BACKGROUND OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT AND PROFICIENCY

Writing is arguably one of the most challenging academic skills to master because it requires fluency and accuracy of microlevel skills (e.g., handwriting, spelling, capitalization, punctuation) within genre-specific macrolevel skills (e.g., vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, audience). Further, writing development is often intricately linked to reading acquisition; therefore, development in one area (e.g., reading) typically correlates with development in the other (e.g., writing).

It should not be surprising that the limited amount of time students receive explicit instruction in writing beyond the primary grades (Appleby & Langer, 2011; Brindle, Harris, Graham, & Hebert, 2016) results in poor writing outcomes for American students. Specifically, approximately 25% of 8th and 12th graders achieved proficiency on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012), according to the latest published assessments. Historical data further illustrate that American students have struggled with the task of writing for many years.

The COVID-19 pandemic will likely exacerbate this problem, given that approximately 25% of instruction during the 2019–2020 academic year was substantially disrupted (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020). Consequently, it will be important for school psychologists to advocate for robust, evidence-based literacy instruction, including writing, for all students upon return to school. Embedded within high-quality writing instruction for all students will be the need to reconsider typical assessment practices and deployment of contemporary school psychological services upon returning to school.

ASSESSMENT PRACTICES POST COVID-19

Writing skills are assessed in one of three ways (Malecki, 2014). The first are categorized as indirect methods in that they require the student to determine where an error has been made in a presented item and offer a correction for that error. These assessments typically appraise students’ microlevel skills. A second set of assessments utilize either holistic or analytic rubrics to evaluate the quality of students’ responses to a prompt and can be used for both micro- and macrolevel writing skills. Empirical evidence indicates analytic rubrics are more psychometrically sound and offer better feedback on how to improve writing skills. A third category of writing assessments are known as Written Expression – Curriculum-Based Measurement (WE-CBM; Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2016). Within WE-CBM, Total Words Written (TWW), Words Spelled Correctly (WSC), and Correct Writing Sequences (CWS) offer a reliable and valid set of metrics to appraise students’ proficiency and growth of microlevel, and to a lesser extent, macrolevel skills. For elementary students, TWW and WSC are the most appropriate metrics, with CWS being the preferred metric in secondary grades.

Historically, a combination of these three assessment methods were recommended, given that no single method demonstrated superiority over the others. Specifically, contemporary practice recommended utilization of analytic rubrics and WE-CBM for large-scale assessment with the latter used for monitoring progress during tiered supports. Further, reading assessment data will continue to be important to interpret concurrent with these writing data given the strong relationship between reading and writing skill acquisition.
Best practices in assessment methods, post COVID-19, will likely remain the same: a combination of analytic rubrics and WE-CBM. Assessment procedures post COVID-19, however, most likely will need to change given students received 75% of a typical, full year of academic instruction during 2019–2020 academic year (NASP, 2020). Specifically, schools and school psychologists should focus their return-to-school efforts on the provision of evidence-based literacy instruction, including writing, and robust class-wide interventions immediately, and should delay traditional writing screeners for a few weeks (e.g., 4–6 weeks). Doing so will prioritize providing high-quality instruction, in part to help make up for lost instructional time in the spring 2020, and deliver that instruction to all students assuming the level of risk for academic failure has been magnified due to that disrupted instruction.

As a consequence, school psychologists have the unique opportunity to expand their role toward a more comprehensive model of service delivery (Skalski et al., 2015). Specifically, school psychologists should be a part of the “all-hands-on-deck” approach to bolstering the quality of instruction delivered to all students around literacy, including writing, once schools return from the COVID-19 disruption. For some school psychologists, this comes as a welcome call to arms that previously was difficult to achieve. For others, this may be an unfamiliar and uncomfortable expansion of our role. But as educators with expertise in both psychology and education, we are uniquely equipped to offer consultative services to all students upon returning to school post COVID-19.

**CORE INSTRUCTION**

It is important for school psychologists to recall the corpus of evidentiary support around effective instruction, as these same practices should be ubiquitous across all academic content areas, including writing (e.g., Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2007). Specifically, a scaffolded approach to skill acquisition should be employed in which skills are initially modeled and then many opportunities to practice these skills are provided along with immediate, corrective feedback. Direct, explicit instruction using materials that are matched to students’ skills should be provided. Lessons that maximize active engagement, motivational strategies, and contingences for high rates of success should be delivered, as these practices are central to instruction during this skill acquisition phase. Objective goals for growth should be established with progress toward those goals monitored using reliable and valid indicators of mastery. Instruction should subsequently be modified based on trends in those data. Once skills are acquired, the focus of instruction switches to promoting fluency, generalization, and adaptation via multiple opportunities to independently practice these skills across content domains and instructional demands. Upon the return to school, school psychologists should avail themselves to serve as consultants and coaches to teachers as they deliver effective instruction to all students.

Specific to writing instruction, school psychologists should consult with teachers as they deliver literacy instruction to their students. Writing instruction is intricately related to reading instruction, so effective reading instruction will have important benefits for writing skill acquisition. The focus of writing instruction during the primary grades should emphasize microlevel skills (e.g., handwriting and copying in kindergarten; sentence-building in primary grades) while simultaneously fostering the important macrolevel skills specific to developmentally appropriate genres (e.g., narratives). During the intermediate grades (e.g., grades 3–6), a balance of microlevel and macrolevel skills is more common, with increasing emphasis placed on the latter within developmentally appropriate genres (e.g., narrative, expository). In the secondary grades, instructional emphasis largely shifts to the macrolevel skills within a range of genres (e.g., narrative, expository, argumentation). Across all grades, students who struggle with writing should receive intensified dosages of instruction and intervention on microlevel skills, although these practices should still be embedded within appropriate genres to support development of those macrolevel skills.

Further, regardless of focus of writing genre, high-quality instruction in writing explicitly teaches the stages of the writing process, from planning to drafting to revising/finalizing the finished product (Graham et al., 2019). This process of writing is recursive, with good writers cycling through the planning and drafting phases multiple times until the finished product is achieved. Again, school psychologists need to familiarize themselves with this process and ensure that it is explicitly taught at all grade levels.
School psychologists must be advocates for effective teaching practices across all content areas and, specifically, evidence-based writing instruction. While this has always been true of school psychologists, it is particularly important as schools return to face-to-face instruction after the COVID-19 disruption. Frankly, this is an opportunity for school psychologists to solidify an expanded role that most of us have advocated for with varying degrees of success. The likely high prevalence rate of students with skill deficits resulting from a 25% disruption in their instruction during the 2019–2020 academic year certainly warrants our assistance with core instruction. Failure to do so is an abdication of our ethical responsibility.

**CLASS-WIDE INTERVENTION WITH DELAYED ASSESSMENT**

Given the known historical base rates of poor writing skills (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), the disruption to approximately 25% of the 2019–2020 instructional calendar, and the limitations of screenings under these conditions (NASP 2020; VanDerHeyden, 2013), school psychologists should advocate for delaying universal screenings of academic skills upon returning to school post COVID-19. Instead, school psychologists’ efforts would be better served in advocating for evidence-based instructional practices in literacy, including writing. Further, we should advocate for class-wide interventions to be implemented that are known to result in robust improvements in writing, ensure that those practices are implemented with fidelity, and then promote assessment practices only after a period of time (e.g., 4–6 weeks) in which those class-wide interventions were in place. Doing so provides an opportunity for all students to receive and respond to high-quality instruction before educators appraise skill acquisition and risk of academic failure.

The list of evidence-based class-wide interventions for writing is too lengthy to review here, especially given that the focus of instruction shifts among micro- and macrolevel skills across the K–12 experience. For example, evidence-based handwriting interventions that focus on teaching the identification of letters, letter–sound correspondences, and how to write the letters would be appropriate for class-wide intervention in kindergarten and first grade. Conversely, teaching theme development and the cohesion and coherence of arguments in a persuasive writing would likely be a focus of class-wide intervention at the secondary level. Graham et al. (2019) offer a comprehensive review of the range of evidence-based writing interventions across the pre-K–12 span for interested readers.

There is, however, at least one evidence-based strategy to writing instruction that is applicable across many, if not most, grades and is thus deserving of specific mention here. It is likely that this approach, while not a panacea for mitigating risk of writing skill deficits for all pre-K–12 students, could be implemented on a large scale across many grades and to all students.

Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD; Graham et al., 2019) is a highly effective approach to teach students *what* to write, including both micro- and macrolevel skills, along with teaching students *how* to write. This is accomplished by promoting self-regulation strategies used while writing. Inclusion of self-regulation strategies in the direct, explicit instruction of the writing process creates writers who are better equipped to adapt their writing skills across genres and writing demands. More than 2 decades of empirical inquiry have established SRSD as a highly effective instructional approach for writing, with effect sizes of 1.17 for elementary students and 1.14 for secondary students (Graham, Harris, & McKeown, 2013).

SRSD uses a six-step, recursive process that helps make the very complex nature of writing, including correct use of micro- and macrolevel writing skills, more accessible to students. According to Graham et al. (2019), the six steps of SRSD are:

1. **Develop background knowledge.** Students are explicitly taught the vocabulary and concepts required to teach the specific writing task in the designated genre.
2. **Discuss it.** Students and teachers discuss the vocabulary of the writing task, the purpose of their writing, and the major components of their writing while reviewing models of that genre.
3. **Model it.** The teacher models writing within that specific task and genre while demonstrating self-regulatory practices via overt self-statements.
4. **Memorize it.** Students memorize the strategy within the writing task and genre with eventual internalization of that strategy.
5. **Support it.** Students are provided opportunities to use the strategy within the specific task and genre via scaffolded instruction, fading of supports, and immediate, corrective feedback.

6. **Independent use.** Teachers provide opportunities for students to utilize the strategy with other writing tasks and genres to promote generalization and adaption of skills.

Often SRSD is paired with graphic organizers to help students throughout the planning, drafting, and revising/finalizing process. Sample graphic organizers from the public domain are offered in Figures 1 and 2 for narrative and persuasive writing, respectively. Mnemonics are also often employed to teach genre-specific writing using the SRSD framework. Evidence-based mnemonics include POW (P = Pick my idea, O = Organize my notes, W = Write and say more; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006), POW + C-SPACE (C = Characters, S = Setting, P = Purpose, A = Action, C = Conclusion, E = Emotions; Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008), and TREE (Topic, Reasons [three or more], Examples/Explanations, Ending; Graham & Harris, 1989). The combination of graphic organizers and mnemonics embedded within SRSD and delivered to all students offers a robust approach to providing class-wide intervention at the start of return-to-school instruction post COVID-19. School psychologists should advocate for the implementation of these across grades and for all students and play a substantive role in implementation efforts.

**Figure 1. Sample Graphic Organizer for Narrative Writing**

![Story Map](image)

**Title:**

**Characters:**

**Setting:**

**Problem:**

**Solution:**
Considerations for Assessment, Instruction, and Intervention of Writing Skills Upon the Return to School

Figure 2. Sample Graphic Organizer for Persuasive Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persuasive Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your position on the topic:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact #1 to support your position:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact #2 to support your position:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact #3 to support your position:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Restate your position and summarize facts:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once evidence-based, high-yield, class-wide interventions such as SRSD are implemented for all students for approximately 4–6 weeks post COVID-19 return to school, school psychologists should then advocate for assessing all students’ writing skills using a combination of analytic rubrics with known psychometric strengths (e.g., Tindal & Hasbrouck, 1991). Further, WE-CBM should be administered to all students and scored using professionals trained to appropriate criterion. Administration of WE-CBM is low cost; however, scoring is more resource-intensive. The value of these data for all students to aid in instructional planning, however, outweighs the costs.

The combination of analytic rubric data and WE-CBM data will permit the identification of students who are responding to the class-wide intervention. Those students who are not responding favorably to the class-wide intervention would then be placed in intervention groups focused on specific needs, likely discrete microlevel skill deficits, and provided more intensive tiered supports. Importantly, however, these students should not be identified for and receive tiered supports until class-wide interventions have been implemented for a period of time, after which a gated assessment process is employed.
Resorting to traditional practices of screening at the beginning of the school year and, at best, superficial instruction in writing, will likely result in continued deficiencies in American students’ writing skills. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and its massive disruption to instruction for all students is unprecedented. Ameliorating the challenges to learning and development that students will face upon returning to face-to-face instruction, however, demands an equally unprecedented response. School psychologists should be integral partners in that response. The NASP Practice Model provides the framework for school psychologists to do just that. Specifically, school psychologists should refocus their professional practice upon the return to school to supporting high-quality core literacy instruction, including direct, explicit instruction in writing, deployment of high-yield class-wide writing interventions, and deferment of screening practices until class-wide interventions have had time to produce positive benefits for many students.

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