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FOCUSED on Writing: The Model

Laura S. Bagents

Florence Middle School, Florence City Schools, Florence, Alabama

Cynthia Szymanski Sunal and Craig Shwery

The University of Alabama

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The written word is powerful, yet writing can be a daunting task. To record even a simple thought clearly and concisely requires conscious effort. The more complex the thought, the more complicated the effort involved in fluent expression becomes. Thus, mastering effective writing is a lifelong endeavor that necessitates carefully honing one's technical skills, adopting new strategies, and monitoring one's attitudes. Middle school students possess varying degrees of those essential skills, strategies, and attitudes.

Numerous factors influence the degree of growth that each student demonstrates in any class. Some of those factors are external in nature (e.g., curriculum content, classroom atmosphere, and teaching dispositions) while others are intrapersonal (e.g., strength of technical skills, perceptions of self-efficacy, and levels of self-regulation) (Schunk, 1995; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). A strong body of research (e.g., Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Schunk, 1990; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Turner & Patrick, 2004; Winne, 2005; Zimmerman, 2002; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1988) indicates that a student's implementation of self-regulation strategies, including goal setting, planning, progress monitoring, and self-evaluation, directly impacts his or her academic progress. However, Zimmerman (2002) asserted that "few teachers effectively prepare students to learn on their own" (p. 69). Students should be given opportunities to become self-regulated—self-empowered to choose, plan, monitor, assess, and evaluate their own learning in any content area.

The need for self-regulation is especially important in the writing curriculum because writing is a complex behavior that requires the orchestration of numerous skills and strategies, and composing is such a personalized craft. Skilled writers are self-regulated writers, sensitive to the utility of cognitive strategy implementation. They assume ownership of their writing. Self-regulated writers set goals for each composition and monitor their progress toward those goals, revising either their goals or their pursuit of those goals as needed (Harris & Graham, 1996). Understanding that the writing task is recursive in nature, self-regulated writers may revise their compositions as needed throughout the writing process in addition to conducting a "final" assessment upon completion of their draft. Effective

writers monitor their attitudes toward their work to ensure that they are giving their best effort to the composition. They even work to maintain a physical environment that facilitates their efforts. To the best of their ability, self-regulated writers monitor and control the cognitive, affective, and external factors that influence their writing.

Some students have attained this high level of self-regulation by the time they enter the middle grades. Many middle school students, however, are not self-regulated writers. Too many middle school students display weak skills, negative attitudes, and low degrees of self-regulation toward writing assignments. Such students fail to recognize the need to plan a composition prior to drafting. They tend to exert minimal effort and to be satisfied with the “rough draft,” declaring an assignment finished after a single writing session. Other middle school students simply refuse to attempt teacher-assigned compositions.

Many students who struggle with composing tasks do not realize that they have the opportunity—or the ability—to control their own writing and improve their skills. These struggling student writers are not prone to identify or understand the requirements and/or parameters of a writing task, set goals for their finished compositions, monitor their writing skills, or mediate external factors within their environment (Graham & Harris, 2005). Students who struggle with the craft of composing often do not possess a set of skills or strategies for recognizing areas of strength or weakness within their compositions. They cannot, therefore, perceive meaningful ways in which their work can be changed. These students need assistance in recognizing and learning the strategies that will facilitate their writing achievement.

Teachers can enhance their students’ writing achievement through intentional, systematic teaching of strategies that address specific stages of process writing (commonly recognized as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing). Students’ writing skills can be further improved when teachers provide direct instruction in recognizing opportunities that warrant the use of those strategies. Attention to prewriting, for example, “has helped improve the teaching of composition by calling attention to planning and discovery as legitimate parts of the writing process” (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 367). Likewise, guiding students through the revision and editing stages of a stage-based writing process has been shown to improve their finished products (Stevens, 2003).

Concern was voiced by Flower and Hayes (1981) about the implementation of stage-model writing paradigms within classrooms. Such paradigms often resemble the traditional approach to writing instruction and may not allow for maximum growth of writers’ literary abilities. They note, “The problem with stage descriptions of writing is that they model the growth of the written product, not the inner process of the person producing it” (p. 367). The danger of presenting the writing process as a lockstep, linear procedure is that it “may seriously distort how these activities work” (p. 367). Writing experts also warn that revision should not be relegated to the end of the writing process, nor be considered only once all “prerequisite” stages have been completed (e.g., Culham, 2003; Fletcher, 1993; Lane, 1993; Lapp & Flood, 1993). How does a writer know when the planning and drafting stages are finished so that the revising stage can begin?

Flower and Hayes (1981) suggested that “a more accurate model of the composing process would need to recognize those basic thinking processes which unite planning and revision” (p. 367). They observed that most writers, whether beginners or experts, follow a recursive path to a finished text; they do not proceed in the neatly outlined steps of a prescribed, stage-of-the-day writing process. Flower and Hayes’s cognitive theory of writing is based on four key points. First, writing incorporates a set of unique thinking processes that writers manipulate as they compose. Second, these processes are organized in such an interrelated manner that any process can be imbedded within another. Third, the very act of

composing is a goal-directed thinking process that is guided by the writer's growing system of goals. Fourth, writers' goals can be generated by either formulating high-level goals and subgoals that support them, changing existing goals, or even creating completely new goals as deemed necessary through examination of what has already been written.

Providing a method to help students visualize the skills and strategies involved in effective, self-regulated writing (especially planning and revision of text) was the primary purpose of the FOCUSED on Writing instructional model, a seven-strategy mnemonic device designed to be presented through a combination of direct instruction and constructivist classroom activities. The strategies address several concepts commonly recognized as essential for effective composition: focus, organization, pacing, vocabulary usage, author's voice, reader engagement, and mechanical/technical correctness. The strategies include: fine-tune your topic, organize your thoughts, control the pacing, use tone and voice carefully, spice up your writing, emphasize action, and demand quality in your writing.

For each of the model's seven strategies, comments and questions guide students' personal thought processes as they plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish compositions. Figure 1 presents a poster on which those guiding comments and questions were made accessible for classroom implementation. Direct instruction allowed students to rehearse those strategies through discussion of the guiding comments and questions as sample compositions were reviewed. In-class writing sessions allowed students to employ the model's strategies as they planned, drafted, and revised their own compositions after becoming familiar with the model. Figure 2 presents a note card which students kept in their writing notebooks to provide suggested revision strategies during writing sessions.

The goal of the FOCUSED study was to provide an instructional device by which students would be encouraged to (1) "see" the abstract cognitive processes involved in composing and revision as they created personal writing processes and (2) control their writing through candid, meaningful assessment and evaluation of their compositions. A mixed-design study investigated the model's success among eighth-grade middle school students in effecting changes from rough draft to revised text for each of the seven component strategies. The teacher-researcher delivered direct instruction concerning the FOCUSED revision model, and students completed numerous constructivist writing activities during a 12-week intervention period. The intervention was followed by a 6-week period during which no FOCUSED instruction was presented.

To assess any changes that might have occurred as a result of the intervention, three sets of data were collected throughout the study within the teacher-researcher's classroom, and one set of data was collected from a cooperating teacher-participant from the teacher-researcher's academic team. Analyses of those data indicated whether changes were noted immediately following the intervention's conclusion, whether evidence of students' implementation of the model within another teacher's classroom could be observed at the conclusion of the intervention, and whether students maintained voluntary implementation of the model following the 6-week "down" period. Data for each set of writing samples were analyzed through a series of one-tailed and two-tailed binomial tests.

Findings from the study indicate that the FOCUSED on Writing model had positively influenced students' composing and revision skills within the intervention classroom at the conclusion of the intervention period. Less positive effects of the model, however, were determined for writing samples collected within the cooperating teacher-participant's classroom at the end of the intervention period as well as for those collected within the intervention classroom following the six-week maintenance period. Those data will be presented in later, separate Papers.

FOCUSED Writing



Involves Seven Thoughtful Steps:



Fine-tune your topic.

Don't do "too much" in a composition. Before writing, determine what you know. Conduct necessary research (before and while) you write so your facts are accurate. Select the best genre for your writing. Is a title needed? If so, what is the best title?

Organize your thoughts.

Grab your reader's attention quickly and creatively. (Don't always ask a question!) Express your thoughts in a logical order. Transition from point to point smoothly. Finish with energy. (PLEASE don't write "The End." Your reader will know!!)

Control the pacing.

Vary your sentences (by length and type). Don't give "equal time" to each point. Use "slow motion" to emphasize essential points. Zip through lesser points. Prune unneeded words, but REMEMBER: repetition may be used effectively.

Use tone and voice wisely.

Select appropriate "person"—1st, 2nd, or 3rd. What tone should your reader "hear"? Let your own voice be heard. Choose words that "fit" your purpose, tone, and voice. Involve your reader, but don't alienate. (Should you NEVER alienate a reader?)

Spice up your writing.

Experiment with poetic language: similes, metaphors, imagery, personification, etc. Create original descriptions; don't use clichés and other "tired" expressions. Utilize vivid and precise vocabulary, but use "everyday" words when they are best.

Emphasize action.

Help your reader see, hear, and feel what you are writing about. Show; don't tell. (Include actions, gestures, dialog, and thoughts to "show.") Don't do enough to make your reader dizzy, though!

Demand quality in your writing.

Search like a teacher for GUM—grammar, usage, and mechanics! Have the genre "requirements" been met? Is your paper neat and attractive? Is this composition FINISHED yet? Are you PROUD of your writing?



Figure 1. FOCUSED Poster ©2009, Laura S. Bagents

Fine-tune your topic.	<p>**Tighten the focus if the composition tries to do too much.</p> <p>**Expand the focus if the composition won't let you do what needs to be done.</p>	<p>**Determine what you already know about your topic.</p> <p>**Conduct more research on the topic and become more knowledgeable so you can add details.</p>	<p>**Experiment with writing the composition in a different genre. (For example, if you are not satisfied with the story you've written, can a poem be written about the topic?)</p>	<p>**Change the title so that it is both appropriate and intriguing. Your title should make your readers WANT to read what you have written. (Do you need a title?)</p>
Organize your thoughts.	<p>**Experiment with the composition's beginning so that it grabs readers' attention. Consider starting with an interesting fact, a question, a quotation, or a statement that appeals to your readers' emotions.</p>	<p>**Rearrange the essay, poem, or story so that your intended message is easier to comprehend.</p>	<p>**Use stronger, more expressive transitions to indicate that you are moving from one point or section to another.</p>	<p>**Experiment with the ending. Possible types of ending include ironic, circular, ambiguous ("cliff hanger"), surprise, or emotional.</p>
Control the pacing.	<p>**Vary the length of your sentences. Some should be short and others, longer.</p> <p>**Use statements and questions. Commands and requests can be used, too. Even a few sentence fragments.</p>	<p>**All points should be supported with facts, details, and/or examples.</p> <p>**The most important points should have the strongest support.</p>	<p>**Remember that "effective use of pacing" means that you "slow down" and give more details for the most important parts of your text. (Don't try to slow down every point!)</p>	<p>**"Prune" unneeded material. Many of your "rough draft" ideas will slow down your readers. Keep only the essential.</p> <p>**Have you used repetition? Does it help or hurt your writing?</p>
Use tone and voice wisely.	<p>**Once you select the narration (1st, 2nd, or 3rd person), use it consistently throughout the text. Switching from one to another would confuse readers.</p>	<p>**Select your tone very carefully, especially if the tone is negative (angry, frustrated, etc.).</p> <p>**Your tone should fit the topic and purpose of your composition.</p>	<p>** Choose each word carefully so that your main ideas are expressed clearly—and so that your readers "hear" your tone.</p>	<p>** Write in such a way that readers are invited to agree with you, not to argue with you. This is especially true if you are writing in a "negative" tone.</p>
Spice up your writing.	<p>**When writing a narrative, don't write your story in a vacuum. Describe the setting! Let your readers know when and where the story is taking place.</p>	<p>**Replace overused words such as "said," "went," "very," and "a lot" with more descriptive verbs and adverbs.</p> <p>**Do you need to replace any nouns or adjectives?</p>	<p>**Use vivid, precise words to clearly express what you want to say.</p> <p>**Be careful, though, that you do not overuse vivid words. Sometimes a "simple" word is the best word, after all!</p>	<p>**Use figurative language, including hyperbole, similes, metaphors, symbolism, personification, and/or onomatopoeia.</p> <p>**Avoid using clichés.</p>
Emphasize action.	<p>**In all modes of writing, but especially in narratives, describe people's words and thoughts.</p>	<p>**Include people's gestures and/or actions that are appropriate for the composition.</p>	<p>**Appeal to all senses, not just sight. It may be appropriate to describe what someone might hear, smell, feel, or even taste in a given situation.</p>	<p>**Maintain a balance between action and description. Use enough action to add interest, but do not use too much.</p>
Demand quality in your writing.	<p>** GRAMMAR and USAGE. Errors such as subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, parallelism, or tense shifts weaken your text. Consult a textbook if necessary. (Knowing grammar and usage basics helps!)</p>	<p>**MECHANICS = spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Check spelling of ALL words ... especially proper nouns and proper adjectives. Look at sentences' beginnings & endings. Are commas and other punctuation used correctly?</p>	<p>**GENRE. Have you followed the rules and/or guidelines for the genre?</p> <p>** GRAPHICS. Any graphics (such as illustrations, charts, or other presentation of data) must be appropriate for the composition.</p>	<p>**PRESENTATION. Whether typed or handwritten, create the neatest, most attractive paper that you can. Your work represents YOU. Be proud of your work. Be proud of yourself.</p>

Figure 2: Suggested FOCUSED Revision Strategies, ©2009, Laura S. Bagents

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