

**Research-Based Writing****THE PARAGRAPH BOOK**
Diane Tucker-LaPlount*by Cynthia Johnson***The Writing Revolution**

Good writers are good thinkers, equipped with a key skill for success in education, industry and society. They make more effective workers and contribute to a more effective economy, and they are informed, engaged and thoughtful participants in a democracy. In 2002, the College Board addressed the growing concern in the educational and business communities about the quality of writers emerging from classrooms in the United States. The organization that develops and administers the SAT® announced that, starting in 2005, the test would include a writing assessment. The College Board also established the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges to explore and promote improvements in writing education. The commission promptly announced that nothing short of a revolution would suffice.

In April 2003 the commission released *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, outlining the shortcomings in prevailing methods of writing instruction, describing its proposed revolutionary writing curriculum and detailing a writing agenda to achieve the nation's full educational potential. The agenda prescribes more attention to writing: more time spent writing, more types of writing, and more opportunities to write across the curriculum. With the National Assessment of Educational Progress's 2002 finding that some seventy percent of fourth and eighth graders, and seventy-five percent of twelfth graders were writing below a "proficient" level, the need for intervention is clear.

The Paragraph Book series gives all struggling writers the skills they need to create clear and effective paragraphs and essays. The step-by-step approach builds writing com-

The Paragraph Book series includes four books for struggling writers in grades five through eight. Each book provides students with the support they need to construct a specific kind of paragraph: **Book 1: Writing the How-to Paragraph;** **Book 2: Writing the Paragraph That Tells a Story;** **Book 3: Writing Expository Paragraphs;** **Book 4: Writing the Paragraph That Persuades.** The Teacher's Edition for each book includes an overview of the series, reproducible assessment sheets, a lesson-by-lesson guide with answer keys, quizzes, reproducible assignments sheets, and additional resources.

petency from the ground up, teaching students to organize, format, and edit four different types of compositions: instructional, narrative, expository, and persuasive. While this highly specialized writing intervention series targets middle-school students with learning differences who have not been successful in conventional language arts programs, it can also be used effectively with ELL and any other students who need to strengthen their writing skills. *The Paragraph Book* series minimizes obstacles and demystifies the process, motivating and empowering students of all levels to become better writers.

Writing is a Process

Before the 1970s, writing was considered an advanced skill, approached only after students had mastered vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, and other mechanical language functions thought to provide the necessary foundation. This notion was particularly troublesome with LD students, for whom mastery of the “basics” was an insurmountable obstacle (Baker, Gersten & Graham, 2003). Process writing emerged as an entirely different way to consider writing instruction. The process writing method of instruction mirrors the process that experienced writers use: organizing their thoughts before they begin to write, creating a draft, and improving their compositions by revising them (Allen, 2003). Teaching the method requires the instructor to describe and demonstrate each step of the process and encourage class interaction at every stage. LD students in particular have difficulty organizing their thoughts, and are understandably reluctant to revisit what was a difficult process once it is finished. They benefit tremendously from strategies that make planning and revising easier (Strickland, Ganske & Monroe, 2002). To be sure, good writing is an advanced skill, but like painting or playing the violin, it is a skill that requires years of practice. In fine arts, students adopt more advanced techniques as they become more adept with their medium; the same is true in language arts. Process writing is based on the theory that it is less important for students to produce perfect compositions than to develop “fluency—the ability to get out their pencils and write about whatever they want” (Allen, 2003).



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The National Writing Project was formed at the University of California, Berkeley in 1974 with the mission to improve writing education by improving writing instruction. It began training educators to teach process writing, based on the theory that children should learn to approach a composition the same way writing professionals do (Allen, 2003). Ten years later, research was bearing out the theory. A 1984 meta-analysis of writing instruction found that the most effective instruction taught the entire, integrated process of writing, from brainstorming through revisions (Baker et al., 2003). In the two decades since, cognitive models of the writing process have been developed, refined, tested, and found to be effective for students with learning differences as well as their non-LD peers (Wong, 2000). Research on improving the writing skills of students with learning differences has identified additional strategies to be used within a process framework that can boost students' success (Strickland et al., 2002).

The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges agrees that process writing is beneficial, including the point, "Writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school and into college," on its Writing Agenda for the Nation (2003). Research supports process writing, finding that students learn the mechanics of language more easily when they can readily apply those lessons in the framework of their writing (Baker et al., 2003).

The workshop environment helps students understand what each step calls for, how to perform that task, and how to feel more at ease when first writing on their own. The process is particularly beneficial for students with learning differences, who may need a clearer understanding of what is expected of them in order to complete their assignments skillfully (Baker et al., 2003). The workshop format also means the teacher can use questions and prompts to identify and help students struggling to transform oral to written language (Strickland et al., 2002). With process writing, the enormous goal of producing an essay is broken down into understandable, performable steps. Students who are intimidated by writing find it easier to begin—and to finish—when the route to the destination is clearly mapped (Allen, 2003).



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The Paragraph Book series approaches writing as a process, providing students with explicit techniques for planning, constructing, and editing their work. The student books provide tools like flowcharts to organize thoughts, models to demonstrate how to apply new skills, checklists to encourage self-correcting, and editing marks to make improving a piece easier. The teacher's guides give lesson-by-lesson suggestions about introducing concepts, modeling new skills, and keeping the students engaged. Stressing that planning and revising are as important to the process as drafting, the series encourages students to approach writing thoughtfully and minimizes their frustration with rewriting. *The Paragraph Book* series synthesizes process writing techniques and strategies to give struggling writers the tools they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond.

Form Balanced with Function

Process writing does not advocate ignoring the mechanics of language in favor of uninhibited writing; it introduces concepts such as grammar, format, and punctuation gradually in the context of the lessons. Meta-analyses of teaching techniques have shown that teaching the function of content together with the form of mechanics is more effective than focusing on either separately (Baker et al., 2003). When presented as tools to help students achieve their writing goals, e.g. communicating something clearly to a specific audience, concepts like capitalization, action verbs, and point of view are easier to understand and embrace (Bromley, 2003). Experts contend that good grammar must be introduced and reinforced continually in order to become habitual and that explaining grammar in the context of evaluating student work is more productive than discussing it abstractly (Allen, 2003).

The Paragraph Book series advances students' mechanical skills by explaining and revisiting format, punctuation, capitalization, parts of speech, point of view, verb tenses, transitions, quotations, and more throughout the program. It also introduces new vocabulary with every lesson, which is reinforced in writing assignments. Students who use *The Paragraph Book* series will see the synergy between form and function and will enjoy writing more as their skill with both advances.



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Explicit Instructions for Excellent Results

While both LD and non-LD students benefit from a process approach, students with learning differences need more help with certain concepts. Their idea of good writing may have less to do with clarity and appropriateness than absence of mechanical errors, and they have more trouble structuring sentences logically within paragraphs (Wong, 2000). Clear definitions, effective models, and explicit instructions help students understand and achieve their objective of producing good prose (Baker et al., 2003). Writing proficiently in different genres, a critical skill for students' academic development, also depends on good models and explicit objectives (Bromley, 2003; Baker et al., 2003). Clearly understanding what is expected of them makes students more comfortable and better able to execute the assigned task, be it to structure paragraphs, craft narratives, or carry out the writing process.

Students using *The Paragraph Book* series will always know what is expected of them. Simple formulas help them arrange sentences into logical paragraphs and paragraphs into effective essays. Each of the four books focuses on a different type of paragraph, exploring the how-to genre first, followed by narrative, expository, and persuasive. The first two books teach the FNTF formula (First, . . . Next, . . . Then, . . . Finally, . . .) for paragraphs and longer essays while the second two books present the number formula to organize less linear compositions. The formulas help students understand what constitutes good writing and gain fluency in the various forms. As their proficiency increases, however, the students may choose to stop relying on the formulas and are given other options.

Facilitating Good Writing

A host of facilitators have been developed to reinforce the process writing approach for students with learning challenges. There are strategies for removing resistance to writing, tools to promote organization, and techniques to foster self-reliance. *The Paragraph Book* series employs many such facilitators to bolster students' success in writing.



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Handwriting and Spelling

While experts favor writing instruction regardless of students' proficiency with the mechanics of language, they do not suggest that the skills that represent good writing form should be ignored. Poor presentation, in the form of objectionable penmanship and spelling, can prejudice audiences against writers—even though they may grasp the function of writing perfectly. On the other hand, too much focus on these mechanics leaves little time for planning thoughtful writing (Allen, 2003). *The Paragraph Book* series encourages teachers to treat difficulties in spelling and handwriting as separate issues from the writing and suggests ways to help students struggling with these obstacles. For instance, teachers may have students call out words they want to use but cannot spell while they write. The teacher may then write the words on the board for the class to see. An appendix is included in the teacher's editions with ideas for helping improve students' handwriting and spelling without interfering too much with the writing process.

Planning Aids

Students of all levels, particularly those for whom focus and organization are a challenge, can benefit from tools to help them plan their writing (Baker et al., 2003). Rather than beginning the process with a draft, students who use planning sheets effectively think through their assignment and organize their thoughts carefully, thereby minimizing the revisions that will be needed later (Strickland et al., 2002). *The Paragraph Book* series features graphic organizers to encourage students to develop the habit of planning before they write, reinforcing an essential step in the writing process.

Editing Tools

Another critical component of process writing is revision. Students who struggle to form letters and words correctly are reluctant to make improvements to their writing if it means rewriting the entire piece. When they learn that editing does not have to mean recopying, novice writers are much more willing—even eager—to revise their work (Strickland et al., 2002). The series is especially useful for students who have trouble with handwriting. Ample practice



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with editing marks gives students a way to learn the material without becoming distracted or frustrated with the physical process of writing and rewriting. Students are also encouraged to revisit older essays to see the progress they have made in their writing and edit their work more than one time.

Organization Aids

Personalized kits to support students' writing efforts keep the process moving forward. Prompt cards and personal dictionaries empower students to navigate difficulties in the writing process on their own, while goal and achievement charts motivate them to continue making progress (Baker et al., 2003; Bromley, 2003; Strickland et al., 2002). *The Paragraph Book* series provides several devices to prevent disorganization from derailing the writing process. Each student keeps an individual Pocket Folder for their writing. The teacher's editions point out when to have students create their own cue cards to remember different aspects of a lesson, as well as lists of editing marks to use in revisions. A progress chart reproduced from the Teacher's Edition and attached to each student's folder shows both teacher and student how much has been achieved. The folder will also hold pencils for writing and editing, personal dictionaries of challenging words, and completed assignments. LD students often suffer from organizational problems, but keeping the tools they need close at hand can reduce the effects of those problems and create more cognitive space for writing.

Self-regulating Strategies

In addition to procedural facilitators like organization tools and editing marks, students can learn to use conceptual facilitators to recognize opportunities to improve their own writing. Students taught to use specific question-asking strategies when evaluating their work produce better prose than students not using a method to guide their revisions (Baker et al., 2003). The series promotes self-assurance in writing with strategies for students to find and fix grammar and syntax problems in their writing. Special attention is given to looking for such mechanical errors as missing capitals, dropped endings, and missing and double words. Students with weak symbol systems find this to be a great help. The series also provides questions to check for mistakes with different lesson topics, which students are asked



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to copy onto their cue cards. The students use the cue cards as prompts to make sure they have applied the lessons to their writing correctly.



Forming Habits of Good Writing

In the “Improving Writing” chapter in *Supporting Struggling Readers and Writers*, Strickland, Ganske & Monroe maintain that all students need instruction that is rooted in the writing process, a predictable structure to the writing instruction, and ready access to the “tools of the trade” and instruction in how to use them. In addition, they assert that, “For the struggling writer, however, instruction in writing strategies must be insistent, consistent, and persistent” (2002). Baker, Gersten, and Graham agree: “Students are more likely to use writing strategies when they value what they and their classmates write; when predictable writing routines are established; when planning and revising are expected and reinforced; when teachers frequently model the use of writing strategies and the thinking behind their use; and when writing assignments are specific, challenging, and interesting for students” (2003).

Recent research into effective writing instruction holds promising news for students faced with learning challenges. Rather than toiling in the abstract with punctuation, grammar, and syntax, LD students can expect to advance as writers and master the mechanics as they move forward. Process writing, teacher modeling, clear expectations, and effective facilitators provide the theory for success; achieving success lies in the practice. “Good writing, and good writing instruction, involves repeated processes that overlap and build on one another,” declare Baker et al. in “Teaching Expressive Writing to Students with Learning Disabilities” (2003).

The Paragraph Book series is designed to improve writing and writing instruction, presenting an innovative approach to learning, providing both teacher and student with bountiful support, and fostering fluency in writing through guidance, practice, reinforcement, and structure. The series’ consistent application of proven techniques allow struggling writers the comfort of knowing what to expect and the confidence of knowing they are up to the challenge.

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