

Written expression remediation for secondary students and adults

Written expression is a crucial part of communication and critical thinking. For secondary students, developing strong writing skills not only helps them to achieve academically but also prepares them for academic and professional futures. Whether in the classroom taking notes and writing essays or beyond the classroom, completing forms and applying for jobs, students must learn how to develop, organise and express their ideas and proofread their written work before sharing it.

Written expression is one of the most challenging tasks to learn. Children and adults who experience difficulties in acquiring fluent and efficient writing skills may struggle to generate ideas, construct meaningful sentences, sequence and organise their ideas into paragraphs, use grammar appropriately and monitor their output for errors. They may also have difficulty with handwriting, punctuation and spelling. Furthermore, writing requires knowledge of text genres, text cohesion and coherence, and a sense of audience. Any weaknesses in oral language expression are likely to transfer to written work as it is very rare for someone to be able to write material they are unable to say.

To learn all the skills necessary for written expression, a highly structured, explicit, systematic teaching approach is needed with many opportunities to practise and apply learned skills. Students must be taught to identify the features and structures of texts when reading and work towards transferring their spoken language into written work.

Secondary students and adults may find assistive technology to be particularly useful for generating written texts. Software and apps are available to help with reading and writing, including voice dictation, support for planning and organising texts, spelling checkers and word prediction. See the information sheet on *Computer Software and Assistive Technology* for more information.

TALKING AND READING FOR WRITING

“Unsurprisingly, the best writers in any class are always readers. Reading influences writing – the richness, depth and breadth of reading determines the writer that we become.”

Pie Corbett, *Talk For Writing*.

As children read and are read to over many years, they store patterns that form the building blocks of written expression. In order to write sentence patterns and structures appropriate to a given text (e.g. a narrative starts with ‘when, who, where and what’ elements) students need to have these patterns modelled with multiple opportunities to say them before being expected to write them. Students need to learn that what they think, they can say and what they say, they can write. A teaching approach that emphasises the thinking process required to write any text is very important. Writing is a problem-solving process during which the writer needs to gather relevant information and communicate ideas effectively and appropriately to a specific audience. It is unlikely that age alone will allow for development of this complex process if the student has not had this explicitly taught in primary schooling years.

SENTENCE-LEVEL ACTIVITIES

Although the complexity and length of written texts expected of secondary students and adults is far greater than that of primary school students, the ability to construct grammatically correct, meaningful sentences and paragraphs is vital to achieving the overall goal of a complete written text. Below are some examples of activities

suitable to develop grammar, sentence and paragraph writing. For more detailed information and activities see the information sheet, Written Expression Remediation for Primary Students.

Grammar:

Grammar must be taught in the context of combining words and building sentences, not just analysing parts of speech in isolation. Words themselves have no value until they are combined. Word banks can be a useful tool to support the generation and organisation of ideas however students also need to be taught the function of the words and *how* to use them in their writing.

- Teach students how parts of speech are effectively used in written texts.

E.g., the power of adjectives in persuasive writing: 'Students should *most certainly* be permitted to use mobile phones at school.'

E.g. sophisticated, descriptive and engaging vocabulary: 'Max scrambled up the crumbling escarpment, reaching the top in barely enough time to grab Anna's fingertips.'

E.g., the use of conjunctions to link ideas: as well as, in addition to, however, on the other hand...

- If students have difficulty varying their sentences, collect different, common patterns, e.g.: Another important theme...; Further exploration of the theme of ...; It is apparent that the author wished to examine the theme of ...

Building Sentences:

Students need to be taught to write simple, grammatically correct sentences before learning to write compound and complex sentences. Sentence-level activities should also teach basic editing skills.

- To build students' understanding of what a 'sentence' is, provide examples and non-examples. Read groups of words which are either a complete thought (a sentence) or an incomplete thought (a fragment) and discuss which one is a sentence and why.

- Teach students how punctuation can determine the function of a sentence. Introduce one sentence type (statements, commands, questions and exclamations): at a time (e.g. *What time is it?*), working up to applying different kinds of punctuation within one sentence (e.g. *"I hate brussel sprouts!", yelled John.*).

- Teach students to combine their ideas to form one, more descriptive or complex sentence. For example:

Mobile phones should be allowed at school.

Students need to use them in emergencies.

= Having access to emergency communication is vital for all students and therefore mobile phones must be allowed in schools.

- Conjunctions can join words, phrases and clauses together. It is essential to teach students to use conjunctions appropriately; especially those who are struggling to compose more than simple sentences. Begin with simple conjunctions to join simple sentences: *and, because, but* and work towards conjunctions such as *if, when, since, after*. Each conjunction must be used in multiple examples to develop the student's understanding of the meaning and effect of each.

It is healthy to eat organic fruit and vegetables.
They can be very expensive.

Eating organic fruit and vegetables is healthy
however they can be very expensive.

PARAGRAPH-LEVEL ACTIVITIES

The structure of a paragraph varies based on the text it is written for (e.g. descriptive, narrative, persuasive essay); however all typically follow a common pattern. Paragraphs generally begin with a topic sentence which introduces the key content of the paragraph and are followed by sentences supporting or describing the topic. Young or struggling writers should first be taught to construct their paragraph with their topic sentence as the first sentence. When students become more proficient at writing sentences and constructing paragraphs they can be shown how to position a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph for effect.

- Teach the 'TREE' strategy to remind students to include all parts of a paragraph: **T**opic sentence (what do you believe?), **R**easons (to support your opinion), **E**xamine the reasons (providing evidence or examples), **E**nding (conclude with a final statement).
- Brainstorm sentences around a relevant, engaging topic such as '*You should be allowed to ride your bike on the footpath*'. Ask the class (or individual students) to pick which sentence is the most appropriate as the topic sentence then add another three or four sentences to construct a paragraph using the TREE structure.
- Present the students with a number of sentences, one of which is a topic sentence. Ask the students to listen to and read the sentences and then pick which one is the topic sentence, and arrange the remaining to form a paragraph.
- Teach students to leave a line between paragraphs

ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP COMPOSITION OF TEXTS

Many interventions targeting written expression skills follow a framework that cumulatively introduces the process of writing based on planning and outlining, drafting, revising and editing and writing a final copy in a clearly structured, logical sequence. **The process of creating a written text should first be modelled with explicit instruction given for each step and multiple opportunities to practise each stage, before students are expected to apply the process independently.**

Engaging the Reluctant Writer:

Many students who have difficulty with written expression have multiple experiences of failure in writing age-appropriate texts. Students need to learn strategies that are specific to the genre of text they are writing as well as strategies that are universal, such as self-regulating, planning and revising. The texts used as examples of each genre should be engaging, relevant and meaningful to each individual student. For example, writing an Autobiography gives students the opportunity to learn about the structure of a non-fiction information report whilst learning more about themselves and their families. An Autobiography can include paragraphs on a student's background/childhood, family history, interests and achievements and those paragraphs can follow the TREE structure, providing multiple opportunities to apply that strategy.

Step-by-step cartoon writing is another useful text to engage writers. It gives beginning or reluctant writers practise in sequencing steps, using transition words and punctuation, and constructing simple sentences and paragraphs. It removes some of the anxiety associated with writing and capitalizes on strengths in other areas like creative story-telling and drawing.

Setting clear goals is beneficial when commencing any written work. The 'PLANS' strategy, described in *Writing Better*, breaks down the writing process into three related tasks. Firstly, students develop a plan for writing by selecting goals for what the text will accomplish, specifying how they will meet these goals, and generating and organising possible ideas for their text. Secondly, students write their text using their plan as a guide, expanding and reshaping the plan as they write. Finally, they check to see whether their goals are met and make appropriate revisions. Teachers or tutors can help the students to set goals that are achievable such as: Purpose: 'I will write a paper that convinces my friends that I am right.;; Parts- I will write a persuasive essay that has three reasons to support my opinion.;; Length- I will write a paper that is 130 words long.

Planning and Outlining

Planning to write involves determining purpose and audience, deciding which text type to use, establishing topics, collating information (and researching, if appropriate) and organising ideas. Students with written expression difficulties will often need additional time and support at this stage. They may need to be given a written assignment early.

- Brainstorming: Help students to generate ideas for their texts through brainstorming ideas to support a particular topic. For each idea they generate, help them to create a complete sentence.
- Explicitly teach each step in the planning process using the following guide:
 1. Introduce and discuss a topic.
 2. Identify audience and discuss purpose.
 3. Present a topic sentence to the students, or have them generate one as a group. (Eventually students will be able to do this independently).
 4. Elicit as many supporting details as possible from the class and write them on the board. Record as phrases or key words.
 5. Depending on the topic and number of details, either select three or four of the most important ones or group the details in categories.
 6. Organise details into appropriate sections in a template before starting a draft.
- The 'Hamburger' strategy for planning essays is popular amongst high-school students. They are taught to include all parts of the 'hamburger': The Bun- introductory paragraph; The Lettuce- a paragraph with the first reason; The Cheese- a paragraph with the second reason; The Meat- a paragraph with the third reason; The Bun- Concluding paragraph. For more detailed information see the information sheet, Hamburger Writing Model.

Drafting

Make it clear to the students that a draft is written so it can be improved and corrected. Skipping lines in a draft or using double line spacing when writing on a computer gives space for comments and corrections. The purpose of a draft is to expand on ideas generated in the planning stage by creating sentences or paragraphs.

Revising and Editing

Students should be taught to use an editing strategy such as 'COPS' to check their work for errors in:

Content (Does it make sense?)

Organisation (Are the sentences and paragraphs in the correct order?)

Punctuation

Spelling

Providing students with checklists for revising and editing according to their age level provides students with a clear structure to check their work and the work of their peers. If the student has difficulty detecting errors in their own work, then reading what is written aloud, using text-to-voice software or asking a peer to check can help with the revision process.

Writing a final copy

Spend less time on re-writing work for final or published copies and be selective as to which pieces of students' writing will require a 'polished' final copy. Teachers may allow the student to dictate to a scribe or to type their work. If the teacher decides to take students' writing to this stage it is important that it is displayed or shown to others for the student to receive praise for their efforts.

References and Useful Resources:

Grammar Magic by Christine Killey

Writing Matters: Developing Sentence Skills in Students of All Ages by William Van Cleave

Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills 2nd edition, Judith Birsch (Editor).

Talk for Writing Across the Curriculum by Pie Corbett and Julia Strong

Talk for Writing in Secondary Schools by Julia Strong

Writing Better: Effective Strategies for Teaching Students with Learning Difficulties by Steve Graham and Karen R. Harris

Powerful Writing Strategies for all Students by Karen Harris, Steve Graham, Linda Mason, Barbara Friendlander.