How to teach students to write

DIRECT INSTRUCTION EFFECTIVELY IMPROVES WRITING SKILLS

By Carla Thomas McClure

The quality of student writing increases when teachers show students how to divide the writing task into steps (i.e., planning, revising, editing), then teach how to accomplish each step, according to a 2007 research meta-analysis published by the Alliance for Excellent Education.

What instructional elements have been shown to improve student writing?

The 2007 Alliance review, authored by researchers Steve Graham and Delores Perin, identifies 11 instructional elements that have shown positive effects on writing quality among students in grades 4-12.

They are — in order of magnitude of effectiveness — explicit strategy instruction, summary writing, collaborative writing, specific product goals, word processing, sentence combining, prewriting, inquiry activities, process writing (e.g., creating a supportive writing environment and encouraging students to take ownership of the work), study of models, and writing for content-area learning.

Are these elements equally important for all students?

The authors of the Alliance study are quick to say their meta-analysis does not constitute a writing curriculum or reveal an "optimal way" to combine the various instructional elements. Needs may vary among individual students, they say. Instruction in writing strategies, however, seems especially effective with low-achieving students.

Do students with learning disabilities need additional support?

Some students with learning disabilities do need additional support, concluded Linda H. Mason and Steve Graham in a 2008 article in *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*. For students with learning disabilities who are not making adequate progress in a general education setting, the instructional elements identified in the Alliance study may need to be implemented outside of the general education setting, they say. These students also may need additional structure and support.

Based on the results of a research meta-analysis focused solely on writing interventions for grade 4-12 students with learning disabilities, Mason and Graham offer several recommendations:

*   Teach students to regulate their own writing

behaviors, such as goal setting and self-rein-forcement, throughout the writing process.

- Use teacher-student and student-student con-ferences.
- Provide guided and independent practice across genres.
- Cognitively model the writing process (e.g., say aloud the things writers usually think as they write, such as, "I know there is a better way to say this, but I can think about that later, when I'm editing").
- Teach reading and writing together to sup-port content learning.

References

Graham, S. & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York.* Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Available at www.all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf.

Mason, L.H. & Graham, S. (2008). Writing instruction for adolescents with learning disabili-ties: Programs of intervention research. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 23*(2), 103-112. ◆

What is a meta-analysis?

Meta-analysis is a way to summarize the collective results of multiple research studies. For example, the Graham and Perin meta-analysis mentioned in this article is based on 142 studies; the Mason and Graham review is based on 40 studies. When researchers do a meta-analysis, they use statistical methods to determine the strength and consistency of the particular educational practices included in the studies.