

# Introduction

**A**s a nation, we have focused a great deal of attention and research on reading instruction. We would be wise to include the power of writing instruction and its reciprocity to reading. *Catch a Falling Writer* is intended to provide educators with strategies for “catching” struggling elementary school writers, including students taking advantage of our special education (SPED) and English language learner (ELL) programs. Classroom teachers, reading specialists, special education teachers, classroom assistants, parents, literacy coaches, and student teachers will benefit from this work.

The topic of writing instruction is extremely relevant today because so many children struggle with basic writing skills that are needed to meet the growing demands of writing in today’s schools. Many children currently enter our schools with limited language skills, insufficient coloring and scribbling experiences, weak fine-motor skills, incorrect pencil grip, perfectionist behaviors, and inadequate exposure to letter-sound knowledge. It has become increasingly evident that specific strategies and ideas for teaching “falling writers” is very much needed in a society where a computer mouse and a television remote-control device are more prevalent than pencils and crayons. A *falling writer* is defined as any child who cannot write on or above grade level with independence.

This book is intended to strengthen and anchor the powerful connection between reading and writing. It will shed light on the issue of falling writers before feelings of frustration, defeat, and incompetence take root. Good teachers continually strive to become better teachers by searching for effective tools in the struggle to help children become independent readers, writers, and thinkers. This pursuit requires commitment, patience, flexibility, skill, and sheer

will. The foundation for the information provided in this book stems from research-based strategies combined with decades of observation and instruction of children of all ages, training from some of the best teachers and researchers in the world, and years of teaching teachers around the globe.

Falling writers can be identified if we, as teachers and parents, become acutely aware of red flags that often present themselves in the early stages of writing development. The tricky part is that red flags come in a host of different shapes and sizes. These flags often appear during the preschool and kindergarten years but don't always manifest themselves fully until Grade 1.

Some early warning signs among falling writers appear to be more common than others. Teachers and reading specialists who are aware of these behaviors will want to begin where the learner is and build on strengths to move the reader forward. This awareness can lead to a search for contributing factors and, ultimately, a plan of action for each child who appears to be “falling.”

Listed below are the most common early warning signs that we should watch for while teaching and guiding young learners. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

(*Note: Early warning signs do not necessarily appear in this order for any given child.*)

- Delayed speech and language skills
- Limited scribbling and drawing skills
- Word retrieval difficulties (trouble “finding” words when retelling, explaining, or describing things, stories, or events)
- Limited prior knowledge, vocabulary, or background experiences
- Directionality issues (right-left, top-bottom, front-back, before-after)
- Limited coloring, drawing, and painting opportunities
- Unusually short attention span when drawing or writing on a whiteboard
- Little or no interest in practicing letter formations
- Little or no attempt at attending to print (doesn't understand that print carries meaning)
- Limited writing vocabulary
- Little or no instant recognition of basic sight words (*yes, no, Mom, a, I*)

- Blinking, yawning, frowning, wiggling, or other unusual behaviors during activities that require coloring or writing
- Pressing down “too hard” when coloring or writing
- Writing words all over the page instead of in a line
- Lips shut tightly when attempting to write unfamiliar words
- Constantly asking, “How do you spell \_\_\_\_?”
- Reading painfully (word-by-word reading with little or no blending of words into phrases)

What can this book do for those who seek to catch a falling writer?

- Offer ideas in a format that is easy to read and understand. This is not a textbook. Ideas and suggestions have been gathered from actual experiences in the field combined with research-based findings.
- Create a conscious awareness of common behaviors in young writers that often become habits.
- Recommend research-based strategies and methods for preventing falling writers from continuing to fall.
- Provide opportunities for educators to confirm, reflect, and enhance their current knowledge of how to teach and assist falling writers on the journey to becoming independent readers, writers, and thinkers.

The best way to read this book is simply to make it a daily practice—reading, reflecting, and perhaps trying one or two strategies each week. You may also want to allow the book to serve as a springboard for teacher book club discussions and debates. *Catch a Falling Writer* is divided into three specific parts: “Engaging the Writer,” “The Mechanics of Writing,” and “Creating Independence.” These three areas were selected as a way of organizing the information into manageable chunks. Segments within each part do not need to be read in any particular order. Teachers of students with special needs as well as those learning a second language will benefit from many of the strategies offered, with modification and differentiation.

It is my sincere hope that this book will inspire each reader to catch every falling student along the universal path to literacy. I firmly believe that when we teach children how to fly as readers

and writers, we save them. Reflection on how and why we do what we do, as teachers, is a key to understanding the craft of teaching falling readers and writers. As educators and parents, we often struggle to find the time to actually “think” about our teaching practices and theories. This book was created with that reality in mind. Finally, consider the following as you search for the power between reading and writing:

- We *all* have students who can read well but struggle to write well.
- We have *no* students who can write well but cannot read well.

*Now, let's catch our falling writers!*