

5-Step Process to Help a Struggling Writer Succeed

Fran Santoro Hamilton

Writing is an extremely complex process that requires the brain to do many different things at once: form an idea, put that idea into words, think about how to spell those words, consider what to capitalize and how to punctuate, and remember how to form letters (or where to find them on a keyboard). In addition, while one sentence is being written, the brain is likely racing ahead to consider the *next* sentence! It is no wonder that so many people—children and adults alike—struggle with writing.

The key to mastering the writing process is to break it into manageable segments so that the writer can focus on one task at a time. For example, while the first draft is being written, focus should be on getting the ideas down; all thoughts about mechanical correctness should be temporarily set aside. That important issue will receive attention later on.

The following 5-step process is geared toward helping struggling writers overcome their reluctance and experience success. The steps involve planning, dictating, copying, writing from dictation, and writing independently. All of these steps will be followed on one short piece of writing. The five-step process might be completed within one session or might be spread out over several days.

Depending on the ability level of the student, the composition may range from one sentence to a short paragraph. If the student gets involved in planning and dictating a lengthy piece, select one paragraph to use in Steps 3, 4, and 5—or at least complete these three steps on one paragraph before moving on to another one.

(Although masculine pronouns have been used for convenience in describing this process, they are intended to be universal and all-inclusive.)

1. Planning. Talk with the person about what he will write. Instead of supplying a lot of information yourself, *get the writer to do the talking*. Talking provides valuable rehearsal for writing. Your role is to ask a lot of questions. Through questioning, help the writer discover which parts of the composition could benefit from further development, which parts may not be relevant to the current purpose, which parts are not clear, which order of ideas is most effective, etc. (This step is helpful to *any* writer, regardless of his level of experience and expertise.)

2. Dictating. Have the person dictate his composition to you or to another “scribe.” Write down what the person says. This frees the author to focus on content without having to think about spelling, capitalization, punctuation, letter formation, or other subskills.

After the person has finished dictating, read the composition aloud so that the author can hear how it sounds, focusing on the content in relation to the planning that was done in Step 1. Ask if there are any changes he wants to make. If there are, make them. It is fine

if, in addition, the author wants to read the composition himself.

Since the student will later copy what you have written from his dictation, this step is most critical to having a piece of writing that is mechanically correct. Even though the author has been relieved of the physical process of writing (and the mechanical errors he might make have been prevented), other errors can still creep in. He might use a wrong form of a verb, a sentence fragment, etc. Errors should be corrected.

The correction process can take different forms. Some errors might simply be corrected by you and not mentioned (unless, of course, the student asks why the written form differs from what he dictated). Other corrections may be discussed with the student. Corrections in this category should be limited to a *few* that involve concepts somewhat familiar to the student or at least within his understanding (things he is “ready” to learn). Generally it is best for such discussions to take place after the dictation has been completed so that the student’s train of thought is not derailed during composition.

3. Copying. Have the person recopy the correct composition (or the target section), paying close attention to capitalization, punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, etc. The copy could be either handwritten or typed on the computer, whichever would be easier for the student. When the student has finished copying, have him check carefully for accuracy. Then check it yourself, helping the student correct errors. You might help the student find errors by saying something like “Is there a word in this line that should be capitalized?” or “You have this word spelled two different ways—which one is right?” For errors involving concepts that the student is not yet able to understand, you can simply supply the correct form or you can leave the error uncorrected.

4. Writing from Dictation. Have the person write the composition, or target section, from your dictation. If you suspect the person is unable to spell some words that will be needed, *make those spellings available*. Let the student assume responsibility for capitalization and punctuation rules he has mastered. For rules that are less familiar to him, give a brief reminder of the correct form. Explanations are not needed at this point (unless the student asks for them); the point is to have the student use correct forms.

When the student has finished writing, have him read the composition aloud, and perhaps silently, checking for correctness. Point out some of the things the student has done *correctly*, especially those that involve newly acquired (or developing) skills. You might also want to help students recognize errors (as in Step 3). *It is not necessary to find and correct every error.* The point is to gradually be acquiring skills.

5. Writing Independently. Have the student write the composition, or the target section, without referring to earlier versions. (The spelling list may still be used.) *The goal is not to use exactly the same words but to effectively express the ideas that have been rehearsed.*

When the person has finished writing, have him read the composition aloud, and silently if he wishes, checking for content and errors. Let him correct what he wants to correct.

Talk with him about the things he has done correctly, especially regarding content and new skills that are emerging.

This process is geared toward helping students use English *correctly*. *Errors are prevented* by having students dictate their composition. Correct forms are reinforced when students *copy a correct version* of their composition. *Spellings of difficult words are supplied* in Steps 4 and 5 so that the student can spell the words correctly. Especially in the latter steps, feedback focuses on what students are doing *right*.

The more students use English correctly, the more familiar they will become with the correct forms—and the more likely they will be to use those forms in future writing. An English handbook enables students to quickly and easily get the information they need in order to use English correctly.

Biographical Information

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Fran Santoro Hamilton's thirty-five years as teacher, writer, and editor have enabled her to distill the English language to its essentials. Fran is the author of Hands-On English, an English handbook that makes grammar visual, and she cosponsors The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration. Fran provides many free resources at www.GrammarAndMore.com.