Chapter 6
Improving the Literacy Skills of Struggling Writers: The Role of Writing in RTI at the Secondary Level

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ABSTRACT
A focus on teaching effective written communication skills is a necessity in our nation’s schools. Students must develop good writing skills not only to ensure academic success but also to later thrive in the workplace and in society. For struggling writers, difficulties with written communication that emerged during elementary school will persist into middle school, high school, and beyond if effective interventions are not employed. Implementing a response to intervention (RTI) literacy model that promotes the integration of writing across the curriculum can help schools make huge strides in improving the motivations, skills, and outcomes of struggling writers. This chapter presents specific elements of effective writing instruction as well as instructional strategies that can be employed within an RTI framework to assist struggling writers schoolwide. The focus is on informing not only English/language arts teachers but also content area teachers on research-based classroom writing supports and practical tips for implementation.

INTRODUCTION

If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write. —National Commission on Writing (2003)

Our nation is in the midst of a literacy crisis. In response to this crisis, a great deal of attention has been given to increasing the reading proficiency of students, but much less attention has been focused on promoting gains in writing proficiency. Because the definition of literacy includes both reading and writing skills, we must recognize poor writing proficiency as an integral part of the national crisis, particularly
since a large number of students graduate from high school unable to write at even the most basic levels that colleges and employers expect (Graham & Perin, 2007b).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), only about one-quarter (24%) of students in Grades 8 and 12 performed at the proficient level in writing—meaning they clearly demonstrated the ability to accomplish the communicative purpose of their writing—on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2011 writing assessment. The majority of students—54% of eighth-graders and 52% of twelfth-graders—performed at the basic level in writing, which indicates only partial mastery of the fundamental knowledge and skills for proficient work at each grade level. Finally, a depressing 20% of eighth-graders and 21% of twelfth-graders performed at the below-basic level in writing, and only 3% of eighth- and twelfth-graders performed at the advanced level, which represents superior performance.

One of the primary goals of the Response to Intervention (RTI) service delivery model in secondary schools has been to address poor literacy. However, the fact that only one-quarter of eighth-grade students scored at the proficient level on the NAEP writing assessment indicates that writing instruction in middle schools is not adequate; even more disturbing is the fact that the percentage is the same for twelfth-graders, implying that students who enter high school as struggling writers will leave the same way because writing instruction is lacking at that level as well. Recent ACT® company data confirm this, revealing that 40% of those who took the ACT writing exam in the high school class of 2016 lacked the writing skills necessary to successfully complete a college-level English composition course (Goldstein, 2017).

In order to make greater strides in addressing literacy deficiencies overall, dedicated attention must be given to increasing writing proficiency at the secondary level. Schools need to employ specific writing-related assessments and differentiated writing instruction to address the needs of students who lack the necessary skills to write effectively. Thus, this chapter focuses on examining ways that secondary schools can improve the motivation, skills, and outcomes of struggling writers through RTI.

The Reading-Writing Connection

In the RTI model, reading and writing are often lumped together, and for valid reasons. Certainly, reading and writing are complementary—reading plays an important role in learning to write, and vice versa. In addition, reading and writing often draw from the same pool of knowledge and abilities. For example, as is the case with reading, writing skills require a degree of competency with cognitive structures; more specifically, writing well requires the ability to access the mental processes of recognition, memorization, classification, spatial orientation, temporal orientation, and metaphorical thinking. Finally, teachers who make the connection explicit between reading and writing will strengthen the literacy development of their students (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, 2009).

However, even though reading and writing are clearly connected and are both vital components of literacy, many researchers are beginning to recognize that treating writing as a separate entity within RTI is important. One reason for the needed individual focus is that although reading and writing development typically runs parallel, the two will not always go hand in hand; for example, many students may not struggle with reading but still have severe difficulties with writing (Graham & Perin, 2007b). In addition, reading and writing are fundamentally different: “While readers form a mental representation of thoughts written by someone else, writers formulate their own thoughts, organize them, and create a written record of them using the conventions of spelling and grammar” (Graham & Perin, 2007b, p. 8).
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