
Helping Students with Writing Assignments

Reviewer's note, September 2019

The following article was originally written using ideas and strategies from a Ministry of Education resource document released as a resource for teachers in 2005: *Education for All, The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6*. It was followed in 2013 by the document *Learning for All – A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. This built on and expanded the concepts from *Education for All*. It is available on the Ministry of Education website at <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/learning.html> and includes many strategies that can be used to help children with communication disorders.

The article below has been written using ideas from Section 8 on “Writing” and strategies from Table 11 in *Education for All*. The strategies continue to be relevant in 2019.

Writing is a very complicated task as students must be able to juggle multiple demands such as formulating ideas, transcribing the information in a coherent and sequential manner, and monitoring spelling and mechanics (e.g. punctuation). Children may experience weakness in written expression because of more functional skill deficits (e.g. spelling, mechanics) and/or because they are unable to juggle the multiple demands of the writing process. For children with language disabilities the challenge is even greater.

The writing process involves four key stages:

1. Idea generating or **brainstorming** the content.
2. **Planning** for writing and deciding on the structure.
3. **Writing** a first draft of the key ideas and information.
4. Revising and **editing** the document.

Table 11 provides suggestions and ideas for addressing the challenges that may be faced by the student at each stage. Although this document has been prepared for classroom teachers, parents can adapt many of the suggestions to help children at home as they work on school assignments. Parents may have more time than the teacher to work with the student, and they know more about the child's interests and strengths. OAFCCD has included some ‘tips’ you may want to consider when working with your child on the development of writing.

One of the first tasks for a parent is to make sure the child understands the assignment and knows how long they have to complete the work. If your child has difficulty with complex instructions or memory problems it is very important that the parent is in regular communication with the teacher, and that a process has been established for recording homework. This could be as simple as a special place in his planner or binder where the assignment is written down. Depending on the child's needs and abilities, the child could have written the instructions themselves or been provided written instructions by the Teacher. Once it is clear to both you and the child what the assignment involves and

when it is due, the parent can help the child to break the assignment into several parts, as illustrated below.

For children who use assistive technology, make sure they understand how to use the software or adaptive devices to complete assignments. For example, for a child who uses Kurzweil, the software can actually be used in the planning and organizing phase. Assignments written with voice recognition software should be carefully reviewed to make sure there are no pronunciation errors that have resulted in the wrong words being selected. The SpellCheck feature can also be used to check spelling – although it can't check whether the right word has been used and can only make sure the spelling is correct.

Parent Role:

Look carefully at Table 11 and you may see more ideas that you can use at home. You can also talk to the classroom teacher or special education staff at your child's school for other ideas. Remember it is not your job to do the assignment or to make the corrections. It is your job to help your child develop the skills and confidence to produce written work, and to know how to critically review and revise their own work.

Table 11: Steps in the Writing Process: Suggestions for Instruction	
Challenges that may affect idea generation or brainstorming	Suggestions for Instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may lack relevant prior experience of knowledge of the topic • Students may be unable to recognize that prior experiences are relevant • Students may be unable to express relevant thoughts and ideas coherently • Students may have a limited vocabulary for expressing thoughts and ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select topics that are of personal interest to students • Encourage students to listen and use other students' ideas • Use concrete objects, pictures/diagrams and mental images as "thought starters" • Use literature and other forms of media as thought starters: "Write an a different ending to this story, movie song." • Use drama and other kinesthetic activities as thought starters: "Let's use charades to act out another ending to the story." • Use open-ended questions or statements as thought starters: Ask the student what they liked or didn't like in the story or movie. • Use software that supports idea generation

Table 11: Steps in the Writing Process: Suggestions for Instruction

OAFCCD Parent tips:

Many children struggle to get started on a writing assignment, or rush to write a few sentences without thinking about the whole document. You can help your child brainstorm their ideas by asking questions and helping them to sort their ideas. If they have a choice of topics you can make suggestions related to their interests or hobbies. You may want to help them write a list of the ideas or make a few diagrams of the important events. If your child is assigned a particular topic, you can discuss what they know about it and where they can find more information. From your knowledge of the child you may be able to link the discussion to ideas and activities, stories or videos that are more familiar to the child.

<p>Challenges that may affect planning for writing</p>	<p>Suggestions for Instruction</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students start to write without considering the purpose, the topic, etc. • Students generate irrelevant ideas that do not match the writing purpose or target audience • Students have difficulty retaining information about the writing purpose or target audience • Students cannot transcribe their thoughts and ideas in print • Students do not understand text structure (beginning, middle, end). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with questions that direct their attention to the writing purpose and audience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To whom am I writing? - Why I am I writing? - What do I know? - What should my reader know? • Provide students with concrete reminders or directions with respect to writing purpose and or audience. • Ask students to explain the purpose of the writing assignment in their own words. • Provide students with topic-relevant vocabulary. • Provide students with a scribe – a peer, older student, or parent volunteer. • Allow students to audio-record thoughts and ideas or use assistive technology such as voice recognition software. • Provide students with visual organizer to guide them through the process. • Provide the student with an appropriate structure depending on the type of text to be produced (e.g., beginning, middle and end of story). • Provide students with a planning template • Offer a series of chronological pictures.

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OAFCCD Parent Tips:

Make sure that your child is clear about the purpose and audience for the writing assignment using the questions above. When the child is ready to think about the structure or format, ask questions to clarify. Ask the child about the sequence of events - what happened first, next, last - and about the characters and locations. You can also help the child make a list of key words or descriptions. Take time to check the spelling of important words and make sure the vocabulary list contains words the child understands and can use correctly. Children who have difficulty with spelling may need to develop a personal dictionary. If they have difficulty identifying the letter sounds the personal dictionary may need to be organized in a way that makes sense to them – for example by subject or topic rather than alphabetical. Picture dictionaries can also be helpful to beginning readers.

Challenges that may affect writing	Suggestions for Instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may not possess adequate vocabulary • Students may be unable to recognize connections between ideas and thoughts • Students are unable to hold multiple ideas and thoughts in memory. • Students may not understand sequential order. • Students struggle and take extensive time to formulate ideas. • Students may have difficulties producing print. • Students may require excessive amounts of time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with visual organizer to guide them through the process. • Provide the student with an appropriate structure depending on the type of text to be produced (e.g., beginning, middle and end of story). • Provide students with relevant word lists, transition phrases, and partial statements, • Have students recall words orally before writing. • Have students rebuild a text from a set of jumbled paragraphs • Rebuild a text from jumbled sentences • Provide students with elements of narrative and expository text (e.g. characters, setting, thesis statement, supporting detail) • Use graphic or advanced organizers and or writing templates (paper or electronic – provincially licensed software. • Use colour to highlight connected thoughts and ideas • Allow students to audio-record their writing and or use other assistive technology (e.g. word processors, voice to text software) • Provide students with ascribe • Frequently heck the student’s work to redirect them promptly and to encourage them.

Table 11: Steps in the Writing Process: Suggestions for Instruction

OAFCCD Parent Tips:

When the child is ready to start writing, provide reminders about sentence structure, the need for action words (verbs) and descriptive words (adjectives). Make up a tip sheet if your child has difficulty with grammar and punctuation. You could provide a model sentence or paragraph with key parts highlighted to remind your child about the structure and punctuation. You can also help the child develop a visual diagram or model of the story that will help them remember the details and sequence of events.

Challenges that may affect revising and editing	Suggestions for Instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may not possess adequate memory and organizational skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a simply worded correction table. • Make sure the students understand all elements of the table and ask the students to explain it in their own words. • Offer much support at this stage, which is particularly challenging one for students with learning difficulties. • Make sure the students use toolboxes with properly tailored reference tools (personal dictionary, grammar rules, verb grid, etc.) to facilitate correction. • Allow the students to strike out words and use arrows rather than erasures. • Have another more skilled classmate correct work.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students have trouble transcribing their texts in a readable manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan publication with the students and assist them throughout the process. • Provide different tools and resources for publication (computer technology, stamps, multimedia).

OAFCCD Parent Tip:

Once the first draft is complete encourage the child to read it over and make corrections before you look at it. When you look at the work start by focusing on the positives – interesting ideas, good descriptions, neatness, and correct use of grammar and punctuation. Identify areas for improvement and ask the child for ideas on what changes are needed.