CHAPTER 1

# Writing Basics



If there is one absolute truth in writing, it's that writing can be absolutely difficult to teach and to learn. Although writing can be wonderfully creative, it is also a maddening, frustrating, highly complex activity that includes many components or processes a writer must navigate and many decisions the writer must make before a piece is completed.

Not surprisingly, many students struggle with writing (Graham & Perin, 2007; Schumaker & Deschler, 2009). And although writing can be difficult for students of average or even above-average academic achievement, it can present a significant challenge for students who struggle with writing or who have documented writing disabilities (Graham, 2006; Kame'enui & Simmons, 1990; Mason & Graham, 2008). Children with writing difficulties/disabilities can exhibit very different characteristics from skilled writers and may have difficulties with all aspects of writing (Troia, 2006). For example, they may not engage in effective planning prior to writing (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003). They may also write very brief papers that are not well organized or cohesive, and these papers may lack important details or elaborations that could make them more enjoyable or understandable to readers (Wong, Graham, Hoskyn, & Berman, 2008). Sadly, the students usually cannot improve their papers through revising, as they often fail to make meaning-improving revisions (Graham, 2006; MacArthur, 2007; Nodine, Barenbaum, & Newcomer, 1985). They may also struggle with other components of writing, including handwriting, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Furthermore, they may lack awareness of audience needs or of genre requirements and forms (Newcomer, Nodine, & Barenbaum, 1988; Wong, Wong, Darlington, & Jones, 1991). Perhaps because of the struggles they face while

writing, many children with writing difficulties/disabilities may have less positive images of their writing and their ability as writers (Graham & Harris, 1989).

Although writing effectively can be very difficult, it is an important skill to learn (Mason & Graham, 2008). Teachers often use writing as a primary means to document student knowledge and a major instrument to evaluate academic performance (Graham & Harris, 2004; MacArthur & Philippakos, 2010). In addition, the growing emphasis on writing in federal- and state-mandated accountability testing and college entrance examinations means teachers must ensure that all students achieve some level of competence with the required writing components (Schumaker & Deschler, 2009). Moreover, writing is a key means of communication, and good communication skills are essential in many areas of life after school; many jobs, for example, require facility in basic written language. Finally, aside from the practical advantages of knowing how to write effectively, writing well can also allow people to explore, organize, and refine their thoughts (Applebee, 1984) and to describe to others what they are remembering, feeling, seeing, experiencing, or wanting through a visible and durable method.

## THE WRITING PROCESS

Generally, to represent and transmit their thoughts effectively, writers proceed through several stages or steps. They will probably first think about or plan (at least in general terms) what they want to say. They may then begin to write down or draft their ideas into an organized format, allowing them to "see" their thoughts. Revision usually follows as the writers grind closer to a final version that most closely matches what they really want to say. While engaged in these processes, the writers must also consider such tasks as how to spell challenging words, which words need capitalization, and how to apply punctuation accurately.

Seldom does a writer plan, draft, and revise a piece of text straight through from beginning to end. Instead, the writer often encounters some difficulties or decision points—for example, "What do I want to say next? How does this next thought fit in with what I have written?" or "Which word might better convey my thought?" Often there may be multiple solutions to these difficulties (e.g., "Several words would work, but which is the best?"). In these situations, which can occur frequently, the writer must test new ideas for suitability as the meaning he or she is trying to convey unfolds. The testing of ideas may require a reread before additional text is created. However, the new solution may force a revision of the initial plan or the section of text just written. Additional text may then be generated based on the revised plan, and the new information may be united to the existing through a short round of revision to make sure the document reads well. This complex, messy, fluid, dynamic, recursive, and sometimes frustrating process places writers in a continual state of creation, consideration, and revision, in which they must solve the problems a writing task may present on their way to creating understandable

language that matches their knowledge of a topic or their thoughts and feelings (Berninger, 1993).

Teaching writers to navigate the processes of writing is understandably challenging, given the available options. How best to teach writing is debatable, and although specific techniques have been empirically proven to be effective, no single technique will work for all writers.

In the next chapter I discuss a foundational component of writing: the sentence.





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