

[REL Mid-Atlantic](#) Event

Teaching Elementary School Students to be Effective Writers Q&A with Dr. Natalie Olinghouse and Alisha Bollinger April 29, 2013

This event focused on the Institute of Education Sciences' practice guide, Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers (2012). Dr. Natalie Olinghouse and Alisha Bollinger presented effective strategies for teaching writing while familiarizing attendees with the recommendations and methods described in the guide. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for the presenters following the event. The [PowerPoint presentation](#) is also available.

Presenters: Natalie Olinghouse, University of Connecticut and Alisha Bollinger, Norris School District, Nebraska

- 1. What do you do with kids who can't write legibly in upper grades?**
Students in the upper grades need to have fluent and efficient handwriting. Of course, it also needs to be readable! An intervention would depend on whether the student's difficulty is with fluency or with legibility. If the student has fluency difficulties, then the intervention should focus on correct formation along with getting letters down on paper automatically. If the student's difficulty is just with legibility, then the intervention should focus on correct formation only. Any handwriting intervention should be short in length, provide supervised targeted practice, and move students from letters to words to sentences.
- 2. Do you have thoughts on recommendations for grammar/convention being taught in isolation?**
Research indicates that traditional grammar instruction is not the most effective way to help students develop sentence and conventions skills. Students need focused instruction that teaches them a specific skill and then how to apply it while writing. One place to start is by having students apply what they have learned during editing. As an example, if students have been working on correct punctuation with dialogue, they can focus on identifying problems with dialogue punctuation in a draft and then correct those problems.
- 3. Is there any research about institutionalizing writing instruction (teaching the same things and same way across grades)?**
No, but logic would tell us that students benefit from receiving consistent instruction rather than disconnected instruction from grade to grade! We have figured this out for early reading and need to apply this approach to writing.

4. Are there modifications used with strategy instruction to support their use with struggling students and students with IEPs?

Generally, more modeling and scaffolding are needed, along with more time in guided practice. The gradual release model is used extensively by effective special education teachers for most instruction.

a. Are there identified substeps for scaffolding?

This would depend on what is being taught. The key is to identify what acts as a support that could be faded for more independent use. The teacher then slowly reduces the student's reliance on those supports over time.

5. Is it important to use POW, TREE, or is it acceptable to use another idea that helps students pick ideas and organize to write? What does research say?

The power of writing strategies does not come from the strategy itself (e.g., POW or TREE), but from the instructional approach used to teach a particular strategy. Any strategy that is specific to the instructional goals and the needs of the student will work, as long as the gradual release model is used to teach the strategy.

6. At what age/grade can students adapt and implement a strategy with success?

The research has shown that young students can implement simple strategies with success! Of course, the strategy needs to be grade appropriate and taught with the gradual release model.

7. Where can you find spelling lists to use for 6th grade?

Given the range of curriculum across the nation, there is not one good spelling list for grade 6 (or any grade). It is important that students in all grades can spell frequently used words. The Basic Spelling Vocabulary List provides a list of the most commonly used words in elementary school (<http://www.readingrockets.org/article/22366/>). If a student in grade 6 cannot spell all of these words, this is a great place to start. After that, the local curriculum that pairs spelling with reading or vocabulary is another place to look. In grades 6–8, students are learning to read multi-syllabic words and determine the meanings of these words, so they also need to learn how to spell them.

a. How many words should you give? And how often?

We do not have research that provides this answer. It also will vary by student. Some students can learn the spellings of new words easily; others have more difficulty. Words should be relevant to the students, and they should be expected to spell them correctly in their writing. Holding students responsible for identifying spelling errors during editing and then correcting them is a great place to start.

b. Should you focus on instructional/content-specific words or grade level appropriate words?

Both!

8. How would the strategies be distributed to other subjects?

It depends on the strategy, but many of the general writing strategies can be used in any other subject. As an example, POW works for any writing task, regardless of the topic. The key is to make sure teachers in other content areas understand the strategy, how to teach it, and how it is applicable to their content area.