

Section 1

Supporting students experiencing difficulties in writing

Students may experience difficulties in writing for a variety of reasons. These difficulties may vary in cause, nature, intensity and duration.

Students who need additional support in writing often demonstrate significant difficulties planning, writing and revising text. Some students may have difficulty communicating ideas, events and experiences because of a limited repertoire of spoken and written English. Others may have difficulties with the ‘mechanical’ aspects of writing, such as handwriting, punctuation and spelling.

Meeting the needs of different learners through effective teaching

There should be a whole-school approach to meeting the needs of different learners. Teachers should maintain high expectations of all students and ensure that writing is equally visible and valued across the full range of purposes, context and learning areas.

The aim of teaching writing is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to write effectively for a range of purposes and in a variety of contexts. For students needing additional support with writing, it is the quality of teaching and assessment that makes the most difference to their achievement.

NSW Quality Teaching Model

The NSW Quality Teaching Model comprises three dimensions that represent classroom and assessment practices that have been linked to improved student learning outcomes.

Intellectual quality

This refers to pedagogy focused on producing deep understanding of important substantive concepts, skills and ideas. Such pedagogy treats knowledge as something that requires active construction and requires students to engage in higher-order thinking and to communicate substantively about what they are learning.

Suggestions:

- Choose authentic texts to deliver key concepts, skills and ideas.
- Be explicit about the purpose and audience for the writing and how language works at the whole text level, sentence level and word level.
- Deconstruct samples of different types of writing.

- Teach students the effects of manipulating knowledge and language for different types of writing.
- Have students engage with, and reflect on, how writing changes and operates in different cultural, social and political contexts and over time.
- Plan for sufficient time for writing to be sustained and substantial.
- Have students talk about and evaluate their writing with peers, teachers and parents.
- Explicitly discuss the way language works to make meaning in the students' writing.

Significance

This refers to teaching that generates significance by connecting students with the intellectual demands of their work. Such pedagogy helps make learning more meaningful and important to students and draws clear connections with students' prior knowledge and identities, with contexts outside the classroom, and with multiple ways of knowing or cultural perspectives.

Suggestions:

- Build writing by starting with students' background knowledge and prior school knowledge; for example, brainstorming, mind mapping.
- Recognise and value the cultural knowledge and practices of diverse social groups. Where appropriate, include members of the community from diverse cultural backgrounds as a resource for writing.
- Give students opportunities for their writing to influence an audience beyond the school. (*Ask them:* Who might need to know this? Why are we writing this? Who might be an appropriate audience for our work?)
- Recognise and use multiple stories (for example, biographies, documentaries, personal accounts) to enrich student understanding of the key concepts to be addressed in their writing.
- When possible, select topics for writing that connect with contexts outside the school.
- Use identified prior school knowledge, out-of-school knowledge and cultural knowledge of the groups represented in the class as content for writing.

Quality learning environment

This refers to pedagogy that creates classrooms where students and teachers work productively in an environment clearly focused on learning. Such pedagogy sets high and explicit expectations and develops positive relationships between teachers and students and among students. Progress for all students relies on a positive and stimulating environment where the writing tasks are seen as real and purposeful and the teacher provides support through explicit teaching.

Suggestions:

- Refer students regularly to the stage-appropriate outcomes they are working towards.
- Ensure activities are purposeful and interesting with clear goals that students perceive to be worthwhile.
- Respect every learner's personal best.
- Have high expectations for all students, but set realistic outcomes which individuals can achieve.
- Make explicit to students what a quality performance or product looks like.
- Encourage students to reflect on and modify their writing using criteria consistent with the type of text they are constructing.
- Be clear about what you want the students to do or produce and how well you expect them to do it.
- Use exemplars and work samples that illustrate high quality student performance based on explicit criteria.
- Identify the prior learning of students and monitor their progress to support the development of appropriately challenging work for all students.
- Celebrate successes in appropriate ways.
- Recognise and value diverse cultures in meaningful ways; for example, many students from different language backgrounds will need carefully structured talking and listening activities as an important bridge to the successful use of written language at school.
- Establish time for daily writing.
- Use processes such as joint construction to allow all students to contribute to and collaborate on a piece of writing.
- Develop links between home and school so that writing is shared and valued.



Planning to teach

When planning for the effective teaching of writing for students who need additional support, it is useful to consider the following:



Barriers to writing

Students may experience frustration when attempting to write because of difficulties with spelling, punctuation, and handwriting. Teachers may need to plan to overcome difficulties with these ‘mechanical’ aspects of writing. The table below provides a comparison of methods to overcome such barriers to writing. Research indicates, for example, that dictating to a scribe can eliminate some difficulties such as spelling or illegibility, and result in a longer, higher-quality written composition (De La Paz & Graham, 1997). While students must eventually learn to do their own writing, these findings suggest possible bridges to higher performance.

Comparison of methods to overcome some barriers to writing			
<i>Evaluative questions</i>			
<i>Method</i>	<i>First draft: Does it enable the writer to focus on ideas? (Author role)</i>	<i>Final Draft: Does it improve readability? (Secretary role)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Have the student dictate while the teacher scribes.	Yes Can significantly increase the length and quality of the compositions by students who need a high level of support.	Yes Improves the readability of the message because the teacher writes the dictated text or assists the student with spelling and punctuation as the student writes.	Major disadvantage is the student's dependence on the teacher in the writing process. Can be an effective bridge in early writing development with students who cannot translate their thoughts into a written form.
Prompt by supplying the spelling of important words before the students write. Spellings can be written on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prompt cards • charts • chalkboards. 	Slightly It enables students to focus attention on ideas, although somewhat inconsistently.	Slightly Does influence readability of the message. Number of misspellings slightly decreased (words suggested by the students for the list tended to be content words). However students with spelling difficulties frequently misspell function words such as <i>every, again, which</i> .	Effects not significantly different from other methods. Because content words convey more meaning in a text than do function words, being able to correctly spell the content words improves the readability of the text.
Teach a strategy for using a personal word book to look up the spelling of unknown words.	No Does not always enable students to focus on ideas. Can be a distraction. Fluency decreased. A few students with learning problems used it to good advantage.	Yes Word books or spelling dictionaries do improve the readability of the text. However, personal word books contain a limited set of frequently used words and are helpful only if students realise that they need to check a word.	Use for final draft only. <i>Note:</i> Having the student look up a word in the dictionary is seldom an effective strategy, because knowing how to spell the word is necessary in order to find it.

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Have the student ask the teacher. In this commonly used strategy, the student raises his or her hand when he or she cannot spell a word, and the teacher comes and spells the word as the student writes it down.	Inconsistently Asking the teacher does not always enable student attention to focus on ideas. For students who wrote fewer than 50 words at baseline, teacher assistance seemed to increase fluency during intervention.	Inconsistently Does improve the readability of the message somewhat but asking the teacher for spelling assistance is related to the students' awareness that they might not know how to spell particular words.	Depends on student's willingness to ask for assistance and awareness of misspelt words. Waiting can detract from writing time and flow of ideas.
Encourage invented spelling for first draft.	Yes Invented spelling seems to effectively enable attention to focus on ideas. Fluency increased.	No Led to an increase in the proportion of words that were misspelt.	Supplement with a strong spelling program. Invented spelling was useful during first draft but not when completing final draft. May be detrimental to subsequent spelling performance.
Promote peer collaboration.	Potentially Peer collaboration combined with strategy instruction may enable attention to focus on ideas in a way that improves quality of writing if students are prepared to work with each other in mutually supportive ways.	Potentially Peer collaboration and strategy instruction had a beneficial effect on the readability of second draft compositions.	Depends on how well students are prepared to work with each other combined with strategy training, e.g. teaching of an editing strategy.

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<i>Evaluative questions</i>			
<i>Method</i>	<i>First draft: Does it enable the writer to focus on ideas? (Author role)</i>	<i>Final Draft: Does it improve readability? (Secretary role)</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Teach a self-checking strategy.	Not intended for first draft	Yes The teacher should teach a self-checking strategy that the student can use to edit his or her own work.	Editing must be separated from drafting. When editing, the student needs to suspect that a word is misspelt or a punctuation error has been made.
Have students use technology.	Inconsistently Ease of revision provided by the word processor creates the potential for students to focus on ideas and edit for spelling or punctuation at a later time.	Partially Success would depend on whether students take advantage of the computer for revising, spell-checking etc. and on their fluency with editing, keyboarding and use of keyboard commands.	Improves appearance but not necessarily the quality of writing; strong motivational appeal.

Adapted from: Isaacson & Gleason (1997).

Building confidence

For students who have experienced difficulties learning to write it is important that teachers focus on removing anxiety and building confidence in students that they will be successful as writers. Teachers should plan for students to experience success with writing by providing clear models and scaffolds, explicit feedback and guidance and many opportunities for success.

Group activities for writing can help remove anxiety and build confidence, and will benefit the student who needs additional support when writing.

In groups students can:

- share knowledge about the topic; brainstorm ideas
- discuss vocabulary choices, sentences and paragraph structures
- participate in a joint construction of a particular type of text
- share editing and proofreading tasks.

It is important that students know how to participate effectively in a group. (See page 54 'Cooperative learning and its essential elements'.)

Effective writing instruction

Graham, Harris and Larsen (2001) concluded that ‘there is little doubt that children’s success as writers is ultimately tied to the quality of instruction’. Other researchers have identified factors in effective classroom writing instruction that apply across the range of learners and the range of classroom contexts. Steps in delivering effective instruction were outlined by Rosenshine and Stevens (1986).

1. Review previously taught skills

Review previously taught skills to ensure that students have learned and remembered them. This gives students more practice and allows the teacher to check whether they are having any problems.

The teacher can correct any errors immediately and show or model again how the task is done correctly. Skills can be retaught and different strategies may need to be used.

2. Present the new writing task

A short statement of the specific nature of the writing task, its purpose or expectations, occurs first.

The teacher models the skills or concepts to be taught using the ‘think aloud’ strategy, see page 33. Students experiencing difficulties will often learn more easily if the writing task is presented in small manageable steps. Step by step instruction may need to be given. A combination of scaffolded instruction – individual, content, material and task – as determined by the needs of the students can best support these students during the critical stage of initial learning, see pages 83–89.

Frequent checking of students’ understanding is necessary and a lively pace will maintain students’ interest.

3. Provide guided practice

In guided practice the teacher guides or leads students through some examples of the skill or concept modelled. A common language is used to provide continuous feedback about the effectiveness, meaning, and accuracy of students’ writing. This ongoing monitoring is important to ensure that students avoid practising errors and can demonstrate success.

4. Provide independent practice

In independent practice students learn to use the new skills or information with a minimum of direct assistance from the teacher until new information is merged with what is already known.

Homework activities can be used for independent practice of skills. To avoid frustration, material set for homework needs to be set at an independent level. Teachers need to provide a range of contexts so that students can generalise skills.

5. Provide cumulative review activities

Skills and knowledge will not be retained by most students experiencing difficulties if taught only once or twice and practised for a brief time. Cumulative review means that students are given a task in which examples of the most recently introduced skills are integrated with examples of skills previously taught.

Fun formats, such as games and puzzles, can make the review pleasant. Tests, quick quizzes and oral questions can also be used for review.

Cumulative review is a critical part of instructional design. Material not learned or remembered may need a different presentation and more practice.

Pages 83–89 describe four dimensions of scaffolded instruction – individual, content, material and task – and how they are applied to provide levels of prompting to optimise the students' learning.

