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the education blog

How to support writing at home: A guide for families

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Writing is an essential life skill. It opens doors for kids and adults alike and helps us better understand the world around us.

In this best of *Teach. Learn. Grow.* eBook, you'll hear from several experts on writing and writing instruction. They'll help you better understand how writing is learned and how best to support your student writer at home.

Partnering to help all kids learn®.

What families need to know to support their child's writing

Lauren Bardwell

I'm not a professional writer. I haven't published a novel. I don't work for a newspaper. But I do consider myself a writer because writing is a central part of my daily life: I scribble reminders for myself on scraps of paper, I compose emails for work, and I write when I respond to a group text thread or post on social media. It's hard for me to think of a single day I haven't written something. I imagine you might have a similar experience.

I can rely on writing daily because I learned to use it as a tool in school. In this Best of ***Teach. Learn. Grow.*** eBook, my colleagues and I share information with you about writing development in children so the kids in your life can benefit from writing, too. We also share practical tips on how to support writing development at home. (Reading and writing go hand in hand, so if you're interested in our earlier family series on literacy, see ***How to support reading at home: A guide for families.***) But first, let's start with the most fundamental question of all.

Why do we write?

Writing is an essential life skill. It has huge implications for how we participate in society. It opens doors to educational, economic, and personal growth.

"Writing is a tool for thinking and learning."

Writing is important for all aspects of school. Sure, students write in their language arts classes, but they also write in science, social studies, math, and other classes. We use writing to show what we know to others, and through the writing process, we also discover new ideas we hadn't considered before.

Writing about a new topic or concept helps us think about and understand ideas more deeply. Writing about a text—whether that's responding to questions, summarizing a passage, or something else—helps us better comprehend that text. Indeed, **developing writing skills is closely related to developing reading skills**. Writing is a tool for thinking and learning.

Writing is also important for career opportunities. According to an article in Inc., **73% of employers list writing as one of their top sought-after skills** when hiring new employees. Good writing skills can lead to hiring and promotions. They are essential for filling out job applications, polishing a résumé, and communicating via email.

People use writing for personal reasons, too. With the traumas of the **pandemic** and **school violence**, writing can be used as a therapeutic tool for children to

express and process complex feelings. Indeed, writing is linked to **improved happiness** and **health benefits**. Children can use a **journal** to explore their emotions, reflect on challenging conversations, examine the pros and cons of a difficult decision, experiment with their creativity, and more. **Writing is a wonderful way to encourage social-emotional growth**, something that will benefit children throughout their lives.

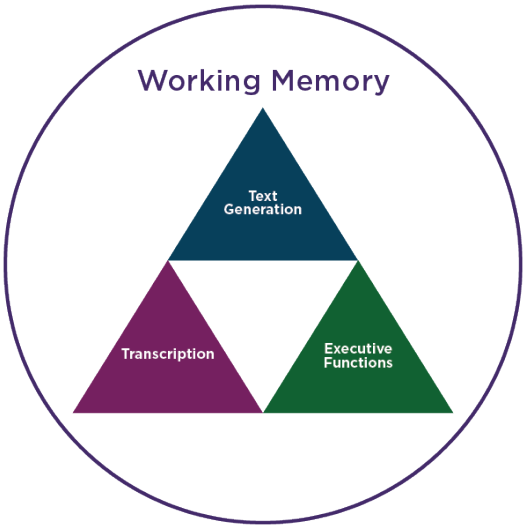
How do we learn to write?

To better understand how to support your writer at home, it helps to learn about the multiple processes that are involved when children are learning how to write. We'll explore these—and explain how they're connected—throughout this eBook. But for now, let's look at the basic elements of what it takes to learn to write. This model is called the Simple View of Writing.

- **Transcription:** This is the act of converting spoken language into printed words. Transcribing involves spelling, handwriting, and keyboarding. In school, when you took notes while your teacher was explaining an idea to the class, you were transcribing.
- **Executive function:** This is the ability to use your mind to manage tasks and monitor progress. In writing, this might involve setting goals, planning, organizing, evaluating, revising, and shifting your attention based on what you find. If you have ever drafted an email, read your writing, and then deleted or rewrote portions of the draft before sending it, you've used executive function skills.

- **Text generation:** This refers to the creation of thoughts and ideas and transforming them into language in written words, sentences, paragraphs, and full texts. When you wrote a response to a question from your teacher, whether it was a short-answer sentence or an entire essay, you were engaging in text generation.
- **Working memory:** This is the limited mental space in which all these processes take place. If you've walked into another room to do something only to get there and completely forget what you were going to do (I know I've been there), then your working memory was probably overloaded.

The Simple View of Writing is represented in the graphic below. The top triangle is text generation. The two skills needed to reach this goal make up the bottom two triangles: transcription and executive functions. All three triangles are located within the circle representing working memory.



Children just learning to write have to work really hard to develop these skills, and there is a continuum, or order, of skill development so that it is easier to learn the more complex skills later on. In fact, even adults continue to grow their writing skills. Writing expert and researcher **Steve Graham says**, "Writing develops across the life span, [and] some forms of writing take many years to master."

What can I do now to support writing at home?

So where do you start to help your child? There are lots of things to consider in the Simple View of Writing model, and I promise we'll dig deep into each component in the coming weeks and give you more specific strategies to try. But for now, I encourage you to focus on the following three things.

1. **Get to know your writer**
   It's valuable to talk to your child about how they feel about writing. Do they like to do it? What do they like to write about? How is writing going

at school? Who are their favorite writers? What do they like about books they read? Understanding your child's motivations and attitudes about writing can help you be better prepared to support them.

2. **Model writing in front of your child**
   Adults' attitudes toward writing influence children's perception of its value. Have your child observe you while writing a thank-you note or composing an email to a friend. Watching you write and hearing you voice aloud your thought process while writing ("I think I might need to use a different word here to show my appreciation") can help to establish a recognition that writing is a useful and positive part of everyday life.

3. **Write together**
   Kids are more likely to engage with writing when they find it relevant and meaningful to their lives. Collaborating with your child on a writing project (small or large) can give you insight into where they are in their writing development.

For very young children, this might involve creating art and having your kid tell you a story about what they've drawn, while you write their words down on paper.

For children just learning to read, you might help them spell words. Children this age are learning to connect sounds to letters and letter patterns, and they often use invented spelling to express their ideas. This is a very normal and helpful part of the learning-to-write process.

For older children, you might rewrite the ending to one of their favorite books or movies.

For more ideas about general writing activities to do at home, check out "**Parent strategies for improving their child's reading and writing.**"

You can do this!

Remember: you don't need to be an expert in writing to try any of these ideas. And you may already be doing these things to some degree. Wherever your child is in their writing development, there are meaningful and doable ways you can support them at home.

Why transcription is important in your child's writing and reading journey

Heather Cella

I remember my mother picking me up from school in our orange VW camper one day in late October. I was in first grade and excited to tell her that, just like grown-ups, we had voted for president in the upcoming election and were going to find out which candidate won at our school.

My mother asked me whom I voted for, and I told her. I could tell she didn't like my choice! I explained that I chose that person because his name was easier to write: the letters were easier to form, and his name was much shorter than the other person's. My mother didn't seem pleased with this answer either!

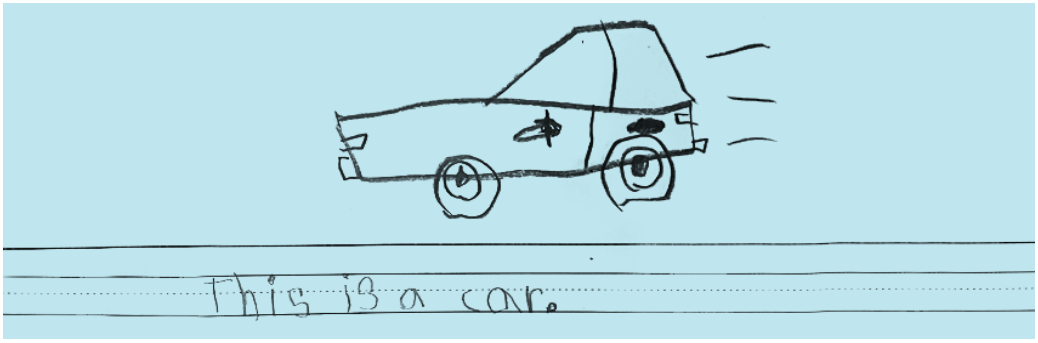
Transcription—forming letters, writing them correctly, and avoiding fatigue by writing at a fast enough pace—affects how we communicate ideas and opinions. For me, transcription was my primary concern as I cast my first-ever vote.

Transcription's starring role in the Simple View of Writing

If your child is learning to write, they're practicing transcription, even if they don't use that word to describe what they're doing. Transcription is a big part of the Simple View of Writing.

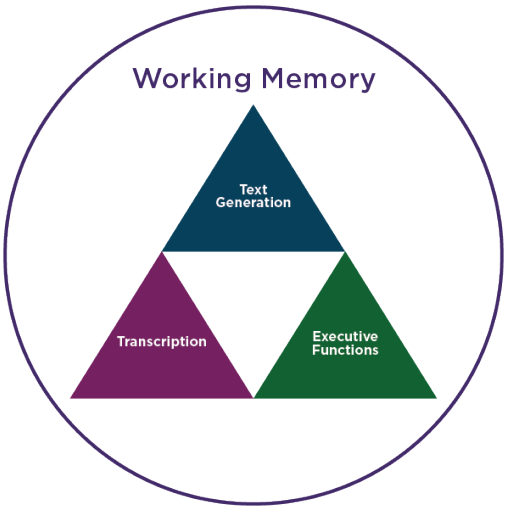
Transcription is simply the act of putting words on paper (or screen) through handwriting (or typing) and making those words understandable through good spelling. Think of handwriting and typing as siblings—and of spelling as a bossy aunt who takes charge, disciplining the letters to get in line and in the right order.

The Simple View of Writing describes how writing is dependent on three interwoven skills: text generation (creating the ideas), transcription (putting the ideas onto paper or screen), and executive function (organizing and revising the ideas). All three take place within the limits of a person's working memory, whether that's an adult or a kid.

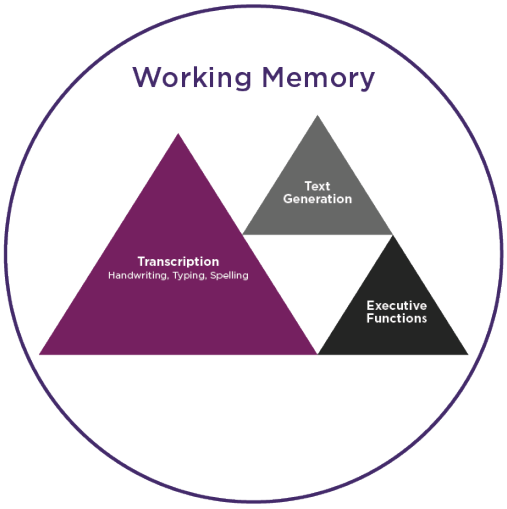


Take a look at the graphic below, which shows these three key components visually.

The Simple View of Writing



For children who are just learning to write, transcription takes up most of their working memory, making it really hard for them to come up with ideas of what to write (that text generation bit I mentioned). They have very little free space in their brain to think about planning or organizing their ideas or to think about spelling.



When transcription becomes more automatic, handwriting (or typing) and spelling stop requiring as much conscious thought and effort. Children then do not need to use as much brain power for those tasks and can redirect energy to generating text, including longer pieces, and executive functions, like organizing their ideas.

Transcription's three parts

Let's take a closer look at each of the three components of transcription: handwriting, typing, and spelling.

"Writing letters by hand also triggers key regions in the brain and puts in motion processes necessary for later reading development."

1. Handwriting

Handwriting means writing by hand, of course, using a tool like a pen or a pencil. You may wonder: does it matter if children begin writing by hand or with a keyboard? It does!

Handwriting activates areas in the brain more than other forms of fine-motor tasks, like tracing or typing letters. For young children without physical disabilities or impairments, learning to draw letters by hand is an important part of both the writing and reading processes. (For students who have disabilities that might interfere with handwriting, there are technologies such as speech-to-text software, as well as supports for positioning and holding a pen or pencil. Some students may be introduced to a keyboard or text-to-speech technology right away if a disability prevents them from writing by hand.)

Children need to develop fluent (i.e., quickly produced and legible) handwriting so they can focus on what is most important: generating and organizing ideas. Writing letters by hand also triggers key regions in the brain and puts in motion processes necessary for later reading development.

Forming letters by hand, while associating them to the sequence of the sounds in a word, is important to a process called **orthographic mapping**, which begins with hearing and identifying each sound in a word, then associating each sound with the letter that represents it before spelling out the word. For example, with "toad," children will need to understand that there are three sounds (/t/ /ō/ /d/), represented by four letters.

Orthographic mapping is important to the reading goal of recognizing words automatically and, thereby, reading fluently. (For more information on how kids learn to read and tips you can use at home, check out our *Teach. Learn. Grow.* eBook ***How to support reading at home: A guide for families.***)

Think about this complex process and take note of what you think the role of handwriting might be. When a child is learning to write a word, they:

- Say a word orally, or "say" it in their mind
- Identify all the individual sounds in the word
- Figure out the letters that match each sound or that are necessary to represent the sound

- Remember what the letters look like
- Form each letter in the correct sequence (i.e., accurately, legibly, and fast enough to write sufficient words to express themselves fully)

Wow! That's a lot of work for a growing brain. And handwriting is integral in this complex process.

2. Typing

Students are often more motivated and engaged with **digital writing than with handwriting**. Perhaps this is because digital writing is more collaborative than handwriting, allowing for other students to easily add to or make changes to a draft. Students can write with teachers, friends, and family members, and the relationship part of writing can be motivating or of value to students or the assignment.

Keyboarding is often introduced **in first grade**. As children move past first grade, they usually become more adept at it. Fluency in handwriting is still important, but the fundamental nature of writing quickly supports the shift of moving from writing by hand to typing. Typing also makes it **easier to revise drafts**.

3. Spelling

It turns out that spelling words correctly really does matter, even after the test. When students think about how to spell a word, they are **strengthening the same muscle that helps them decode** (that is, break down, read, and understand) that word. Although the English language has many (sometimes confusing) **spelling rules**, most words have predictable letters and letter combinations that we can lean on when trying to spell or read a word.

Unfortunately, some writing difficulties stem from problems with spelling. Often, the middle of a word, where the vowels reside, is where students need the most help with spelling. Sometimes two vowels together do not make a sound a student expects. For example, the -ie in "pie" and "piece" make two different sounds. And the -ou in "loud" and "soup" are completely different as well. Words that have two consonants at the beginning (e.g., "brake," "grill") or end of a word ("bent," "past") can also be difficult for students.

The good news is that digital tools help students correct spelling errors. Spell check and autocorrect for the win! Frequent exposure through practice and word study, such as sorting activities, can help, too.

How to help your child with transcription

To support your budding writer at home, here are some things you can do to strengthen their transcription skills:

- **Practice!** Practicing writing letters or words for short periods each day. Even 10–15 minutes is enough to help your child with forming letters, writing neatly, and increasing writing rate.

- **Use self-evaluation.** Encourage children to evaluate their own efforts. One way is to have them circle what they determine are their best-formed letters or words. Ask them for ideas on how they can improve.

- **Focus on a few letters.** Research supports that the letters Q, J, Z, U, N, and K account for almost half of the mistakes kids make when writing lowercase letters. The most common illegible letters are Q, J, Z, U, and A. Pay attention to these and be ready to help clarify how to form a letter or how to write it more legibly.

- **Aim for speed.** Copying short paragraphs or sentences from a grade-level book is a valuable activity that can help young children learn to write faster. Have your child write for about three minutes and then have them (or help them) count the number of words they wrote. Repeat the effort the next day and see if the number of written words increased. This little self-competition can be motivating for some kids.

- **Establish a purpose.** Practicing writing at home does not mean having to write a full story or formal essay. Think about useful forms of writing you do at home each day, such as grocery lists, thank you notes, birthday cards, or even simple directions for a dog walker or babysitter.

The writing is on the wall

Sometimes what we see as the little things end up being much more important than we thought. Handwriting is one of those things. It is an important part of the process of writing, starting with shaping letters that match to sounds in words, sequencing those letters together properly to form correctly spelled words, and forming words at a speed that creates legible pieces of writing for different purposes and audiences. Learning to type these letters at a speed that won't slow down thinking is not so easy either!

Our young children have a lot to say. Transcription turns out to be a key part of the developmental process that will empower them to use their voice, not just in those early years when learning to write, but throughout their lives—even to express their ideas about elections!

5 ways you can help kids develop their executive function skills for writing

Julie Richardson

One parent–teacher conference stands out in my mind more than all the others. It was the beginning of the school year, and my partner and I were sitting in our son's fourth-grade classroom. The teacher began by saying the students had just taken a writing assessment.

"They were given twenty minutes to respond to a prompt," she said.

"Oh, our son's very creative. How'd he do?"

She took out a blank piece of paper with our son's name on it. We were confused.

"He wrote nothing?!" I said in disbelief.

This was a kid with a vivid imagination and an advanced vocabulary. He would tell elaborate stories at home. He would write and draw in journals, describing animals with quirky personalities and superpowers. But at school, in response to an open-ended writing prompt, he suddenly had nothing to say. Did he have writer's block? Maybe he was just having a bad day?

The teacher didn't think so. She took a deep breath. So did I. Then I listened. Really listened.

"It's possible the higher demands of this writing task felt overwhelming to your son. Does he struggle with executive function?"

"Struggle with what?" my partner and I said blankly.

And that's how we learned about executive function and why it plays such an important role in writing.

What is executive function?

Some people have described executive function as an air traffic control system in our brain. Each day, our brain takes in new information and encounters new demands. Our executive function keeps everything straight so we can go on living productive lives.

As adults, we struggle with our own executive function sometimes, probably without even knowing it. If you've ever misplaced your keys, felt your mind wandering mid-conversation, or had trouble with multi-tasking, then you've likely experienced problems with executive function.

"If you've ever misplaced your keys, felt your mind wandering mid-conversation, or had trouble with multi-tasking, then you've likely experienced problems with executive function."

Why is executive function so important for writing?

When it comes to writing, executive function is what helps us set goals, plan, and organize. It also helps us manage our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during the writing process. This kind of self-management is known as self-regulation, and it's critical for writing.

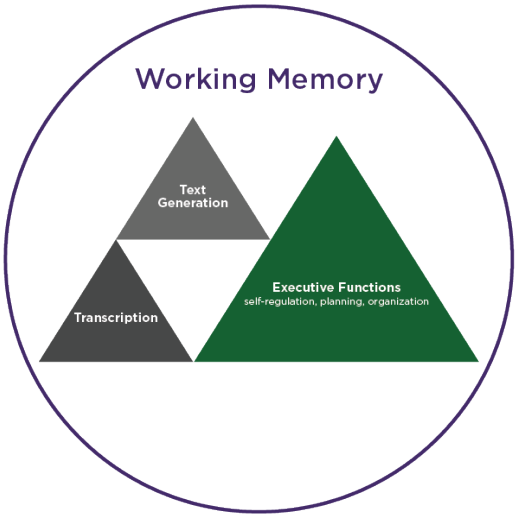
Self-regulation includes things like the attention and motivation needed to start writing (initiation), the self-monitoring and self-evaluation needed to keep writing (stamina), and the positive self-talk and rewards needed to overcome obstacles during writing (persistence).

For emerging and young writers, difficulties with executive function happen more often than people know or understand. For children with learning differences (such as **dyslexia**, autism, or ADHD, like my son), who already struggle with executive function, writing becomes that much more difficult. Understanding that executive function difficulties are real—and what you can do to help—can empower kids to see themselves as writers in spite of **how hard writing is**.

What does the Simple View of Writing say about executive function?

You may remember the Simple View of Writing from earlier in this eBook. For a quick review, the graphic here shows the key components of writing: transcription, text generation, and executive functions. These three components all happen within the limits of working memory, meaning they constantly compete for our available mental resources. When one component takes up most of our working memory, we have less brain power available for the other two.

The Simple View of Writing



Beginning writers, as my colleague Heather Cella explained in **"Why transcription is important in your child's writing and reading journey,"** dedicate most of their working memory to transcription (handwriting, spelling, and typing) until these skills become more automatic. Once these skills are more automatic, more mental resources become available for executive functions, including the goal setting, planning, organization, and self-regulation needed for more complex writing tasks. When children encounter significant difficulties with executive functions (such as lacking the motivation to practice and the attention needed to start writing, as in the example with my son), it can adversely affect text generation, or their ability to generate ideas and compose text.

The good news is there are lots of ways to help your child build executive function skills. For inspiration, let's look to what skilled writers do, including how they reduce demands on their working memory.

1. Set goals

Skilled writers set aside blocks of time for writing, often each day. You can help your child establish a similar routine and gradually build their writing stamina. Building your child's writing stamina can increase their confidence with writing, and increased confidence provides the motivation needed to set more challenging goals and persist in meeting them.

- **Make goals achievable.** Writing takes focused attention, and a **child's attention span** grows with age. A good rule of thumb is two or three minutes per year of life, though some research suggests an upper limit closer to five minutes. Keep in mind that every child is different. Start small. Use **engaging writing prompts** and have your child count the words they wrote so they can see the number grow over time. When your child is ready, increase the challenge.
- **Be supportive.** A positive and supportive environment can increase a child's motivation. Find out what supports your child's needs. Some kids with executive function difficulties have trouble managing time because time is an abstract concept. Try using a visual timer, like a sand timer, so your child can see time pass in a more concrete way. If your child has a hard time staying seated, try putting **a stretchy band around the legs of their chair.** If your child is working on transcription skills, they may need other supports, like a pencil grip, slant board, or special paper. These **tools** can help make handwriting easier, which frees up working memory for executive function skills. Be sure to remove these supports once they're no longer needed.

2. Make a plan

Skilled writers spend more time planning than on any other task in the writing process. However, planning can tax our executive function, making it difficult to generate ideas for writing in the first place. Try these proven planning strategies with your child:

- **Reduce the number of choices.** Open-ended writing tasks can overwhelm our executive function, so reduce the number of choices. For example, if your child is really into cars, you might ask, "Do you want to write about cars of the past or cars of the future?" Then present another choice for consideration. Encourage your child to choose what's interesting, even if it might be difficult to write about; it's harder in the long run to write about something boring.
- **Ask guiding questions.** Help your child understand what they're thinking with guiding questions. For example, ask, "What's so interesting to you about cars of the future? Oh, you think they might fly? That sounds like a great place to start your research."

3. Get organized

Skilled writers document ideas so they don't have to hold every one in their working memory. Try these strategies to help your child get organized for writing:

- **Talk about purpose and audience.** Purpose and audience are two abstract concepts that place extra demands on executive function. Let's say your child is writing a **persuasive paper** on whether pets should be allowed in school. Talk to them about their opinion: "Oh, so you want to be able to bring your dog to school." But don't stop there: "Let's see. So you need to persuade some people to let you bring your dog to school. That's your purpose for writing. And who do you need to persuade? The principal? The school board? The community? That's the audience for your writing."
- **Use a graphic organizer.** Knowing the genre of writing can also tell you something about its organization. Your child's teacher will likely provide them with a graphic organizer for writing (like **this one for a persuasive essay**), so make sure your child completes it. Graphic organizers are especially helpful for students who are visual learners and thinkers, as students with learning differences often are.

4. Self-regulate

Because writing is primarily a self-initiated and self-sustained activity, it requires more self-regulation than other academic tasks. Skilled writers know how to make their environment conducive to writing and how to regulate their attention, emotions (frustration!), motivation, and writing strategies for maximum productivity. Help your child keep big emotions in check by anticipating what they need to be successful writers.

- **Create the right environment.** High-quality writing environments are safe spaces where children can express themselves however they want. They have the potential to increase engagement, motivation, and persistence, and they can be particularly helpful for **emergent bilingual students**. Your child may need a quiet space, with plenty of writing materials and few distractions. Or they might prefer a more vibrant space with carefully chosen sensory inputs, like a bouncy ball to sit on, calming music, or even colored lights.
- **Create the right circumstances.** Skilled writers think about the circumstances in which they write best. Is it first thing in the morning? After they've had some physical activity? After dinner? These are decisions adults often make without conscious thought. Learn what works best for your child.

5. Talk with a mentor

Skilled writers engage in metacognition, or thinking about their writing while they write. Your child's teacher is an experienced writer and can act as a mentor. Talk with them about other strategies your child can use to self-monitor, evaluate, and revise their writing, as well as build their self-efficacy.

- **Find out about self-regulated strategy development.** There is a large body of research on the success of self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) in writing. In fact, SRSD has a more positive effect on student writing than any other instructional method. Teachers who use SRSD support students to reduce the difficulty of writing, then release students from these supports when they are ready. Ask your child's teacher what they know about SRSD and how you can support them in using it. SRSD can be used in combination with whatever your child's teacher is currently doing, and there are free practice guides available for both elementary and secondary school.
- **Pay attention to your child's self-image as a writer.** If your child makes negative statements like, "I'm not a good writer," they may be stuck in a negative feedback loop that makes them avoid writing, and it's hard to get better at writing without having lots of opportunities to practice. Talk with your child's teacher about their attitude toward writing. Students who learn to use self-regulating strategies during the writing process, including managing their emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and attention, have more positive images of themselves as writers.

Success with executive function

Fast forward to the spring of fourth grade. My partner and I are sitting in a parent-teacher conference once again. This time it's being led by our son, and he's talking about writing stamina.

He hands us a prompt. We feel nervous. Then he reveals an entire page of his own writing, brimming with words and ideas. We think back to the blank page from the start of the year. The before and after is startling. What made the difference?

To be honest, we tried every strategy I wrote about here. While some worked better than others for our son, one thing remained true: Nothing succeeds like success.

We sat in silent awe as he stared at his end-of-the-year writing prompt, smiling from ear to ear.

"What's the best thing you learned this year?" I asked him.

"I'm a really good writer," he said without hesitation.

Words, words, words: 8 ways to support kids of all ages in writing at home

Kellie Schmidt

A few years ago, I had to write a thesis as part of my master's program. I found myself researching, researching, and then researching some more. In fact, I was spending so much time with the research that I was inching toward the due date without having put any of my *own* thoughts on the page.

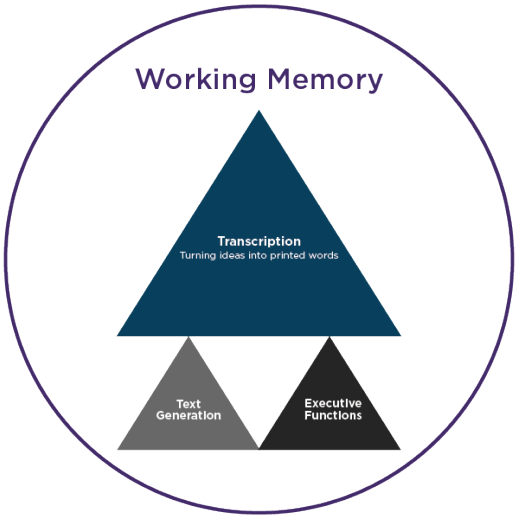
In a meeting with my advisor, she asked me how I was progressing. "Well," I said, "I feel like I need to keep researching." She asked me which aspects of research I still needed to do. I told her I wasn't sure. She reminded me of the timeline, and I finally confessed, "I guess I don't know where to start. The part I'm most interested in writing about right now isn't the introduction." She gave me as much of a soul gaze as one can across Zoom and said, "Just write."

While I stared longingly at a stack of books and articles I still wanted to read, I knew I needed to follow her advice. So, starting somewhere vaguely near the middle of the paper, I wrote. And wrote. And then wrote some more. I did not need much in the way of additional research, it turned out, and finally admitted to myself that I had been using my enjoyment of that part of the writing process as an excuse to avoid turning the ideas floating around in my head into words, sentences, and paragraphs. I may also have been hiding a good bit of fear behind that clever procrastination strategy.

As kids are learning to write (and even when they're in higher grades and feel like old pros), they get stuck, too. If I said, "Just write" to my anxious nine-year-old, his eyes would widen, and a look of mild panic would cross his face. He might actually run away from me (true story). Why is this? Because writing can be scary.

A reminder: The Simple View of Writing

We've been talking about the Simple View of Writing throughout this eBook. The part of the Simple View of Writing (represented in the visual below) that I'll explore here is text generation.



Text generation is the part of the writing process in which we turn our ideas into a text. Students need to lean heavily on their executive function and transcription skills to be able to focus on text generation.

Why is text generation important?

Writing is a tool for thinking. During writing, our brain is engaged in mental gymnastics in which we deepen our understanding of ideas and form new connections. Text generation is the process of turning these ideas in our heads into comprehensible words, sentences, and paragraphs on the page. More often than not, these ideas are constantly changing as we write.

Writers—whether it's me battling with my thesis or your third-grader stalling with a book report—sometimes make brand-new discoveries while they are writing. I certainly experienced this during the writing saga I mentioned earlier; I had a few powerful "Aha!" moments as I was writing that felt like cartoon lightbulbs above my head. These happened when I made connections I hadn't made before, and I had to start putting words on the page before I could earn those lightbulbs. When your writer makes a new discovery during the text generation process, it will feel like magic to them, too.

How to support your writer in generating text

There are lots of ways to support your writer at home, many of them simpler than you may think. Here are eight tips, all designed to help make writing feel less scary. They work well for writers of any age.

1. **Be a sounding board.** Ask any writer and they'll tell you the same thing: most of the writing process is less about getting words on a page and more about researching and thinking and deciding what to say. It is helpful for writers of any age to talk through their ideas with someone. I do this with my husband sometimes when I find myself stalling on a writing assignment. I ask him specifically if what I am saying makes sense, and I ask him to stop me as needed to ask questions.

2. **Understand the assignment.** Help your child identify and understand their purpose and audience. That means understanding what kind of writing they've been asked to do and who will be reading it. For example, writing an essay will require a different structure and style than writing a short story or a flyer for a student council campaign. Help your student consider the audience they are addressing, too. What they'll share about sharks with their science teacher, who is a marine biology buff, will certainly be different from what they'll share with their best friend, who is terrified of all creatures with teeth.

3. **Help with focus.** If my youngest had to write a report on sharks, rather than handing him a pencil and paper and wishing him luck, I could offer him something more bite-sized (shark joke!) to guide and inspire him. I could say, "Why don't you start with a sentence about how sharks use their gills?" Or "What is something you want to say about what sharks eat?" Or even, "What have you learned about sharks that you are most excited to share? Write that down for me." Questions like this can help kids realize what they have learned during their research process and start ordering their thoughts. This also, very subtly, shows them that they have a starting point simply because they know something. They have important thoughts to share with the world.

4. **Start wherever makes sense (it might not be at the beginning).** Writing doesn't always have to start with the title or introductory sentence, especially if your writer is already in the (very good) habit of **working from an outline**. Sometimes it's better to begin somewhere your writer feels comfortable. When I was writing my thesis, I felt overwhelmed by the idea of crafting my introduction. It was much easier for me to work on a later section first, and doing that allowed me to start generating text in a way that increased my confidence and allowed me to make visible progress. Your child will need to make sure to check that what they are writing fits in with their overall writing goals, of course, but an outline or other **graphic organizer** can keep them on track.

5. **Set realistic (a.k.a., small) goals.** As my colleague Julie Richardson noted in **"5 ways you can help kids develop their executive function skills for writing,"** help your child articulate what they're working toward, that is, what their goal is. Make a plan for accomplishing what comes next. Try establishing a certain amount of time per day for your child to devote to writing, for example, or aim for a specific daily word count (their teacher can help you determine what's age appropriate). An outline or graphic organizer can help here, too, because both provide direction and reminders of what needs to be completed.

6. **Acknowledge physical demands.** For very young writers (think kindergarten through second grade), a lot of physical energy is needed for writing: Holding the pencil. Keeping the page steady. Controlling how hard they press down on the page. For older writers, wrists get achy, necks get sore, and eyes get tired of looking at a screen. Help your writer by both acknowledging this ("That looks like a lot of work. Is your hand tired?") and giving them plenty of breaks.

7. **Use tools that make the physical act of writing easier.** Make sure your child has tools that make them more comfortable with transcription. For example, my nine-year-old experiences physical discomfort using a pen or pencil. While I want him to improve his handwriting, that effort toward transcription interferes with his ability to generate text. Putting him on a keyboard best supports his needs. Sometimes I also have him record ideas via audio, then transcribe them later. When my son does need to use a pen or pencil, there are special pencil grips that make it less physically uncomfortable for him.

8. **Celebrate revising, not perfection.** Try not to pressure your writer to expect perfection as they start to write. They need time and space to process their thoughts and to turn those thoughts into words. I mean, even **Shakespeare didn't produce a perfect play on the first try**; he went back and revised his own writing (a lot). That's true of every other published writer you can think of. So don't worry about spelling or punctuation, especially in the younger grades. The goal is to get words out; editing comes later.

Moving past writer's block

Every writer is different, but one thing most of us have in common is that being told to "Just sit down and write!" is unlikely to do anything other than bring on a serious case of writer's block.

It's okay for your writer to use tools to help them organize their thoughts and feel physically comfortable. It's okay to guide them in exploring what they think about a topic, understanding exactly what an assignment calls for, and celebrating the power of revising. All these things help writers of all ages do the most important thing: just write.

7 ways you can help kid writers from overloading their working memory

Lauren Bardwell

Picture this: A six-year-old writer has many great ideas for a story. They excitedly rattle off to you four sentences to complete their story. As a young writer new to forming letters and spelling words, they write slowly and stumble to finish the first sentence—only to completely forget the once highly detailed and organized text they just told you moments before. Their brain is so focused on spelling, pencil grip, and letter formation that they have completely forgotten what they were going to write about. Their working memory is overloaded.

Sound familiar? Maybe you've witnessed your own kid experience this struggle. Maybe you have even experienced it during your own writing process.

The good news is there are strategies that you and your kid can use to help reduce the burden put on our working memories during the writing process. Read on to find out more.

What is working memory?

You've probably heard of short-term memory. Short-term memory is the limited information we can temporarily hold in our mind to use in the present moment, and the information is often forgotten shortly after use. Think of temporarily remembering a phone number while you type the numbers on your phone.

Working memory is related to short-term memory, and it also includes our ability to manipulate or control that information. In working memory, you are actively doing something with the new information you are given. For example, when you are doing mental math to calculate the tip at a restaurant, you are using your working memory to manipulate number amounts.

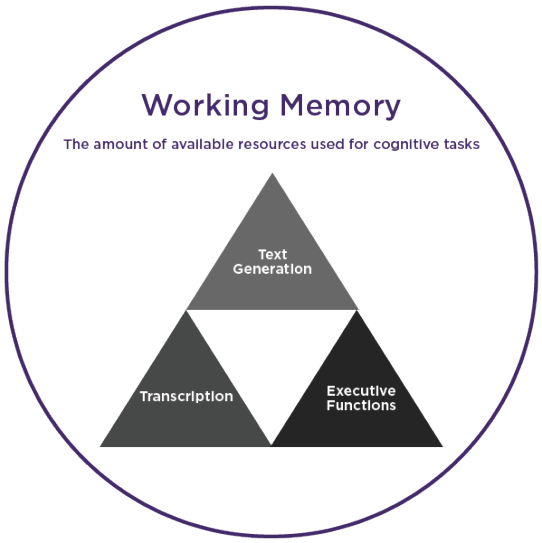
"We all—kids and adults alike—have limits to our working memory."

Working memory has its limits, and these limits can be different for individuals. Some people have working memories with larger capacities, while other people have working memories with smaller capacities. People with ADHD, dyslexia, and traumatic brain injuries may experience more challenges with working memory.

Our working memory capacity can also change throughout the day, depending on specific situations. For example, if we are feeling anxious or overwhelmed, we may have fewer available resources for working memory because our attention is negatively affected by stress.

How is working memory related to writing?

As you might remember from our other posts on the Simple View of Writing, writing takes place within a working memory environment.



During writing, working memory helps us temporarily store information like a new idea that we want to explain (using text generation), how we want to word a particular sentence, or how to spell a word (i.e., transcription). It helps us switch between different writing processes like planning and revising (these are executive functions). It helps us form a mental representation of "the text in construction" or the already produced text with the one we intend to write.

As my colleague Heather wrote about in "Why transcription is important in your child's writing and reading journey," transcription puts a lot of demands on young kids' working memory. They are focused on remembering how to form letters and spell words. Until they become fluent with handwriting, typing, and spelling, they have little mental space to think about things like organizing and revising ideas. Typically, by grade 4, transcription skills become fairly automatic, but kids still need help developing their executive function skills. My colleague Julie has some great ideas to support this in her post "5 ways you can help kids develop their executive function skills for writing."

Mature writers might be fully fluent with their transcription skills and skilled in executive functions, but everyone has limits on their working memory and, as Kellie wrote in "8 ways to support kids of all ages in writing at home," text generation will challenge those limits, even in the most skilled adult writers.

So, if working memory is fairly fixed in individuals, how can you help your kid with their writing when it comes to working memory? Luckily, there are several strategies. They have two goals: (1) Reduce the demands on working memory so

your kid has more resources available for competing cognitive (mental) tasks and (2) make sure kids can use their working memory to the fullest extent.

Here are a few **research-supported strategies** to reduce the demands on working memory during the writing process:

1. **Practice sentence combining.** Give your child two or more simple sentences and ask them to combine them into a single, more complex sentence. Providing kids with starter sentences reduces the cognitive load for them to generate ideas and vocabulary on their own and lets them focus on thinking about how ideas are related, determining the word choice to convey those relationships. It also helps them make a plan for writing future sentences that express similar ideas. Sentence combining practice has been shown to improve overall writing quality.

2. **Use graphic organizers.** A lot of internal mental organization of ideas takes place when planning a written piece. Using a graphic organizer can free up some of your child's working memory by capturing that organization on an external visual plan. This is similar to taking notes while reading a book, listening to a lecture, or watching an instructional video. By offloading information to paper (or screen), the brain is freed up to focus on deeper thinking and processing. Being able to reference, add on to, and revise writing plans via graphic organizers prevents kids from exerting a lot of extra mental energy on trying to keep track of all the ideas in their head.

3. **Break it into steps.** Chunking information into manageable, bite-size pieces is a key strategy for avoiding overloading working memory. It can be helpful for many kids to have an easy-to-remember step-by-step process for writing. Two popular writing strategies are **POW and TREE**. "POW" stands for pick my idea, organize my notes, and write and say more. "TREE" is an acronym for topic sentence, reasons (three or more), explain reasons, and ending.

   Typically, as kids mature as writers, this process will become more internalized and they will no longer need to follow these formulas rigidly (and should even be encouraged to experiment with their writing). But for writers who have ongoing issues with working memory, step-by-step strategies like POW and TREE can be incredibly helpful.

4. **Read, read, read.** Our existing knowledge base provides the foundation for our working memory. If we are familiar with a topic, we have more available resources for working memory when thinking about issues related to that topic. When we don't know much or anything about a topic, our working memory can become easily overloaded. (This is me

when someone tries to explain how cryptocurrency works.) The best way to help your kid expand their knowledge base is to encourage them to read about topics that interest them. For more information about reading strategies to use with your kid, see our eBook ***How to support reading at home: A guide for families***.

And here are some general strategies to free up resources for working memory:

5. **Get visual.** Visualizing, or creating mental images and representations of ideas, helps us create meaningful connections, which aids with memory. Visualization can help with reading comprehension and encourage the generation of ideas when writing. For some ideas on how to encourage visualization with your kids, check out **"Teaching kids to visualize."**

6. **Get moving.** Research has shown that **exercise improves working memory and overall brain function**. Encourage your kid to take occasional breaks when writing and go outside for a walk, play a game of basketball, practice their favorite TikTok dance, stretch at their desk, or something else fun. If your child has physical limitations, check out these videos for inclusive exercise ideas: **"Yoga for individuals with disabilities"** and **"Adaptive chair yoga class for people in wheelchairs."**

7. **Get mindful.** Among the **many benefits of mindfulness** and meditation is the ability to improve attention, recall skills, and reduce stress and distractions. **"12 ways to teach mindfulness to kids"** has some great and simple suggestions.

For more information about general strategies your kid can use to optimize their working memory, check out **"8 working memory boosters."**

These strategies are applicable across grade-levels, though their sophistication should increase as kids mature. For example, older kids can work on combining longer sentences, while younger kids might use a more simplified version of a graphic organizer.

Writing: It's not so simple

Though the model is called the Simple View of Writing, writing is a complex mental process that places many simultaneous demands on a writer. Because of its complexity, learning to write can be understood as a continuum. We develop as writers, not just across our childhood, but across our entire lifetime.

When kids are really young, most of their working memory is consumed by transcription. As kids mature, they get more practice with transcription and it becomes automatic, so they have more mental space to focus on executive functions and text generation. But we all—kids and adults alike—have limits to our working memory, and it's important to treat those limits with patience and support. We can use a toolkit of strategies to help reduce the cognitive load on our working memory so that we can unleash the storyteller in all of us.

About the authors

Lauren Bardwell

Like any good book nerd, Lauren Bardwell began her career as a high school English teacher. She earned her BA in English at Millsaps College and her MEd in curriculum and instruction at Middle Tennessee State University. Prior to joining NWEA's Content Advocacy and Design team, Lauren served as the executive director for adolescent literacy for the Tennessee Department of Education and a principal designer for Odell Education's high school literacy program. Lauren is passionate about ensuring students have access to high-quality instructional materials and assessments; teachers have access to ongoing, job-embedded professional development; and leaders have access to meaningful thought partnerships to improve instruction and achieve equitable outcomes for all students. When she's not working, she's busy hiking trails with her dog and attempting overly ambitious recipes in the kitchen, with varying levels of success.

Heather Cella

If you want to find Heather Cella, early reading specialist at NWEA, on a warm weekend, you might try her small backyard sanctuary, her porch (she'll be the one with a book), or her family, which includes twin dogs and two sweet cats. Heather is passionate about early literacy education, especially reading for grades K–2. Her 30-year career in education began with roles as a primary and intermediate teacher and interventionist. She has consulted with many school districts across Illinois and Wisconsin, provided professional development in literacy, and served as a district literacy coach for a large school district. She also spent over a decade in educational publishing. Heather believes good early literacy instruction is dependent on developmentally appropriate and evidence-based assessments so all children have the opportunity to read at grade level. She holds a master's in education from DePaul University and an EdS in supervision and administration from National Louis University.

Julie Richardson

Julie Richardson brings more than 20 years of experience and a master's degree in educational technology to her role as ELA content lead. Prior to joining NWEA in 2012, she was a high school language arts and journalism teacher who worked primarily with multilingual learners. Julie is passionate about ensuring that all students can see themselves in their curriculum and assessments. While at NWEA, she has worked with a multicultural advisor to expand the diversity of reading passages in MAP® Growth™ assessments, adding numerous works written by authors of color. Julie currently lives in Portland, Oregon, where she enjoys many outdoor activities but perhaps feels most content when cruising downriver on a standup paddle board.

Kellie Schmidt

Kellie Schmidt joined NWEA in 2016 as a content manager for ELA. She has over 15 years of experience in assessment and began her career teaching high school. Kellie holds a BA in American history and is currently pursuing her master's in Shakespeare and education.

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