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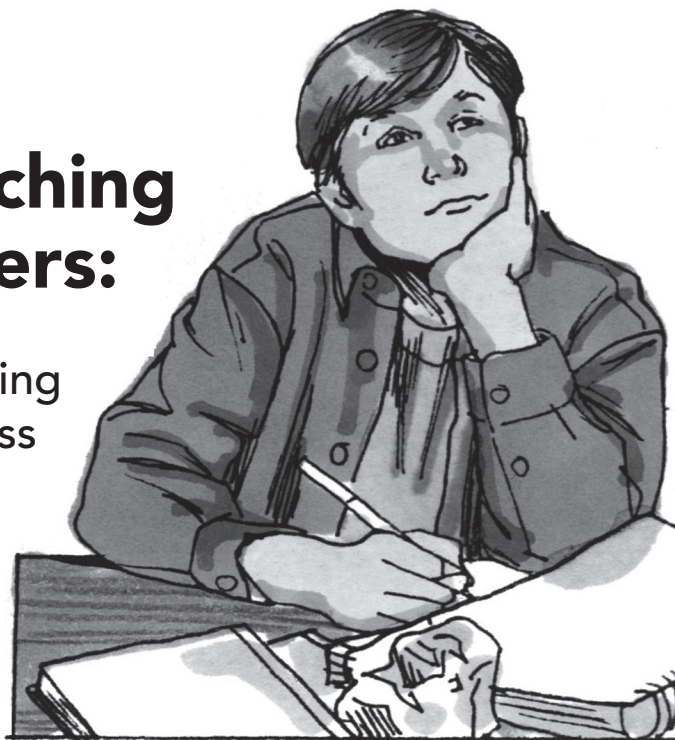
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Explicitly Teaching Struggling Writers:

Strategies for Mastering the Writing Process

STEVE GRAHAM, KAREN R. HARRIS,
AND CHARLES MACARTHUR



Students are often asked to write reports for science, history, and other content-area classes. Struggling writers and many of their classmates are unsure about how to plan and write reports. This article presents a strategy for planning and writing reports and describes how a general and special education teacher team-taught this strategy to a classroom of fifth-grade students.

What I know about forest fires is that they began by lightning or by somebody throwing match and forget to put it out. Sometimes because they throw cigarettes or they forget to put the camping fire out. And I thought that forest fires were all bad for forest. What I didn't know was that some forest fires were good for the forest and that Yellow Stone Park was a place where lots of forest fires occurred [corrected for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation miscues, not grammar].

The author of this report on forest fires is Virginia, a bright 11-year-old, who would likely disagree with the observation by novelist Peter de Vries, "I love being a writer," but readily accept the rest of his commentary, "What I can't stand is the paperwork" (Gordon, 2000, p. 149). Virginia avoids writing whenever possible, applies little effort when she has to write, and makes derogatory comments about writing and her capabilities as a writer.

When working on the report just quoted from, Virginia began by saying, "I hate this stuff!" Even though

her fifth-grade teacher, Victoria Johnson, encouraged her to "take your time to gather information and plan your paper," Virginia quickly glanced at a single book on forest fires and made no notes for what she planned to do or say. Altogether, she spent about 7 min creating a first draft, pulling just two ideas from the book examined (i.e., "Some forest fires were good . . . Yellow Stone park was a place where lots of forest fires occurred"). While writing, she sighed several times, and as she finished, she shrugged her shoulders and whispered, "I don't know any more."

During a writing conference in class the next day, Virginia read her report to Ms. Johnson, who told her that she especially liked the part pointing out that forest fires were helpful. Then she encouraged Virginia to add more information about this and to expand her paper so that it also covered the damage done by forest fires as well as how we can keep them from starting and put them out once they begin. When Virginia complained, "I don't know how to do this," Ms. Johnson suggested that she

look at some more material on forest fires. After the conference, Virginia spent about 15 min examining two books, but when she started working on her paper again, all she did was change a few words and try to correct some spelling miscues.

Virginia was not the only student in her class who was unsure about how to plan and write a report. While working on their papers and during individual conferences with Ms. Johnson, many of the students expressed uncertainty about the process and asked questions about what they were required to do. The teacher's suggestions appeared to have little impact, however, as most of her students, including some of the strongest writers, spent little time thinking about or planning what they wanted to write.

To address this situation, Ms. Johnson decided to teach her students a strategy for planning and writing a report. She and the school's special education teacher, Barbara Danoff, had previously teamed together and taught students an explicit strategy for planning and writing stories (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993). The report writing strategy was taught as a series of mini-lessons embedded into the classroom writing program, Writers' Workshop (Calkins, 1986). Learning this strategy had a positive effect on students' story writing skills, and Ms. Johnson was eager to apply the same kind of approach to report writing.

She and Ms. Danoff agreed to team-teach the following six-step report writing strategy developed by MacArthur, Schwartz, Graham, Molloy, and Harris (1996):

1. Choose a topic.
2. Brainstorm all you know and would like to know about the topic.
3. Organize your ideas by main points and details on a web, where main ideas and subordinate ideas are linked together through the use of lines and arrows.
4. Read to find new information and verify the accuracy of already generated material (add, delete, and modify information on the web as necessary).

5. Write your report using information from the web you created, but continue planning as you write.
6. Check to be sure that you used everything you wanted from the web (see Note).

Teaching the Strategy

The report writing strategy was taught using the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD; Harris & Graham, 1996, 1999) model. With this model, students learn how to apply the report writing strategy effectively, independently, and thoughtfully with the teacher's explicit instruction about the overall strategy, as well as how they can use their knowledge and organizational skills to apply the strategy. The six stages of SRSD instruction are presented in Table 1 and discussed in the following descriptions of how to teach the procedure. It is important to note that these stages can be reordered and applied recursively (moving from one back to another). This was done with the first two stages (Develop Background Knowledge and Discuss It) when Ms. Johnson and Ms. Danoff taught the report writing strategy in their class.

Before teaching the report writing strategy, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Danoff carefully considered what they knew about their students, the demands of the strategy, and the classroom writing program. They concluded that they could not teach the strategy through a series of short mini-lessons, as it was much too complicated and time consuming. Instead, they decided to suspend Writers' Workshop, introduce the report writing strategy and teach it via the SRSD model strategy, and model how to use it. They further decided that Ms. Danoff would take the lead in introducing and teaching how to use the report writing strategy, as she had more experience with this kind of teaching. However, both teachers played an active role in every phase of instruction, allowing them to address individual student's specific needs. Ms. Danoff focused her attention on a group of four struggling writers with learning disabilities, including Virginia. Although

Table 1 . Stages of Instruction in the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (Harris & Graham, 1996, 1999) Model

Stage	Description
Develop background knowledge	Students are taught any background knowledge needed to use the strategy successfully.
Discuss it	The strategy as well as its purpose and benefits are described and discussed.
Model it	The teacher models how to use the strategy and introduces the concept of self-instruction.
Memorize it	The student memorizes the steps of the strategy.
Support it	The teacher supports or scaffolds student mastery of the strategy.
Independent use	Students use the strategy with little or no supports.

Note. These stages may be combined, repeated, or reordered.

the report writing strategy was taught to the whole class, Ms. Danoff scheduled additional time to work with these four children separately to provide more individualized support. She did the same for several other students who also needed extra help.

To use the report writing strategy effectively, students must be able to generate and organize information from multiple sources (e.g., background knowledge and information from written sources). Although Ms. Johnson thought that most of the students in her class were reasonably skilled at using brainstorming to generate what they knew, she was less certain that all of them were able to effectively use semantic webs to organize their ideas. Finally, the teachers thought that some of the students, including the four children with learning disabilities, might experience difficulty managing a task of this complexity. For these students, and several others in the class, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Danoff decided that it would be important to include instructional procedures in the teaching routine that ensured that they mastered the strategy and established an “I can do” attitude.

Before introducing the report writing strategy to the whole class, Ms. Danoff held a conference with each student who had a learning disability (*Discuss It*). At this meeting, they discussed the child’s approach to writing an earlier report (presented at the beginning of this article.), and Ms. Danoff emphasized that the student would profit from learning a strategy for report writing. She stressed that this would help in writing a more complete and informative report, “One that was more fun to share with other people.” She briefly described the strategy and talked about how students would learn to use it. She further emphasized that the child could master the strategy by making a commitment to learning it, underlining the importance of effort in this endeavor. Each student indicated that he or she would work hard to learn the strategy.

Develop Background Knowledge

In a session with the whole class, the teachers next worked on helping students develop the background knowledge and skills necessary to write good reports and apply the report writing strategy. After the class brainstormed “good ideas” on how people work together cooperatively (e.g., stay on task, use nice words, help each other, listen to whoever is speaking), students were split into small groups of four or five and asked to discuss what makes a good report and why it is important to write good reports. The groups then shared their ideas with the whole class, as Ms. Johnson recorded their ideas on a wall chart.

The next day, students were assigned to groups of three (consisting of a manager, reader, and writer) and given an example of a good report. They were asked to read the paper and make a list of what made it a good re-

port. As the groups later shared their ideas, Ms. Danoff webbed them on another wall chart. They then referred back to the ideas that they had brainstormed on the previous day to see how their prior and current knowledge matched. Each group was then asked to make a web combining the most important information from the two wall charts. At the end of this session, students were asked to start a new log in their writing journal to record what they learned each day and how it helped them.

The activities in these first two whole-class sessions required that students carry out two processes—brainstorming and semantic webbing—that are essential to successful use of the report writing strategy. These activities not only helped to make sure that students understood the purpose of report writing and the characteristics of a good report but also allowed the teachers to assess students’ facility in using these two processes. For several of the students, including Virginia, Ms. Danoff arranged a teaching session later in the day to work on semantic webbing, as these children had not yet mastered the process.

Discuss It

During the next classroom session, each student received a small chart listing the steps of the report writing strategy, and Ms. Danoff described in detail how the strategy worked. Students discussed the reasons for each step, as well as how and when to use the strategy. Their ideas were recorded on a chart that remained on the wall for the remainder of the school year.

Memorize It

Further, as a homework assignment, students were asked to memorize the steps of the strategy, using the following words as reminders: choose, brainstorm, organize, read, write and say more, check. Ms. Johnson explained that they were memorizing the steps, “so that you won’t have to keep looking them up.” She also encouraged students to make up a silly sentence (mnemonic) to help them remember the reminding words (e.g., “Choose, Brainstorm, Organize—They will help you read, write, and say more: Check it out.”). Most of the students in the class memorized the steps easily, but all four of the students with learning disabilities required some additional practice with Ms. Danoff.

Model It

In two subsequent sessions, Ms. Danoff modeled, while thinking out loud, how to use the strategy to write a report. This provided students with a visible and concrete model of how to apply the strategy. Students participated in this activity by helping the teacher as she planned, wrote, and revised by providing suggestions for content,



where to place items on the web, or, for example, how to turn an idea into a sentence.

As she applied the strategy, Ms. Danoff held a running dialogue with herself designed to demonstrate what writers say to themselves to help them

- focus their attention: “What do I need to do?”
- stay on task: “Keep going.”
- monitor performance: “Does this make part make sense?”
- reinforce themselves: “What a great idea!”
- cope with frustration: “I can do this.”

Once the report was finished, the class discussed the importance of what we say to ourselves as we work and write, and students volunteered examples of positive and sometimes negative things they said when writing (Virginia mentioned that she often said, “I hate this.”). The class then identified what Ms. Danoff said that helped her do a good job when writing the report. Students developed and recorded on a card one or more personal statements they would use while writing. For example, Virginia developed the following two self-statements to help her: “I can do it” and “Keep good thoughts.”

Support It

At this point, Writers’ Workshop was resumed as students began to use the report writing strategy to write their own reports. The students with learning disabilities and two other struggling writers began this phase of instruction with them collaboratively planning a report with Ms. Danoff. This allowed the teachers to make sure that these students understood how to use the strategy

correctly. Ms. Danoff did a second collaborative report with Virginia and one other student, as these two children were not yet ready to apply the strategy without her directing the process. The other students in the classroom began this phase of instruction by collaboratively writing a story with a peer, assisted by Ms. Johnson as needed.

Independent Use

As students used the strategy to write reports, they continued to reflect on what they were learning in a daily entry in their writing journals. The teachers also reminded them to use their personal statements to help them manage the writing process. As students became increasingly proficient in applying the report writing strategy, the two teachers encouraged them to be more independent, relying as little as possible on the teachers or their peers for help. At this point, the students were also encouraged to use their personal statements covertly (“In your head.”). Although most of the children in the classroom were able to use the strategy independently after writing three reports, the students with learning disabilities required more time to master it (they needed to write 4–5 reports).

To help students more fully personalize the report writing strategy, they were asked to share how they thought they could make the strategy better (*Discuss It*). Suggestions included, “Do brainstorming and webbing together;” “Number on the web what will appear first, second, third in the report;” and “Do not brainstorm for unfamiliar topics.” Some of the students modified their use of the strategy by following one or more of these suggestions.

The Effects of Teaching the Strategy

Although it took almost 6 weeks for children in this class to master the report writing strategy, the teachers thought it was time well spent, commenting that their students will “have to write reports every year from now on,” and “now they know how to do so.” The overall quality of students’ reports improved, even for children like Virginia who found writing to be particularly perplexing. She now planned her reports in advance and was less likely to make derisive comments about writing or her own capabilities. The positive benefits of explicit instruction in how to plan and write a report are evident in her report, which follows.

*Germ*s

*Germ*s are tiny cells that get into people’s body and make you look sick.

Who get germs? People like us get germs on your hands, from cats and dogs, and lots of other places like which fight germs. White blood that your blood has works very hard to kill germs.

How do you feel? You feel like throwing up; you feel sick; stomachaches come to you; you get fever, pain, breaks, aches, and rashes. You feel all these things when you have germs inside your body.

From where do they come? They come from old metal and dirt. There is even germs in food, in the air, from the hands. There is even germs in water, and everything that you touch that is not clean.

What happens when you have germs? You cough, you get allergies, you get a cold, you have a feeling to throw-up. That all happens when you have germs in your body. All things that you read here comes from germs in your body. The skin is your protection against germs [corrected for spelling, capitalization, and punctuation miscues].

Postscript

Explicitly teaching students strategies for planning, drafting, and revising text is not only effective in improving the performance of struggling writers (Graham & Harris, 2003) but also enhances the writing of their more skilled classmates (see Graham & Harris, 2006). Such instruction has been effective when incorporated within Writers' Workshop (e.g., Danoff et al., 1993; Graham & Harris, 1996) or as a separate component of writing instruction (e.g., De La Paz & Graham, 2002).

Why is such instruction effective with a broad range of students? One, it makes what is typically a covert process visible and more concrete. And two, students are taught to carry out processes—such as generating, framing, planning, and revising text—that most young writers find challenging (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986).

Readers who are interested in seeing what strategy instruction looks like in the classroom are referred to a videotape published by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (Alexandria, Virginia) titled *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities: Using Learning Strategies* (2002). In this tape, fourth-grade students are taught a strategy for planning and writing a persuasive essay. The strategy is conjointly taught by their general education teacher and Ms. Danoff, the special education teacher featured in this article (other research-validated writing strategies and the procedures for teaching them are contained in Graham & Harris, 2006, as well as Harris & Graham, 1996).

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NOTE

See MacArthur, Schwartz, Graham, Molloy, and Harris, 1996, for a slightly different version of this strategy.

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