organized paragraphs. For informative summary writing, POW, along with another strategy, TIDE (**T**opic sentence, **I**mportant evidence, **D**etails to support evidence, **E**nding) has been noted to be effective in inclusive science classrooms that include

Table 2. Genre-Specific Strategies for Informative, Persuasive, and Narrative Text.

Genre	Mnemonic	Sample Prompt for Modeling or Guided Practice
Three-step planning strategy	POW Pick my idea Organize my notes Write and say more	POW guides students as they analyze each of the following genre-specific writing prompts.
Informative	TIDE Topic Important Evidence Details to Support Evidence Ending	"Describe the three different cloud types that were described in the article called 'Clouds in the Sky.'"
Persuasive	TREE Topic sentence Reasons: three or more Explanations Ending	"Explain which civilization (Aztec, Inca, or Mayan) would be the best to live in as a child."
Narrative	C- SPACE Characters Setting Purpose Actions Conclusion Emotions	"If the Principal put you in charge for the day, explain the exciting things that would happen."

students with LD (Benedek-Wood, Mason, Wood, Hoffman, & MacQuire, 2014). The POW strategy used with the TREE strategy (Topic sentence, Reasons: three or more, Explanations, Ending) for persuasive writing has been effective in multiple elementary and middle school studies for students with LD (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008; Mason et al., 2011). Finally, the POW strategy with another strategy, C-SPACE (Characters, Setting, Plot, Action, Characters, Ending), can be applied to personal narrative, biographical writing, and story writing (Mason et al., 2012). While the next section of this article focuses on using SRSD to teach informative writing using the POW + TIDE strategy, the following procedures can be easily applied to all three genres/strategies (i.e., informative, persuasive, narrative) listed in Table 2.

Writing to Inform

When introducing writing for a new genre, the strategies for that genre (e.g., POW with TIDE, TREE, or C-SPACE) are introduced one at a time. Teachers decide the order of the genre based on classroom, student, and curricular needs. For example, a teacher could teach informative writing in September to help students write basic informative summaries, then introduce persuasive writing in November. The following example in a fourth-grade inclusive classroom demonstrates how each stage of SRSD can be implemented to help students with LD become proficient in writing informative text. See Mason et al. (2012) for lesson plans and

reproducible materials. Four self-regulation procedures (i.e., goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, self-reinforcement) are embedded within the six SRSD stages for strategy acquisition. These self-regulation procedures are important for promoting independence, confidence, and the ability to set goals, which will be integral as students reach middle school and high school. Ms. Harrington, the teacher in our example, taught informative writing in the context of a unit of study about clouds (see Note 1).

Stage 1: Develop It. The prerequisite skills for each strategy step in POW + TIDE are addressed in the *develop it* stage. During this stage, Ms. Harrington engaged students in guided conversations that built interest in writing informative text. Student confidence was developed when Ms. Harrington explained how previously acquired skills (e.g., knowing how to find details in text) could be combined with a strategy to improve informative writing (e.g., using important details from the text, writing an effective conclusion/wrap-up sentence). The discussion of the prerequisite skills was based on the needs and current abilities of her students. For example, some students in Ms. Harrington's class had a good understanding of informative writing while others needed additional explanation about what constitutes this writing genre (e.g., factual information). Students with LD needed review and practice in basic skills such as formatting a paragraph as well as additional support for using academic vocabulary (e.g., *cumulus*, *cirrus*, *stratus clouds*) in their writing prior to the introduction of the strategy.

Topic	Three types of clouds
Important evidence	1. Cumulus 2. Cirrus 3. Stratus
Details to support evidence	1. Cumulus – common, puffy like cotton balls with spaces of blue sky, and lead to rain clouds 2. Cirrus - 18,000 feet, thin, light, and wispy 3. Stratus - 7,000 feet grey, flat, look like one huge cloud
Ending	3 types of clouds are different and have different characteristics
Informative Paragraph Example	There are three common types of clouds. Cumulus clouds are the most common. They look like shapes because they are puffy like cotton balls. Cumulus clouds often have spaces of blue sky between them. They sometimes lead to rain clouds. Cirrus clouds are high in the sky, at around 18,000 feet. Cirrus clouds are thin, light, and wispy clouds. Stratus clouds are closer to the ground than cirrus clouds. They appear at around 7,000 feet. Stratus clouds look grey, flat, and sometimes look like one huge cloud. Cumulus, cirrus, and stratus clouds not only look different but also have different characteristics that make them unique.

Figure 1. A Sample TIDE Graphic Organizer and Subsequent Paragraph for Informational Summary Writing in a Fourth-Grade Science Lesson. This example could be used during modeling or guided practice to identify information from an article about clouds before using TIDE to plan and write.

Stage 2: Discuss It. Ms. Harrington introduced the students to informative writing with POW + TIDE during the *discuss it* phase. A discussion was conducted to explain how POW + TIDE provides a useful planning strategy for improving informative writing. For example, “POW + TIDE will help us to explain the cool details about clouds that we will read about next week!” To increase interest, Ms. Harrington prompted students to share examples of how they could use informative writing, such as writing about a place to which they have traveled or steps for winning a video game. During *discuss it*, each strategy step and purpose was described; anchor papers (see Figure 1) were read, and TIDE elements (i.e., topic sentence, important evidence, details, ending) were highlighted. Students established goals for learning the strategy and strategy steps.

Stage 3: Memorize It. Ms. Harrington supported students’ memorization of the POW + TIDE strategy mnemonic and all strategy steps. Memorization of the strategy was supported in several ways. First, Ms. Harrington asked students to chorally recite the POW + TIDE steps, and then she asked students to explain the strategy to a partner and asked students to provide examples of how they would use the strategy in other settings. In addition, cue cards with the POW + TIDE mnemonics and strategy steps were provided to students, and posters were used to display the mnemonic and strategy steps.

Stage 4: Model It. Ms. Harrington modeled the complete process of writing an informative paper about cirrus clouds while thinking out loud about how to use all strategy steps and self-regulation procedures. The process of writing brief notes on a TIDE graphic organizer and using the notes to write sentences was demonstrated. In

addition, Ms. Harrington modeled goal setting (e.g., write three details and explain each detail), self-monitoring of strategy steps written, self-instructions (e.g., “Writing can be tricky, but I’m organized when I use POW + TIDE”), and self-reinforcement. Ms. Harrington introduced self-monitoring by demonstrating how to track progress by graphing performance, noting that each shaded part of a graph represents one TIDE element (i.e., one for a topic sentence, one for each piece of important evidence, one for each detail, and one for an ending sentence). Ms. Harrington used all SRSD materials while modeling (e.g., charts with the strategy steps, graphic organizers, word charts for transition words) and self-reinforced herself for a job well done: “I wrote a great paper using POW + TIDE.” After Ms. Harrington modeled, students developed their own personal self-instructions to use when writing and set goals for using the strategy steps to write a better informative paper.

Stage 5: Guided Practice. During guided practice students set goals to use the POW + TIDE strategy, wrote with teacher and peer support, self-monitored, and graphed their performance. Teacher and peer feedback was provided, and support was gradually faded. In the first lesson during this stage, Ms. Harrington and the class collaboratively completed the first half of the TIDE graphic organizer (see Figure 1). Then students completed the second half with a peer. Small-group instruction was provided for students with LD who needed additional support in completing the graphic organizer. Ms. Harrington knew that the guided practice stage should not be rushed! Her guided practice spanned several lessons and was dependent on the needs of her students. Many of her students with LD required supplemental guided practice including additional teacher

C- Capitalization	Have I capitalized? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ First letters in each sentence ✓ Proper nouns ✓ Titles ✓ Days of the week/months ✓ Nationalities and countries
O- Organization	Is my text organized? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Spacing between words (on paper or computer) ✓ Indenting the first word in each paragraph (using finger for paper or tab key) ✓ Every sentence makes sense; check past/present tense, missing words, or ideas to change/revise ✓ Conclusion sentences for each paragraph ✓ Transition words such as “next”, “in addition” or “in conclusion”
P- Punctuation	Is my punctuation correct? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Periods, question marks, or exclamation marks ✓ Quotation marks ✓ Use apostrophes to show possession (e.g. Rosa’s seat) or omission (e.g. can’t) ✓ Commas before connecting words (but, or, and)
S- Spelling	Have I checked my spelling? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use spellcheck on my computer, book glossary, dictionary, or looked back at text ✓ Correct spelling for homonyms such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To/too/two - There/their/they’re - Its/it’s - Write/right

Figure 2. Sample COPS Template for Fourth- and Fifth-Grade Writing.

support and extensive practice with instructional materials such as the TIDE graphic organizer. For example, some of Ms. Harrington’s students were successful at writing important evidence and details but did not transition between sentences. A mini lesson for using the transitioning words (e.g., “next,” “another reason,” or “this is important”) on the transition word chart was conducted.

By the end of guided practice, the majority of students in Ms. Harrington’s class were planning essays without the use of the graphic organizer and had learned to make their own notes as needed. Ms. Harrington established criteria for mastery, as recommended in SRSD instruction, based on the number of TIDE “elements” students included (Harris et al., 2008). For TIDE, elements include the topic sentence, the count of important pieces of evidence, details, and the ending sentence. After students reached the criteria established by Ms. Harrington and in the students’ personal writing goals, it was noted that students were independent.

Step 6: Independent Practice. Ms. Harrington was pleased that her students used the POW + TIDE strategy independently for writing an informative paper. She planned for maintenance and generalization by including informative

writing when teaching other subjects and by collaborating with other teachers to extend informative writing in their classrooms. In addition, Ms. Harrington planned lessons for using the students’ informative writing as a base for teaching revision and editing. She also planned to provide additional lessons for note taking as many students with LD struggled with this skill.

Revision and Editing

Teaching students to revise and edit to improve writing promotes middle school readiness as these skills become increasingly important in upper grades. The COPS strategy (Capitalization, Organization, Punctuation, and Spelling) and the sentence-combining activity support revision and editing and are appropriate for all students (Graham et al., 2012). An explicit instructional approach for teaching COPS and sentence combining are presented next.

The Strategy

Revising and editing strategies should be modeled and paired with authentic writing. The COPS strategy (see

<p>Aztec Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Aztec law required children to attend _____. ➤ There were separate schools for _____ and _____. ➤ Boys learned about religion and how to fight. Girls learned to _____ and _____. ➤ Sons of “noblemen” went to separate schools.
<p>Aztec Foods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ _____ (similar to corn) was the primary food grown. ➤ The Aztecs used _____ to make tortillas. ➤ Fish, honey, and _____ were also common. ➤ The _____ bean was valuable. This was used to make chocolate.
<p>The Capital City</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ _____ was the capital. It was founded in _____. ➤ _____ was located in what is now called _____ (find it on your map!). ➤ About _____ people lived there. ➤ If you visit _____ City today, you can see Aztec ruins. ➤ In the city center there was a plaza where games took place.

Figure 3. Example Guided Notes Template for Categories Associated With Life in the Aztec Civilization in Fifth-Grade Social Studies.

Figure 2) is taught by introducing each COPS step, modeling how to scan for errors, and providing guided practice. Teaching the COPS strategy through mini lesson instruction for each step of COPS can be especially effective. Ms. Harrington, for example, provided instruction for the *organization* step by modeling how to revise a previously written informative paper, one with errors, by indenting the first line of each paragraph and by adding appropriate spacing between words and sentences. She then modeled how to use transition words to improve organization. In a second lesson, Ms. Harrington focused on the *spelling* step. For this lesson, she modeled how to use resources for checking spelling (e.g., the article about clouds, the spell check function on a computer, a dictionary). Ms. Harrington also modeled how to read through the paper to edit for capitalization and punctuation. Ms. Harrington displayed a COPS poster in her classroom to help students remember each step as they practiced revising and editing their writing.

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is an instructional approach that has been effective with struggling writers and students with LD (Saddler, Asaro, & Behforooz, 2008). Sentence combining helps students improve their writing by turning simple phrases or sentences into complex and detailed sentences. For example, “Cumulus clouds are fluffy” and “Cumulus clouds are billowy” could be combined to read, “Cumulus clouds are fluffy and billowy.” Ms. Harrington used the following two-step procedure to teach sentence combining to revise student writing.

Step 1: Ms. Harrington used authentic student writing as she knows that editing and revision activities are meaningful and effective when classroom writing samples are

used (Harris et al., 2008). Therefore, she selected a paragraph about food served in the cafeteria, a paragraph written using the TIDE strategy. Ms. Harrington knows that out-of-context revision activities, including worksheets, are a less meaningful and engaging way to teach sentence combining.

Step 2: Ms. Harrington discussed ways that COPS and sentence combining could be integrated. Ms. Harrington modeled revising the following two short sentences, “The cafeteria needs more options” and “I want more food from south america [*sic*]” by combining the phrases to say, “The cafeteria should include more food options for students, for example, foods that come from South America.” In doing so, Ms. Harrington used sentence combining and pointed to the COPS checklist to show students how to correct the capitalization of South America by discussing the rule for capitalizing proper nouns. Ms. Harrington provided ongoing discussion and guided practice so that her students would learn that revising and editing with COPS could be strategically integrated with improving sentence writing by using sentence-combining techniques. After modeling, Ms. Harrington provided guided practice.

Note Taking

Although note taking often receives less attention relative to other skills, it contributes to academic performance in Grades 6 to 12 (Boyle, 2010). Effective note taking supports student planning for writing, organizational skills, and studying (Konrad, Joseph, & Eveleigh, 2009). When teachers utilize an explicit approach to teaching note taking in elementary school, students become comfortable with the process, establishing a foundation for middle school. Additional scaffolding is often needed for students with LD

who tend to write fewer words and have difficulty locating key information (Boyle, 2010).

Writing Guided Notes

Guided notes utilizes a basic template for illustrating the framework for notes by leaving blank lines and spaces for students to write in missing information (e.g., “_____ is when a product is reused, such as a soda can or bottle.”). Guided notes is effective for students with LD as they encourage active engagement during lectures or during/after reading (Patterson, 2005). Guided notes maximizes classroom time

- by addressing a middle-grade writing standard and
- by enhancing comprehension (Konrad et al., 2009).

Teachers adapt guided notes based on a lesson’s purpose, content, and student needs. Ms. Harrington used the following framework for her students with LD in social studies when teaching a unit about ancient civilizations.

Step 1: Preparation. Ms. Harrington identified the content about which her students with LD needed to learn or write. Next, she selected an option for creating notes.

Option 1: A free tool called the *Guided-Notes Maker* (see https://www.interventioncentral.org/rti2/guided_notes). To use this resource, the teacher types notes on a document in a selected format (e.g., a list of topic headings and subheadings with bullets as in Figure 3) copies and pastes notes into the template, and highlights words/phrases to be removed. This free tool also gives teachers the option of placing the removed words into a box for students to choose from. This adaptation may be helpful to students with severe attention or learning difficulties.

Option 2: A PowerPoint or interactive white board to type guided notes, including blank spaces as previously described. After the notes are typed, the guided notes are projected for students to view.

Step 2: Modeling and Guided Practice. Ms. Harrington began by explaining to students the purpose of taking notes:

- to acquire a skill that will be helpful in middle school (Boyle, 2010),
- to create study guides, or
- to record ideas for upcoming writing activities.

As when teaching other skills, Ms. Harrington modeled, provided guided practice with feedback, and afforded multiple opportunities for independent practice. After modeling, guided practice was implemented by leading students through a PowerPoint lecture, while students followed along on guided notes handouts, giving the students

opportunities to complete the notes while offering feedback and encouragement.

Step 3: Independence. Once independent use was established, Ms. Harrington increased the amount of blank spaces on the notes page to increase task complexity to support middle-school readiness. Ms. Harrington checked students’ notes for accuracy and monitored assessment performance. Ms. Harrington’s teacher-checks guided the length and complexity of future lessons that incorporated guided notes.

In summary, guided notes is an effective method for introducing note taking to students in upper elementary grades. Guided notes provides students with adequate support to prevent frustration, and it promotes students’ active engagement in the note-taking process (Konrad et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Improving the writing outcomes of students with LD is critical. Therefore, prioritizing evidence-based writing instruction in upper elementary grades is important for providing students with a solid foundation for the more advanced written expression tasks that they will encounter in middle school. The use of evidence-based writing instruction, such as the instructional approaches for strategies and procedures described in this article, will build students’ proficiency for planning to write across genres, revising and editing, and note taking. Written communication is integral to academic success in middle school and beyond. Improving the writing skills of students with LD can be attained through the use of targeted evidence-based instruction.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. The vignette depicted is a fictionalized account drawn from the research literature and not based on actual people or events that were observed by the authors.

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