Why is writing so darn hard?
Bonnie Singer, Ph.D., CCC
Webinar for the International Dyslexia Association
Upper Midwest Branch
January 2019

Where are we going?
1. Student perspectives about writing
3. The role of language in written language
4. Implications for assessment, instruction, and intervention

Student perspectives

Why did full legal and civil rights for African Americans finally come to be established only in the late 1960s, instead of earlier in the century, or even in the 19th century? What were the political, economic, and cultural preconditions for this breakthrough? To what extent were African Americans able to affect the process, and for what reasons did other Americans help them?
To truly understand why students struggle, stop testing them.
Just ask them!

“Language poses multiple problems for education because it is both curriculum content and learning environment—both the object of knowledge and a principal means through which other knowledge is acquired.”

Cazden, C (1978)
Executive Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task management</th>
<th>Self-regulation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Inhibiting off-task behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working memory</td>
<td>Focusing attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizing ideas, behavior, &amp; materials in time</td>
<td>Maintaining optimal levels of emotional &amp; cognitive arousal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining attention &amp; work</td>
<td>Multiple domains: emotion, behavior, cognition, motor, language, engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
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Weintraub et al., (in press)
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Executive Functions are minimally engaged when responses are practiced, smooth, or automatic.

Talking and writing are NEVER automatic.
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“A JUGGLING ACT”

A difficult and/or precarious situation in which several things are being attempted or must be maintained at the same time.

http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/a+juggling+act

“A JUGGLING ACT”

COGNITIVE-LINGUISTIC

Reasoning
Processing speed
Content knowledge
Linguistic Knowledge
Meta Awareness
Working memory

SOCIAL-RHETORICAL

Rhetorical task
Environment

PRODUCTION

Grapho-motor skills
Mode of output
Speed of output

BELIEFS & ATTITUDES

Self-efficacy
Goals
Affect

WRITING FOUNDATIONS

Singer & Grasha (2004)
Implications for Assessment

Different kinds of writing demand varying amounts and kinds of executive and self-regulatory control

- Diary or journal entry
- What I did on my summer vacation
- Our visit to the zoo
- A comparison of the early Jamestown settlements
- F. Scott Fitzgerald and his era as reflected in *The Great Gatsby*

Singer & Bashir (1997)

“To pay conscious attention to handwriting, spelling, punctuation, word choice, syntax, textual conventions, purpose, organization, clarity, rhythm, euphony, and reader characteristics would seemingly overload the information processing capacity of the best intellects.”

Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987)

Writing requires an expert air traffic controller

Singer & Bashir (1997)
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Language and Behavior

“The more complex the behavior demanded by a situation and the less direct its solution, the greater the importance of [inner] speech.”

Vygotsky (1978, pp. 25-26)
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Self-talk

Negative  Positive

Counter-productive  Facilitating

Rapid deterioration

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Learning how to write is HARD
Teaching kids to write is WICKED HARD!

Implications
Instruction & Intervention

Prewrite
Plan your writing.

Write
Write your first draft.

Revise
Change your writing to make it better.

Edit
Check your writing.

Publish
Share your writing.

(Otherwise known as)

Bang Head Here
Explicit teaching involves:

Demystifying the sequence of steps a writer goes through to produce text

Revealing how language works to make meaning

- Organizational patterns (word, sentence, text)
- How those vary for different writing purposes
Language is fleeting

“If students are thinking, they can show it. And if they can see their knowledge, they can organize it. And if they can organize their ideas, they can figure out how to express what they know and understand.”

Singer (2004)
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Make language stand still

EmPOWER™ - Brain Frames®

Patterns
Cognition
Language

A model of test production

KEY IDEAS

www.architectsforlearning.com
1. Writing demands the synchronous coordination of several cognitive, linguistic, motoric, social, and affective abilities

2. Weaknesses in any of these areas have the potential to constrain the composing process and the production of text

3. Because of its complexity, multi-disciplinary assessment of writing difficulties is warranted

4. Students who struggle need explicit instruction in the step-by-step process of composing and many facets of language

Suggested Readings


