Getting the Writing Engine Started

By Kendra Wagner, M.A.

I am sitting in my home office (aka remodeled dining room) with a seventh-grade student for our weekly one-hour session on writing. I have worked many years with a variety of students who have a variety of needs and the alphabet soup of diagnoses. The ones like this girl, with writing difficulty, are most often twice exceptional. It baffles her teachers who say, "She devours books and information and speaks up in class, but she can't get that intelligence onto paper." This is the commonality across many twice-exceptional students.

Our goals for individual progress for this seventh-grader sound so straightforward:

- Write with ease and rich language, in informal and formal pieces.
- Given a writing topic or school assignment, follow the writing process (pre-write, draft, edit/revise and final).
- Develop ideas, 90 percent independently, in a five-paragraph essay format, using a graphic organizer as a starting point.
- Write meaningful topic sentences using the six common types interchangeably.
- Use "Show, Don't Tell" as a strategy for elaboration and explanation.

And yet, writing for her is a mountainous task. All the drafts. All the revision. It's not like math problems. Not a bit.

Taming the Octopus — The Many Arms of the Writing Process

We have all seen students who seem wizardly smart, who are creative idea-generating machines, but whose words don't come easily onto the page. They frequently freeze, or write in a rambling manner, and then complain that writing is too hard. Compared to math, for example, it is. There are countless ways to start an essay, write a literary response, or describe what you did over spring break. Yet, there's only one right answer for math. To some minds, having a variety of options feels like freedom; but to our kids it can seem like an obstacle to productivity.

Writing, unlike any other academic area, carries the most sub-skills and multi-threaded components. For most of us, these are so automatic that we can't feel ourselves doing them. But imagine having to think about your audience, grammar, spelling, the prompt, the teacher's expectations, sentence variety, word choice, linear arguments, transition words, and more, since none are second nature.

Teachers make writing sound so simple by saying, "If you can talk, you can write." I used to tout that, too, in my neophyte days of teaching in a classroom of second graders on the tough side of Chicago. They were talkers! But, as I came to realize, how we speak is very different from how we write.

To a number of the kids we parent or teach, writing feels like a way for us to torture them with rules about grammar, punctuation, and capitalization, and with never-ending drafts and revisions. These kids can get stuck because they're sitting in front of a page or screen trying to craft each sentence so that it's an imaginative, perfect creation that won't require an iota of revision. Or they have so many ideas at once that they can't seem to corral them into a manageable topic.

I've come to realize that what would be more accurate to say to our struggling writers is more along the lines of "If you can talk with a great vocabulary, and you are an avid reader, and you have patience, you have the beginnings of being a good writer."

The multi-layered nature of writing requires the brain to activate multiple centers, including those that govern motor control, language rules, sensory feedback, problem-solving, imitation skills, memory, organization, and metacognition. In the "school universe" — whether a school is private, public, heavily Common Core, a homeschool model, or any medley of those — writing must be taught. The emphasis in most K-12 classrooms is on giving creative prompts and opportunities to compose arguments, but not on the micro-elements of writing, such as practicing rewriting a sentence five different ways, or adding three strong verbs to a weak paragraph, etc. Twice-exceptional students especially need this level of precision teaching. Therefore, while the writing process is commonly presented, modeled, or cheerleaded, it is *not* always explicitly taught.

Many classrooms have posters on the wall listing the "Steps of the Writing Process."

1. Pre-write
2. Draft
3. Edit and Revise
4. Final Draft
5. Present or Publish (often putting it on the classroom wall)

Getting the Writing Engine Started, continued

They make it sound so easy! But these steps came from the literary publishing profession, not classrooms. The young proficient writers I work with embrace these steps, aspire to be like their favorite author, engage in deep revision, and look online for places to submit their finished pieces. But few students are seasoned writers. Many need extra support and extra steps to help them through this process, especially our 2e students.

"Wait! I am going to draw this campsite for you — it's too hard to describe."

Support might come in the form of options that give 2e students an opportunity to build on their strengths and interests. Given that many tend to be highly visual thinkers, they can become frustrated when we ask them to express their ideas or "mind pictures" completely in words. An assignment that gives students the option to use images, like creating a PowerPoint presentation, can feel so much more manageable to them — and more stimulating. Similarly, if a teacher adds some pictures to a written description of a writing assignment, 2e students are likely to be more responsive.

Adding Steps to the Process

Consider the first step of the writing process: Prewrite. How can we better prepare our 2e learners to begin the task of writing? The table to the right gives some examples of how I help my students get started.

What to Try	Ways to Do It	For Example:
1. Get the body ready.	Engage students in activities to warm up the nervous system (which is connected to the brain!).	• Open and close fists 10 times. • Breathe quick breaths through the nose only. • Stretch or bounce on an exercise ball.

2. Make tools available to students.	Make "Think Sheets" — in the form of posters or a collection of sheets in a binder — readily accessible.	• Pages of word lists that include:
		  – Adjectives (primarily for literary analysis)
		    a. Setting words
		    b. Feeling words
		    c. Five senses words
		    d. Character descriptors
		  – Adverbs (Note that dropping the *ly* often turns them into adjectives.)
		  – Alternatives to overused words (such as *said, very, things, stuff*, or whatever your students tends to overuse)
		  – Transition Words (also known as Essay Phrases) such as *therefore, on the other hand, in addition to, another reason for*, etc. (There are many lists available, organized by type of transition.)
		• Blank mind maps/graphic organizers to frame, tame, and contain ideas (These help to ensure that all the parts of an essay or narrative are in place.)
		• Brainstorming steps to guide students in preparing to begin their first draft
		• Customized rubrics to refer to while composing
		• Self-talk sheets to use to keep themselves focused on the task at hand and for celebrating small steps

3. Engage students in a pre-writing activity before they start work on the first draft.	Help students overcome having too much or not enough to write about.	• Brainstorm with words and pictures. • Create an outline using storyboards or post-it-notes. • Fill in a paper-based or a computer-based graphic organizer.

Getting the Writing Engine Started, continued

Filling out a brainstorm page or a mind map organizer makes it is easier to start the drafting process. However, many students want to skip this step because they think it takes too much time. They are in a "just get it done" mindset, which leads to lots of staring at their paper, re-reading what they have already written, and wondering what to say next, all things that can be minimized or avoided with a filled out organizer or map in front of them serving as a guide to where to go next.

The word lists are a great help during drafting as well. If students freeze while writing, it usually means they have paused to try to figure out the perfect way to express something, instead of just getting ideas down to be revised later. Having a word list to refer to can help them to get unstuck.

Still Stuck?

Here are some additional ideas in case your students hit a roadblock during the writing phase.
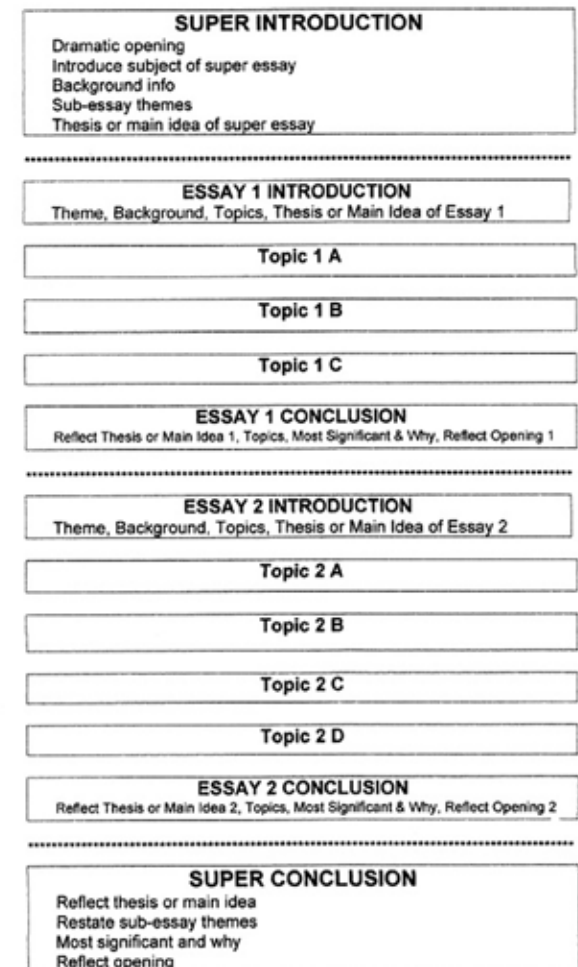- Have them purposely write a bad introductory sentence or paragraph to get it out of their system. This writing has a robotic tone or is a rambling run-on sentence.
- Have students tell aloud what they're going to write, based on what they produced during the pre-writing activity.
- Have students keep the results of the pre-writing activity visible while developing the first draft.

"Why can't this draft just be my final?"

As the draft unfolds, we are into the realm of essay structure refinement, which is another article altogether. The classic structure is five paragraphs, which comes naturally to some students but not to others. Those in the latter group may need visual organizers, such as the one shown below, all through school.

THE SUPER ESSAY MODEL

SUPER INTRODUCTION
Dramatic opening
Introduce subject of super essay
Background info
Sub-essay themes
Thesis or main idea of super essay

ESSAY 1 INTRODUCTION
Theme, Background, Topics, Thesis or Main Idea of Essay 1

Topic 1 A

Topic 1 B

Topic 1 C

ESSAY 1 CONCLUSION
Reflect Thesis or Main Idea 1, Topics, Most Significant & Why, Reflect Opening 1

ESSAY 2 INTRODUCTION
Theme, Background, Topics, Thesis or Main Idea of Essay 2

Topic 2 A

Topic 2 B

Topic 2 C

Topic 2 D

ESSAY 2 CONCLUSION
Reflect Thesis or Main Idea 2, Topics, Most Significant & Why, Reflect Opening 2

SUPER CONCLUSION
Reflect thesis or main idea
Restate sub-essay themes
Most significant and why
Reflect opening

What about Speech-to-Text Programs or Apps?

You might be wondering if these have a role to play in helping struggling young writers. They can be helpful tools if brainstorming or typing doesn't come easily to a student. These programs enable a student to easily capture ideas as they occur by talking into the microphone, or take notes on a topic while reading, like a news reporter does.

Something to keep in mind, however, is that Dragon Naturally Speaking and the family of software for speech-to-text tasks all follow the "if you can talk, you can write" belief system. However, because we talk far more informally than we write, these programs are no panacea. While helpful for the child who has weak handwriting or keyboarding skills, this type of software doesn't encourage students to deepen their choice of words or organize an argument. Software just listens to what the child says and puts it on the page. If mumbling or rambling is a habit, then that goes into the recording. Plus, Dragon-produced documents can have a more conversational tone to them rather than the formal or persuasive one that schools often require.

—KW

Getting the Writing Engine Started, concluded

The next steps in the writing process are editing and revising, and many 2e students are allergic to revision. They want to be done, done, done, right? Besides telling stories of how many revisions their favorite authors had to go through, what works is to have them use highly specific checklists. Teachers often provide a general rubric for scoring that includes criteria such as "indented paragraphs" and "supporting sentences that explain the topic sentence." I create customized ones, such as the one shown below for word choice.

Finally, we can't forget the grammar police! There are some great grammar-checking apps and online tools, but it's vital to look for those that use humor. *NoRedInk* is my favorite. Here are a few others just to get you started:

- *Grammar with a Giggle* by Jane Bell Kiester
- *Grammar Girl Presents the Ultimate Writing Guide for Students* by Mignon Fogerty
- *The Giggly Guide to Grammar* by Cathy Campbell.

In Conclusion

Watching my students grow more independent in getting started on their writing assignments is a delight! Eventually they won't need all the scaffolds described in this article. My 7th-grade girl now works on very short pieces with me, and does not need any reminders of all the small steps that help her begin. Where she once would default to procrastination and waiting until "she was in the mood" to get started, she now has a tool kit that is more and more becoming a part of her.

Criteria	Yes	No
I looked at the picture in my head as I wrote.		
I used specific nouns. (brown scarab beetle, not bug)		
I used strong verbs instead of *went, were, are, was, be, had,* etc.		
I used adjectives that made my nouns more specific.		
I used different ways of saying the same old words: fun, awesome, good, nice, bad, mean, or _____		
I used a word that is new in my vocabulary.		
My story or essay makes sense to someone reading about that topic for the first time.		
I read through the paper more than once to revise my word choices.		
I referred to my word list resources, or a thesaurus.		
I congratulated myself on trying new words.		
Other _____		

Kendra Wagner, MA, is a learning specialist in private practice in Seattle. She works one-on-one teaching reading and writing and also is a coach, researcher, presenter, and advocate for differently-abled children. Her expertise in 2e writers comes from decades of working with non-neurotypical children and teens. Her original interest in literacy and learning disabilities began when she was working in juvenile detention. Discovering that 75 percent of the population has some kind of learning disability motivated her to study the brain and learning, and discover how to reach and teach kids who don't fit in the box of school. Kendra invites readers to email her at kendra9@mindspring.com to get copies of some of the lists mentioned in this article. This article copyright © 2016 Kendra Wagner. 2e