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Research in Brief:  
**Effective Writing Instruction for Students  
in the Elementary Grades (grades 1-6)**



Writing is a fundamental skill that students must develop over the course of their education. Previous research has shown that waiting until later grades to address literacy problems is a not successful strategy – intervention must begin in the earlier grades.

**What types of writing instruction are effective for students in the elementary grades?**

A recent meta-analysis examined the effectiveness of several different types of writing instruction methods. The following categories of intervention were studied:

- Explicit instruction methods
- Scaffolding methods
- Alternative modes of composing
- Other writing activities
- Complete writing programs

Researchers found that a variety of different methods were effective for improving students' writing skills. The only ineffective method was grammar instruction, which did not have a significant impact on writing quality. The researchers suggest that combining different writing practices can be beneficial for students.

**What is a meta-analysis?**

A meta-analysis is a study that combines the results of several other studies. A meta-analysis involves selecting several high-quality studies in a specific research area and analyzing the findings collectively. This provides researchers with a larger sample size and allows them to draw stronger conclusions than those based on individual studies.



***Why does this matter?***

- ⇒ *Many students do not develop the writing skills needed to be successful.*
- ⇒ *Instruction on writing strategies and on text structure helps students to improve their overall writing skills.*
- ⇒ *Grammar instruction does not significantly improve writing skills.*
- ⇒ *Teachers who monitor and evaluate their own strategies are more likely to be effective in the classroom.*



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# Effective Writing Instruction for Students in the Elementary Grades

## What did they do?

The researchers conducted a literature search using ERIC, PsycINFO, Education Abstracts, ProQuest and Dissertation Abstracts databases to find relevant studies. They also searched a number of specific journals.

The following criteria qualified a study for inclusion in the meta-analysis:

- Study design was experimental or quasi-experimental
- Participants were elementary school students in grades 1-6
- A measurement of writing quality was included in post-test measures

## What did the researchers learn?

The strategies that were found to be successful for improving writing skills in elementary students are listed below. Under each category, the strategies are organized in order of effectiveness, beginning with the most effective.

### Explicit instruction Methods

1. Teach students strategies for planning, drafting or revising different kinds of text
2. Teach students procedures for regulating the writing strategies they are taught
3. Teach students how to form images and be more creative
4. Teach students how different types of text are structured and formed
5. Teach students spelling, handwriting and keyboarding

Teaching students strategies for planning, drafting and revising different kinds of text was found to be an effective strategy for students in Grades 2-6. Many studies of strategy instruction used the

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model. Teaching students the process of visual imagery was effective in improving writing quality for students in Grades 3-6. Teaching students about how different types of text are structured and formed, specifically narrative and expository text, was also found to be an effective method for students in Grades 2-6. Teaching students spelling, handwriting and keyboarding skills were another effective method for Grades 1-3.

### Scaffolding Methods

1. Develop instructional arrangements where children work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their papers
2. Set clear and specific goals
3. Engage students in activities that help them gather and organize ideas for their papers before they write a first draft
4. Assess students' writing and progress learning to write

Collaborative activities allowing children to work together through the stages of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising and editing) were found to be effective in improving writing quality for students in Grades 2-6. Helping students to set clear and specific goals, such as adding three new ideas to a piece of text, was also an effective method for students in Grades 4-6. Engaging students in pre-writing activities to organize ideas prior to beginning a first draft, such as making notes or drawing pictures, showed positive effects for students in Grades 2-6. Finally, assessment of students' progress (either self-assessment, peer assessment or teacher assessment) was another effective method for improving writing quality in Grades 1-6.

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## Alternative Modes of Composing

1. Make it possible for students to use word processing as a primary tool for writing

Using a word processing tool was found to produce positive changes in the writing skills of students in Grades 1-6.

## Other Writing Activities

1. Increase how much students write

Increasing the amount of time students spend writing, at least 15 extra minutes per day, was found to improve writing quality for students in Grades 2-6.

## Complete Writing Programs

1. Implement a comprehensive writing program

Comprehensive Writing Programs were also found to improve writing quality for students in Grades 1-6. Many of the comprehensive writing programs in this meta-analysis used a process approach, while other programs included combinations of word processing, strategy instruction, whole language approach, direct instruction, and writing skill/text structure instruction.



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*Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.*

## Selected Bibliography

### **Strategy instruction**

Glaser, C., & Brunstein, J. C. (2007). Improving fourth-grade students' composition skills: Effects of strategy instruction and self-regulation procedures. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99, 297–310. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.99.2.297

### **Adding self-regulation to strategy instruction**

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### **Text structure instruction**

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## **Creativity/imagery instruction**

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## **Pre-writing activities**

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## **Extra writing**

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## **Comprehensive writing programs**

Swain, S. S., Graves, R. L., & Morse, D. T. (2007). Effects of NWP teaching strategies on elementary students' writing. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project, University of California.



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