

Bring Powerful Writing Strategies
Into Your Classroom! Why and How

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Writing is important. A local policeman recently explained to an elementary school class, “In 20 years, I have shot my gun twice. I use my pen every day. If you want to be a cop, you have to learn to write.”

Why is writing important? The policeman gave this class good advice. We know that writing plays a key role in learning, as students use writing to gather and organize knowledge and to explore and refine their ideas. We also know that writing is the primary means by which students demonstrate their knowledge in today’s classrooms, and that both writing about text read and teaching writing have a positive impact on reading outcomes (Graham, 2006; Harris, Graham, Brindle, & Sandmel, 2009). Failure to acquire strong writing abilities restricts opportunities for both post-secondary education and employment.

The importance of writing is recognized in the new Common Core State Standards adopted by 46 states (CCSS, 2012). These standards focus on the acquisition of foundational writing skills, such as handwriting and spelling, as well as the following four writing applications: (1) writing for multiple purposes (narrate, persuade, inform/explain); (2) producing and publishing well organized text appropriate to task and purpose by increasingly applying processes involving planning, revising, editing, and collaborating with others; (3) using writing to build knowledge about specific topics or materials read; and (4) applying writing to extend and facilitate learning in a range of discipline-specific subjects as well as across purposes and audiences.

Unfortunately, we also know that many students experience difficulty with writing. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reveal that less than a third of students in the United States have mastered the skills necessary for *proficient*, or *grade-level appropriate* writing on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The vast majority of students in the U.S. have scored at the *Basic* level or below, which denotes only *partial mastery of the writing skills needed at each grade*. A deteriorating attitude toward writing across the grades has also been reported.

How did we get here? First, writing is challenging, and typically must be developed across K-12 and into post-secondary employment or education. Skilled writing is complex, requiring extensive self-regulation of a flexible, goal-directed, problem-solving activity. In addition to basic skills, students must also develop knowledge about the writing process, genre knowledge, and strategies for writing and self-regulating the writing process. The National Commission on Writing, however, reported that of the three ‘Rs’, writing has become the most neglected in classrooms (College Commission on Writing in America’s Schools, 2003); reading and math have also received priority over writing in both research and funding for research (Harris et al., 2009). Further adding to this picture, research indicates the majority of teachers report inadequate pre- and in-service preparation in writing instruction, and often do not implement evidence-based interventions.

How can we develop better writers? The CCSS (2012) are a strong foundation for improving our students’ writing. Using evidence-based approaches in our classrooms will make a difference, as will increasing the time and attention given to writing development. We focus here on one powerful evidence-based approach making a difference in students’ writing development: Self-Regulated Strategy Development. SRSD for writing has had the strongest

impact of any strategies instruction approach in writing and has been deemed an evidence-based practice by multiple evaluators (cf. Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009; Graham & Perin, 2007; National Center for Response to Intervention, 2011).

What is SRSD, and what is the evidence base? Briefly described, SRSD instruction includes explicit, interactive learning of powerful strategies for writing both across and within genres, the knowledge (including vocabulary and background knowledge) needed to use these strategies, and strategies for self-regulating use of these writing strategies throughout the writing process (e.g., goal setting, self-assessment, self-instructions, and self-reinforcement). Equally important, SRSD purposively develops self-efficacy for writing, attributions to strategy knowledge and effort, and motivation for writing. Instruction takes place across six flexible, recursive, and highly interactive stages, with gradual release of responsibility for writing to students (Harris et al., 2009). Instruction proceeds based on students' progress; students are given the time they need to make these strategies their own. Procedures for maintaining what has been learned and determining how to use this knowledge across writing tasks are integrated throughout the stages of instruction (these stages are briefly summarized in Table 1).

Over 80 studies of SRSD (true-experiments, quasi-experiments, and single-subject design studies) have been conducted across grades 1 to 12 (Graham, Harris, & McKeown, in press). These studies provide convincing evidence SRSD is an effective method for teaching writing strategies to students who represent the full range of writing ability in a typical class and students with writing disabilities. SRSD research has resulted in the development of writing strategies (typically with the assistance of teachers and their students) for a variety of genres, including personal narratives, opinion and persuasive essays, report writing, expository essays, story

writing, and state writing tests. SRSD research has also been conducted on the integration of reading and writing strategies to improve each (Mason, Reid, & Haganan, 2012).

How can teachers learn to use SRSD in their classrooms? All of us have worked with teachers learning to implement SRSD, and strongly recommend the practice-based professional development approach (PBPD), which our research has shown to be highly effective (cf. Harris, Lane, et al., 2012). PBPD focuses on teacher development of knowledge, understanding, and skills regarding an effective educational practice before they use it, with support once classroom use begins (cf. Ball & Cohen, 1999). PBPD has six critical characteristics: (a) collective participation of teachers within the same school with similar needs; (b) basing professional development around the characteristics, strengths, and needs of the students in these teachers' current classrooms; (c) attention to content knowledge needs of teachers, including pedagogical content knowledge; (d) opportunities for active learning and practice of the new methods being learned, including opportunities to see examples of these methods being used and to analyze the work; (e) use of materials and other artifacts during professional development that are identical to those to be used in the classroom, and (f) feedback on performance while learning, and before using these methods in the classroom, so that understandings and skills critical in implementation are developed.

Want to know more? If you don't have access to PBPD for SRSD in writing, we know many dedicated teachers, coaches, and others who have made use of available resources to begin SRSD in their schools or classrooms. These resources include two books that contain lesson plans for all of the evidence-based strategies developed to date across elementary through high school (Harris et al., 2008; Mason et al., 2012). Two other books provide greater detail on modifying strategies to student needs and on development of self-regulation (Graham & Harris,

2005; Harris & Graham, 1996). Online, you can find lesson plans for selected strategies at <http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/projectwrite> and an excellent website about strategies instruction at www.unl.edu/csi. Several free, interactive tutorials on SRSD can be found at <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/>. Finally, all of the stages of SRSD instruction can be seen in an elementary and middle school classroom in a video by ASCD (2002): *Teaching students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom: Using learning strategies* [videotape 2]; <http://shop.ascd.org/productdisplay.cfm?productid=602084>.

Parting words. We interview our students and their teachers as they work with SRSD, and we thought you might like to hear comments from two recent elementary students in our classrooms. In his interview, Luke said, “Of course I can write now, somebody taught me how!” Perhaps one of the most fun comments we’ve gotten over the years came from Chris, “I like food, all kinds of food – but I like Count and Plan FAST (a state writing test strategy) even better!”

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Table 1: *SRSD Stages of Instruction**

1. Develop and Activate Knowledge Needed for Writing and Self-Regulation

*read and discuss works in the genre being addressed (persuasive essays, reports, etc.), to develop declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge (e.g., what is an *opinion*?, what are the parts of a persuasive essay, are they all here?; how do you think the author came up with this idea, what would you do?; what might the author have done to organize the ideas?; what might the author do when he gets frustrated?, and so on), appreciation of characteristics of effective writing (how did the writer grab your interest?), and other knowledge and understandings targeted for instruction. Continue development through the next two stages as needed until all key knowledge and understandings are clear.

*discuss and explore both writing and self-regulation strategies to be learned; may begin development of self-regulation, introducing goal setting and self-monitoring

2. Discuss It – Discourse is Critical!

*discuss students' current writing and self-regulation abilities, their attitudes and beliefs about writing, what they are saying to themselves as they write, and how these factors might help or hinder them as writers; emphasize role of both effort and learning powerful strategies in becoming a better writer

*graphing (self-monitoring) may be introduced, using prior compositions; this will assist with goal setting (graphing prior writing can be skipped if the student is likely to react negatively – graph only writing during instruction)

*further discuss writing and self-regulation strategies to be learned: purpose, benefits, how and when they can be used or might be inappropriate (begin generalization support)

*establish students' commitment to learn strategies and act as collaborative partner; establish role of student effort and strategy use

Model It

*interactive teacher modeling and/or collaborative modeling of writing and self-regulation strategies

*analyze and discuss strategies and model's performance; make changes as needed

*can model self-assessment and self-recording through graphing of modeled compositions

*continue student development of self-regulation strategies across composition and other tasks and situations; discuss use here and in other settings (continue generalization support)

Memorize It

*though typically begun in earlier stages, require and confirm memorization of strategies, mnemonic(s), and self-instructions as appropriate

*continue to confirm and support memorization in following stages, make sure students have memorized the mnemonics and what they mean before Independent Performance

Support It

*teachers and students use writing and self-regulation strategies collaboratively to achieve success in composing, using prompts such as strategy charts, self-instruction sheets, and graphic organizers

*challenging initial goals for genre elements and characteristics of writing established collaboratively with individual students; criterion levels increased gradually until final goals met

*prompts, guidance, and collaboration faded individually (graphic organizer replaced with student creating mnemonic on scratch paper) until the student can compose successfully alone

*self-regulation components (goal setting, self-instructions, self-monitoring and self-reinforcement) are all being used by this stage; additional forms of self-regulation, such as managing the writing environment, use of imagery, and so on may be introduced

*discuss plans for maintenance, continue support of generalization

Independent Performance

*students able to use writing and self-regulation strategies independently; teachers monitor and support as necessary

*fading of overt self-regulation may begin (graphing may be discontinued)

*plans for maintenance and generalization continue to be discussed and implemented

*Stages 1 and 2 are often combined in instruction; a stage or combination of stages may take several lessons to complete; instruction is often recursive across stages; students should progress across stages as they meet criteria for doing so