“What works?”
As teachers, it’s a question we often ask ourselves about teaching writing. We consider questions such as:

- How can the writing process, including prewriting, product goals, and inquiry, become more meaningful for students?
- What is the best way to use models in the classroom?
- What can targeted strategies, word processing, or collaboration do for students’ writing?
- How can writing-to-learn develop students’ overall writing skills?
- How can sentence combining and summarizing benefit writing?

Through teacher-friendly language and classroom examples, Deborah Dean helps answer these kinds of questions by taking a close look at research-based practices that have proved to be effective and interpreting the principles behind them.

Based on the Carnegie Institute’s influential Writing Next report, What Works in Writing Instruction will help teachers apply the findings to their unique classroom environments. We all must find the right mix of activities for our own students, and this book offers the best of what is currently known about effective writing instruction to help students improve their writing abilities.
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Introduction

Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Yet every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers. In addition, every school day 7,000 young people drop out of high school [. . .] many of them because they lack the basic literacy skills to meet the growing demands of the high school curriculum.

—Writing Next, Steve Graham and Dolores Perin

The claim that students’ writing skills (and, consequently, writing instruction) are in a crisis has been raised for over a hundred years. The epigraph that begins this introduction is the opening text of the Executive Summary of Writing Next (Graham and Perin 2007), and reflects the continuation of those claims. The Writing Next report identifies current studies to support its assertion of a serious continuing problem with writing and writing instruction. These recent studies and their findings suggest that, even if we aren’t getting any worse, we aren’t doing as much as we could to provide students with the best writing instruction possible. That’s where the recommendations summarized in the Graham and Perin report come in.

Writing Next provides the first large-scale review of writing instruction since Hillocks’s report in 1986—and a lot about writing and writing instruction has changed in those twenty-plus years. Graham and Perin use meta-analysis, a “large-scale statistical review of research” (4), to determine what teachers can depend on as research-proven elements of effective instruction. Through their analysis, the authors found eleven such elements:
1. writing strategies
2. summarization
3. collaborative writing
4. specific product goals
5. word processing
6. sentence combining
7. prewriting
8. inquiry activities
9. process writing approach
10. study of models
11. writing for content learning

These elements, we know now from research, can improve students’ writing.

How can the results of the Graham and Perin report benefit writing instruction? Mostly the answer to that question has to do with teachers, because they can make a huge difference to students and their writing. In fact, “teacher expertise is the most significant factor in student success” (National 59). What teachers know and how they put their knowledge to use is crucial—that’s why knowing these eleven elements provides such a good foundation for effective instruction. Teachers tell me that they are having their students write more than they used to, and that’s a good response to recommendations made in recent years that encourage more writing in schools. But Graham and Perin’s review of research shows uneven findings on the effectiveness of simply causing more writing. In fact, the authors suggest (and I agree) that “providing more opportunities to write without effective instruction and motivation is not enough to improve writing quality” (Writing Next 26). We must get students writing, true. But we must also provide them with instruction about writing if we expect them to develop as they can. Teachers make a difference, and with the help of these eleven elements, we can begin to make an even bigger one.

Regarding the eleven elements, Graham and Perin provide a caveat: “All of the elements are supported by rigorous research, but [...] even when used together, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum” (Writing Next 4). This is important to remember. What it means is that teachers must consider how to use the different elements in varying degrees to address the specific needs of students in their classrooms. Graham and Perin acknowledge that “researchers do not know what combination or how much of each of the recommended activities is needed to maximize writing instruction for adolescents in general
or low-achieving writers in particular” (12). There isn’t a one-size-fits-all program. Instead, these principles or elements contribute to an effective program, and effective writing curricula should reflect these elements to varying degrees. Again, teacher knowledge—also of students—is essential in using the report’s findings to improve student writing.

One limitation of the Writing Next report is that it doesn’t recognize other practices that might benefit instruction, either because sufficient research isn’t available, or because the studies that are currently available don’t fit into a report like this one. Such practices might include instruction in text structure or vocabulary, for instance, or teachers’ use of rubrics and structured responses to student writing. Even the workshop approach, very popular with teachers, isn’t represented in this report. All of these practices might be beneficial elements of effective writing instruction, but Writing Next, based as it is on the meta-analysis of specific types of studies, cannot recommend them. For these reasons, the authors acknowledge that the eleven elements don’t constitute a complete writing curriculum. Instead, “educators need to test mixes of intervention elements to find the ones that work best for students with different needs” (12). Teachers who know their students will realize that some current practices do work; teachers should not disregard their own professional knowledge simply because an element of instruction does not show up in this report.

Additionally, these eleven elements don’t represent a single theoretical approach or ideology. Although some elements grow out of specific theoretical foundations, they don’t necessarily still represent those. Because they represent different theories, beliefs, and practices, the eleven elements cannot alone be a curriculum. Instead, depending on how they are used, the elements can serve a curriculum: they can work on behalf of almost any approach that is theoretically sound. Teachers should be aware of this possibility—and should use the elements in ways that best serve the needs of their own situations and students. Because the elements don’t represent a single theory or philosophy, they can help teachers who use any of a number of philosophical approaches. That said, these elements are not simple add-ons or Band-Aids. They should be considered thoughtfully in relation to teachers’ already effective practices.

What follows in this book is an explanation of the elements reported in Writing Next to be effective, with each element presented in one of the next eleven chapters. Although I have organized the chapters in the order mentioned in Writing Next, they may be read in any order that seems best to the reader. Each of the eleven chapters first provides an overview of the element, with some explanation of the history and ideas behind it. As I investigated the research and history associated with the elements, I found that many (if not all) had been used in classrooms, some for a long time. I also discovered that teachers had reported
varying success with the elements—and unsuccessful uses seemed to be related to the way that the element had been implemented. When teachers found success, certain specific principles had been part of their practice. So the second section of each chapter lists and explains the principles that research suggests should be practiced for the element to achieve its greatest benefits.

Following the principles section of each chapter, I include classroom applications of the element that teachers can use or adapt to their own situations. Many of the applications come from my own experience teaching grades 7–12, but some are also from other teachers’ experiences as well. The applications are explained in detail to help teachers envision how to implement or adapt the practice in some way in their classes. Finally, each chapter concludes with an annotated bibliography of additional resources for teachers who would like more information on that specific element. If an element is not practiced by a teacher, or is unfamiliar, the ideas and books suggested at the end of each chapter should provide both a place to start implementation and the resources to learn more.

My intent is for readers to choose individual paths through this book—each person finding a path that fits her or his needs. If an element is new or little known, I hope all the sections of a chapter will provide the necessary foundation to begin to implement that practice. If an element is already in place in a teacher’s classroom, I hope the principles section might present some ideas for refining the approach or the applications section provide some new ways to use it. The references at the end of each chapter, I hope, will provide a stepping-off point for teachers to generate more ideas for implementing the element effectively with their own students.

Although the first eleven chapters might be read in any order, the last chapter of the book serves a concluding purpose to all: it ties together the eleven elements, explaining principles that seem to repeat themselves throughout the elements and suggesting ways for all eleven to work together in a classroom. Ultimately, I hope that this book in its entirety supports teachers in their desire to help students write more, and write more effectively.
Writing Strategies

Strategic writing instruction is a creative business.

—James Collins

Overview

I was watching my four-year-old granddaughter write a “book.” At her request, I had stapled together several pieces of paper for her, and then she had proceeded to tell me what she was going to write on each page. She knew the correspondence between sounds and letters, but at one point she stopped in the middle of a word, said the letter she needed next, “E,” and pointed to a word carved out of wood that was part of the room’s decor. “There’s an e,” she said. “It’s silent.” Then she bent to her paper to write the e.

Another granddaughter is also a “book” writer (see Figure 1.1). When she wrote her first book at age seven, she had her mother staple together several pieces of paper. Talking to me on the phone, my granddaughter said she was writing a book that was going to be thirteen pages long. She explained that the first page would have the title and a picture, and she told me her work schedule (so many pages a day) and the shape of the story (so many sentences on a page). Both of these girls, even as beginning writers, show that they are strategic writers: they use models, they make plans, and they talk about their writing with another writer.

I, too, am a strategic writer, using similar strategies at some times, and (I hope!) using more sophisticated strategies at others. More important, I am aware of the strategies I use, and I use them fairly consciously. As I’ve written the various chapters of this book, I’ve used many strategies that served me well in prior writing experiences. For the most part, I conducted my research by
doing traditional inquiry in journals and databases (and googling key terms). I also used the references listed in the articles and books I found to gather more information on key questions. I took notes in a Word document, reviewed them several times to determine key themes and patterns, and wrote an outline by hand. Then, after I had drafted it on the computer, I read my writing aloud, making changes as I went. Eventually I printed a hard copy to continue revision, and I asked colleagues to read parts or all of a draft. I also set deadlines for dif-
ferent aspects of my writing, monitoring my progress in meeting those goals, adjusting when needed, and rewarding myself when I reached certain goals: a soft drink if I wrote for two hours straight; lunch with a friend when note-taking for a chapter was done; thirty minutes of reading for pleasure if I met my daily writing goals. And as I prepared to draft this chapter, I was tempted to employ avoidance strategies: extra and unnecessary reviews of my notes, a glance at my email, getting that bottle of water I might need later, and so on. All of these are strategies that I’ve used in the past.

Beyond the strategies I’ve used before, I have adapted and developed new strategies that helped me with this specific writing task. I wrote the chapters not in the order they are found in the book, but in an order that fit my schedule and my own inclinations. For chapters on topics referencing research that was less familiar to me, I reviewed my notes several more times than usual—annotating them with a code to help me identify patterns or themes. For several chapters that I wrote later in the process, rather than work from a handwritten outline as I had earlier, I began inserting a rough outline (as a series of headings) in the Word document; this would eventually become the chapter. I found that drafting at home was more effective for me than it had been in the past, when I did most of my writing in my office. I used more self-regulating strategies this time, partly because of the size of the project, and partly because so many unexpected events arose during the time I had scheduled to complete the draft, requiring me to revise my original interim deadlines. Because I have experience with writing, and because I wanted to complete the project (even if at times the writing seemed so difficult that I tried to avoid it), I was willing to use old strategies and devise new ones to help me accomplish my goal: writing this book. And that’s exactly what writing strategies (some of which I have just highlighted) are supposed to do. They are supposed to help writers accomplish their writing goals more effectively.

Collins reminds us that there is no “master list of [. . .] strategies” (210). There are some that many people find helpful, and some that are more helpful to a specific individual or task. Strategies all serve to solve problems in writing—if by problems, we mean the questions or challenges that can occur during the writing process. Researchers classify strategies in three broad categories: (1) cognitive learning strategies, (2) writing strategies, and (3) self-regulatory strategies. Cognitive learning strategies encourage learning in general, but also aid writing. Writing strategies connect specifically to writing tasks. Self-regulatory strategies help writers stay with a task and find ways to be successful with it. Students need to learn and use strategies in each of these categories in order to develop as writers. I noted a variety of strategies in my description of my work, and if I were to classify them, I would label them as follows (Table 1.1):
Before we teach writing strategies, we should acknowledge that students may come to us unaware of the strategies they already possess; it’s our job to help them identify and make controllable any effective strategies they already use. Sometimes students’ writing strategies can be tricky to identify because they are invisible; even experienced writers may be unaware of many of their own strategies. Part of our teaching may involve helping students recognize their invisible strategies. In explaining another aspect of strategies, Pressley, Harris, and Marks inform us that they “are not rigidly formulated, exacting cognitive rules; rather, they entail personal interpretation” (16), revealing that the same or similar strategy may look different when different people use it. That ability to be individualized makes writing strategies powerful for writers, and is something both teachers and students need to remember: strategies should be personalized.

Many benefits result from teaching students to use strategies in writing. First, when we participate in any purposeful and goal-directed activity, especially writing, the employment of strategies can help us accomplish our goals more effectively. We want that for our students. Our experience as teachers shows us that use of effective strategies can be a distinguishing characteristic between experienced and novice writers, and we want our students to develop as writers. Additionally, strategy instruction can also “increase knowledge about the characteristics of good writing and form positive attitudes about writing and [students’] writing capabilities” (Graham, Harris, and Troia 2). We have probably all observed how students with few strategies approach a writing task: they may begin writing what comes to mind (what Scardamalia and Bereiter call knowledge telling) or they may never complete the writing task. They don’t know what to do: how to question the task or situation; how to gather the requisite

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Learning</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Self-Regulatory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry in journals/books</td>
<td>Outlining by hand</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Reviewing notes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotating notes</td>
<td>Asking colleagues to review</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Outlining on computer</td>
<td>Selecting a different order</td>
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<td>Adding additional rereadings</td>
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<td>Drafting at home</td>
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TABLE 1.1. Types of Strategies for Writing
Writing Strategies

information; how to learn the expected structure of the writing; how to revise to ensure a quality written product. They have no effective strategies to use. Yet, with instruction, students can become strategic writers.

Strategic writers are prepared to write in all situations and in multiple genres. Some teachers, in support of a natural development approach to writing, believe that getting students to write often is all that is needed to help them develop as writers. And frequent writing is certainly an important element of writing development. But as Graham and Harris point out, “Frequent and extended writing is necessary but not sufficient for promoting writing development” (“It Can Be Taught” 417). Students need more. They need strategies. And instruction in strategies provides the essential extra element for developing writers by moving them beyond putting words on paper to considering the cognitive processes involved—and the tools that will help them address those processes. Strategy instruction helps students learn multiple methods for solving a variety of problems they may face in all kinds of writing situations, not just the kind of writing they do for school. Helping students learn and practice strategies, as well as the regulatory practices that will help them apply those strategies effectively in a variety of future situations, is at the heart of strategy instruction.

One challenge of strategy instruction is transfer, the use of strategies in situations beyond the one where students initially learn the strategy. In my own experience, students seem so trained to see strategies as attached to specific products that they don’t even consider transfer. Troia explains that one difficulty with transfer might be that students may not be mindful enough to realize that we expect them to transfer strategies. That’s a possibility. In some ways, the constructs of school encourage students to compartmentalize, so they do it even when we don’t want them to. Being strategic writers also requires effort—and sometimes students don’t want to put out the effort to be strategic. Sometimes they aren’t interested enough in the writing to care. But sometimes, they just don’t see any value in writing in general. Whatever the reason, transfer of strategy use can be challenging.

Strategy instruction is problematic for some researchers because of its use of explicit instruction, something they see as counter to more student-centered teaching, such as process approaches or constructivism. Pressley, Harris, and Marks counter these criticisms by asserting that “[g]ood strategy instruction could never be cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all teaching as implied in constructivist educator critiques of strategy teaching” (13). In good strategy instruction, students construct knowledge through their interactions with a knowledgeable adult (the teacher) and with peers; we model and explain strategies, and then encourage students to individualize them as they apply them in a variety of situations. These are certainly constructivist behaviors. Collins explains that
“the only important difference between good strategy instruction and the generally accepted tenets of constructivist pedagogy is in the degree of explicitness strategy instructors bring to what is being learned” (62). When explicitness is enhanced by multiple interactions and adaptations, this issue is of less concern.

Two primary models for strategy instruction have been proposed. The one most referenced in research studies is Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD). It has six defined steps that include building background knowledge, discussing and modeling the strategy, memorizing it (because most of the tested strategies are based on acronyms), and then supporting its practice until students’ independent use is possible (Graham, Harris, and Troia). Despite its well-defined procedure, Sexton, Harris, and Graham encourage teachers to adapt SRSD instruction to meet the needs of their students, showing their awareness of the need for adaptation after explicit instruction (308). In a second model, Collins proposes a more general plan that includes identifying a strategy worth teaching, introducing it through modeling, and then providing scaffolding while students learn the strategy until they can use it independently (64).

Although these frameworks offer different options for strategy instruction, they share common features that help us understand how best to teach writing strategies. They both emphasize modeling on the part of the teacher and practice on the part of students, practice that is supported in the beginning and then moved to independence with time. They both also recognize that we need to help students see the variety of strategies available to them, and see how the strategies can be individualized by writers in different situations. These are key features that should be found in all writing strategy instruction.

Embedded in both models of strategy instruction is a key factor in strategic writing instruction: the recognition of different kinds of knowledge in learning writing strategies. These three kinds of knowledge are declarative, procedural, and conditional. Declarative knowledge involves the “what” of a strategy: what it is, and what it is supposed to do. Collins notes that “declarative knowledge gives us information” (53). In the SRSD model, this is included in the first stage of building background knowledge, and might involve our explaining the strategy to the students and noting what it can do for a writer. It might include our modeling the strategy for the students. But declarative knowledge can also be engaged by having students deliberately work through a strategy as a class or in small groups, and then discussing what they see as its structure and purpose. In this way, we can guide students to understand the value of a strategy through their involvement with it, not only as something we say is useful.

Procedural knowledge is the “how” of a strategy: how it works. And procedural knowledge is best obtained by practicing a strategy. All models of strategy
Writing Strategies

instruction urge the practice of strategies in pursuit of authentic goals (that is, related to a writing task, not just as stand-alone practices) and in conjunction with support from an experienced user of the strategy. In fact, some research suggests that teachers who don’t use the strategies themselves might be less effective in their instruction because they can’t be as supportive of students’ gaining procedural knowledge of a strategy. In other words, even we need procedural knowledge. Mostly, procedural knowledge means that students need to “feel” how a strategy works for them, not just to learn how it works once, but also to know how it might be useful for them in other situations.

Conditional knowledge is the knowledge that relates to transfer—and that is essential to strategy instruction. It is the “when” of a strategy: when—or in what other situations—might this strategy help me? As Collins states, “It is conditional knowledge that helps orchestrate declarative and procedural knowledge to achieve goals. Control over performance resides in the combination of declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge” (53). The point of strategy instruction is not for students to be able to use a strategy on the writing task under consideration during the strategy practice, but for them to be able to use it independently in other writing situations. And that is what conditional knowledge can do for them. Good strategy instruction, then, would include all three elements in teaching practices.

Some traps show up in strategy instruction, however, that we need to recognize. One has to do with the form that strategies take. For instance, some strategies are practiced using graphic organizers or other handouts. The problem is that students may view the handout itself as the strategy, and not realize that the strategy is the thinking that the handout is meant to teach. In other words, if I want to teach my students a planning strategy for a compare-contrast essay, I might have them use a Venn diagram to organize their ideas. But the diagram itself is not the strategy; instead, the strategy is the way the diagram asks students to think of how the items under consideration are similar or different. Students need to see the activity/handout/practice as a way of thinking, not as simply a thing to do because we ask it of them. The handout with the two overlapping circles is only a tool to implement the thinking that is the real strategy.

Overall, then, a key to teaching writing with a strategic approach is to remember that the focus is not on teaching strategies, but on helping students become strategic writers who are able to use and adapt strategies to their individual needs and purposes. It’s important to remember that there is no “set of strategies that guarantee effective writing” (Graham and Harris, Making ix). Instead, we must see that strategies vary by the needs of writers (both beginning and more experienced) and the writing tasks they engage. As students and
teachers learn to approach writing tasks with a strategic mindset, they are likely to discover and create many meaningful strategies to help them solve their writing problems.

**Principles**

**Context**

To be effective, strategy instruction should occur in authentic contexts that are responsive to students’ needs. If strategies are taught in isolation, it’s possible that students will see them “reduced to a set of memorized writing principles, scripts, or rules” (Englert et al. 364). This is the exact opposite of what strategy instruction is supposed to teach. To provide an effective context for writing strategy instruction, we should (1) make sure strategy instruction fits into the larger curriculum, (2) create an effective classroom environment, and (3) carefully design the kinds of tasks for which students are asked to use strategies.

In terms of curricular design, strategy instruction works especially well when combined with a process approach to writing. Teachers who approach writing instruction from a process perspective already have an effective curricular context in place. When we incorporate strategy instruction with a process approach, students benefit because they can see the effects of strategy use throughout the various aspects of the writing process. Because strategy instruction provides explicit teaching about goals, skills, and processes, it can supplement the benefits available from a process approach: “Where process teaching believes writing abilities are naturally acquired by everyone, strategic writing instruction ensures that they will be learned, even when acquisition is difficult” (Collins x). Together, strategy instruction and process can create an instructional context that engages and meets the learning needs of a wide variety of students. Together they can enhance students’ acquisition of strategies to aid their writing development.

Some of the context important to strategy instruction also involves the classroom environment, including the teacher’s place in it. Graham and Harris assert that strategy instruction should be “responsive to the teacher’s understanding of the learners and the task” (Making 41). For that to be the case, we must be attentive to what students need as they work through writing tasks. This could include, according to Pressley, Harris, and Marks, making sure that “students know that failures to understand are natural and that seeking clarification is intelligent” (14). For students to know that failures may be part of the learning process, the classroom must be a supportive, predictable place that values students’
efforts. Creating this climate may not be easy. Sometimes I have shared my own “false starts” (failures?) as a way for students to see that I understand the difficulty of writing well and the importance of trying again and again until something works. My own struggles help them see that it’s okay to not always “get it right” at first.

As part of the classroom context, Garner suggests that a teacher’s overall classroom philosophy also has some influence on the effectiveness of strategic instruction. In general, when students believe that effort can improve performance, and that there is value in learning and trying, they use strategies more than when they think the intent of the class is for students to compete with other students or to perform tasks that don’t require much effort (521). So the overall impression that students have of the class might enhance or detract from strategy instruction. What matters in our class? Or what do students think matters? Effort or outcome, learning or competition? Students’ sense of the value of effort is certainly conveyed in many subtle ways, but it can also be conveyed by specific classroom practices. For instance, if we provide opportunities for writing that allows students to take risks without fear of failure, they are more likely to see effort and learning as valued. Additionally, I have found that allowing (even encouraging) revisions after the grade has been given helps students see that learning to write is a continuing process rather than a one-shot exercise. Such practices help create a context in which students are more likely to use writing strategies.

We also should ensure that students see the classroom environment as a place where they can work on writing in a social setting. When strategies are taught in isolation, outside of social situations, they risk becoming just “things to do,” not ways to solve problems. In fact, Collins asserts that “no amount of strategic writing instruction will help if students are not full participants in classroom communities” (213). We help to create this social context for learning strategies by encouraging students to see writing as a social act, and by encouraging students to work with each other and with us in their writing and learning. Such social interaction allows students to consider the impact that environmental strategies have on writing, as they learn how others in their groups prefer to write. Additionally, writing with others (in one way or another) can encourage the use of self-regulatory strategies, as students set goals and monitor their progress toward those goals. Cognitive learning strategies, such as inquiry and review of learning prior to writing, are enhanced through the talk that is essential to social interaction.

The kinds of assignments that we give constitute another element of the context of strategy learning because they influence how effectively students will learn a strategic approach to writing. For one thing, if students aren’t interested...
in the task, if it isn’t engaging, they will be unlikely to do the kind of thinking that allows for strategic approaches, even if they do complete the task. Paris and Paris note that assignments designed to engage strategic behavior are those that

1. are intrinsically interesting;
2. allow personal ownership to some extent;
3. connect to students’ lives outside of school;
4. promote collaboration;
5. encourage quality writing through high expectations;
6. provide “consistent support for students to meet those expectations” (93).

In other words, creating effective writing tasks to encourage strategy use is not a simple matter. Some tasks that might meet these criteria are explained throughout this book, but one example might be students’ creation of a public service announcement. Gardner suggests having students choose a topic or issue or idea, conduct inquiry, and then create public service announcements that would be broadcast each morning for a month along with the daily intercom announcements (80). In groups, students could create a month-long series of such announcements, all different but related. An assignment of this nature meets all the requirements of the Paris and Paris list—and encourages students to use strategies as they complete it.

To encourage strategy use, assignments can’t be too familiar or easy. If students can complete an assignment without much thought, they are unlikely to use the kind of thoughtfulness that makes strategies useful. Graham and Harris suggest that writing about personal experience, for example, may be one of these assignments that doesn’t encourage strategic behavior because of its familiarity or ease (“It Can Be Taught” 417). Even with a familiar assignment, though, we can “pump it up” to make it more complex and therefore encourage strategy use. For example, with personal narratives, a genre that students are more familiar with, requiring them to add informative content or present the narrative as a digital story could encourage strategy use. Assignments, then, should be a little beyond the range of what students are used to doing, both in content and genre, so that students need to stretch a bit. At the same time, they can’t be so difficult as to overwhelm students. Strategies help writers solve problems, but if a writing task either doesn’t present a problem or presents too many problems, it’s unlikely to promote strategic behaviors.
Scaffolding

Scaffolding is an essential component of effective strategy instruction that begins with teacher instruction in and modeling of the target strategies; it continues with collaboration between the teacher and students, as students practice the target strategies.

To begin scaffolding, we must engage students. This can happen from either of two directions: (1) the teacher shows how the strategy relates to the task students are working on, or (2) the teacher explains the purpose of the strategy in general, and then lets students use it to complete a writing task. Some explanation of a strategy can happen through direct instruction in mini-lessons, but it can also happen in small-group discussions as students discover some elements of a strategy together. Sometimes I ask students to work through a strategy first, and then, after they’ve experienced it, we discuss its effectiveness and use in other situations. At other times I might introduce a strategy by name, explain how I think it will help students in their writing, and then let them practice it—first as a class and then individually. Either way, talking about a strategy is an important element of scaffolding toward students’ eventual use of it.

Teacher modeling is another essential element of the scaffolding needed for effective strategy instruction. More than the explanations that may precede this part of instruction, modeling is helpful in “exploring with students the range of possibilities” that each strategy entails (Collins 63). While modeling strategy practices for students, we can discuss with students the ways that strategies could be adapted to fit both individual needs and the needs of different writing tasks. So, for example, when I model the says-does strategy (a way to annotate texts) with my students (Dean, Strategic 65–68), I work first as a whole class, guiding students’ responses. Then I have students practice in small groups before they try it individually. After students have applied the strategy to their own writing, I ask them how they might use it in other situations, and I share how I have found it useful in my own writing experiences. My explicit modeling—the class activity—and my implicit modeling—sharing my own uses of the strategy—serve as scaffolds for students in acquiring strategies they can use independently.

After teacher explanations and modeling, students need guided practice where we support them in practicing the strategies. Research shows that “progressing directly from adult modeling to independent student performance does not produce general application of strategies” (Pressley, Harris, and Marks 9). In between, students need supported practice. And if students struggle with writing, Sexton, Harris, and Graham assert that this guided practice “appears
to be critical to realizing the full potential of writing strategies” (308). To be successful with strategy instruction, then, we can’t neglect this element of scaffolding: supported practice. For me, this has meant giving my students time to write and practice strategies in class. When they do this, I can move about the room, making sure they are able to implement the strategies and individualize them to serve their own purposes. Sometimes I have asked students to give me a little piece of their writing, a paragraph to review during the evening, so I can see if they understand the principles. For instance, when my tenth graders were working with explaining symbolism, we practiced writing paragraphs as a class using a simple strategy: identify the symbol, explain how it works in a piece of literature, and then show how the use of the symbol enhances the overall themes or ideas of the literature. After we’d worked as a class, we read another piece of literature that provided content for students to write their own paragraphs in class—drafts I could review that evening to know if students were ready to write more extensively on literary symbols. I found that if I neglected this supported practice, students tended to get home and then not know what to do. Fewer students completed the task, and even fewer completed it successfully.

For some teachers, guided practice also involves conferencing with individual writers as they attempt the strategies and helping each student adapt the strategy to his or her own needs. In this way, we can recognize what Collins calls a writer’s “problematic moment” (135) that would allow us to help students find strategic solutions. Obviously, when we have hundreds of students, such individualization—an important element of strategy instruction—is difficult to achieve. But the classroom community can also be used as an element of supported instruction when students work with each other, an idea supported by Englert and colleagues, who assert that “participation in a writing community contributes to the overall success of the strategy instruction” (340). It’s important that this sense of community be part of the classroom environment, so that we can use it for scaffolding strategy use. What Wong and colleagues call “interactive dialogues” among students can be a part of the scaffolding needed for effective strategy instruction (197). When teachers and students negotiate meaning and take important roles in classroom talk, strategy instruction is more likely to be effective.

In general, scaffolding means helping students through the process of writing in authentic situations, working on tasks where they are motivated and where they face challenges that encourage strategy use. In such situations, we use our knowledge of students and tasks to help students see how they can achieve their goals in individually meaningful ways. As Collins explains, “strategy instruction is good coaching” (209), and coaching is a good metaphor for the scaffolded help essential to writing strategy instruction.
Reflection

An essential component of strategy instruction must be reflection or conditional knowledge, a term coined by Paris, Lipson, and Wixson to represent the “knowledge about when and why to apply various strategies” (Collins 52). Other researchers call this kind of knowledge metacognition, which Welch defines as “writers’ awareness and implementation of their repertoire of cognitive resources to complete a task or solve a problem” (120). So whatever term is used, the concept is a kind of thinking about thinking, and thinking about the choices we make as writers—and how they influence our performance.

Reflection is used to achieve a primary goal of strategy instruction: transfer, or the ability to use a strategy in situations beyond the one where the strategy was learned. Research shows the value of reflection. For example, Pressley and Hilden find that “a learner is more likely to understand and successfully apply a strategy to a new situation if he or she has been encouraged to think about why the strategy works and has received instruction about why it works” (521). Part of this knowledge comes from a teacher who shares with her students her own use of strategies in a variety of situations, and who collaborates with students in their own use of strategies. But some of it also must be developed individually by students. Learning to develop conditional knowledge is important because students will sometimes develop strategies on their own; and reflection will help students determine the effectiveness of these new strategies and their usefulness in other situations, something that students may not consider without practice in reflection.

It’s not easy to get students to practice reflection effectively. In some cases, they resist it; some of my students, not seeing any value in it, called it “busy work.” In other cases, students just don’t understand the kind of thinking we are asking of them; after all, it isn’t the kind of thinking they are asked to do very often. Because, as Wong points out, “strategy transfer does not ‘pop up’ spontaneously from students’ instantaneous recognition of superficially similar perceptual cues” (111), we can’t just assume that students will transfer strategy use, especially if it involves far transfer, or transfer to a situation that is not similar to the one where students learned the strategy. For transfer to be possible, we should ensure that they make reflection a serious and consistent part of the strategic classroom.

To make reflection meaningful, students must understand its purpose: to help them become better writers when they are on their own. Wong asserts that students need to “think or to ‘dig at’ transfer rather than merely being told to transfer” (112). Reflection is how that digging occurs, but first we have to help students see how this will assist them. I recall being frustrated when students...
didn’t seem to use what they’d learned while writing a previous piece when they were writing the next one—they didn’t transfer. Instead, they saw the strategies they used to successfully write in one situation as attached to the product of that situation, not as strategies they could use in other situations. Reflection was the only way to make that transfer happen, and it took some work on my part, first, to convince my students that they should transfer, and then, to help them see how they could transfer strategies.

To make this transfer happen—or at least more likely to happen—reflection should encourage students to make connections between their strategy use and their successful learning or writing. Beyond that, reflection should also help students consider what other situations might be good places in which to use those strategies again. Such considerations can happen during whole-class discussion, especially when students are first learning to make these connections. Eventually, however, students should reflect in writing so that we can be aware of how they are doing in making these important connections. Some of the questions I have used (and these vary from assignment to assignment and among student groups, depending on where they are developmentally) include the following:

1. What strategies did you use on this writing assignment that worked well for you? Consider strategies of inquiry, drafting, and product in your answer.
2. Why do you think they worked well? In other words, what did the strategy do for you that improved your ability to write or your writing?
3. Under what conditions might you use this strategy again?
4. What aspects of the writing process were particularly helpful to you during the writing of this paper? How did they help you? How might those aspects be beneficial to you in future writing?
5. What aspects of this assignment were challenging to you as a writer? Why? How did you resolve those challenges?
6. What have you learned about writing from writing this paper? What have you learned about the topic from writing this paper? What have you learned about yourself as a writer from writing this paper? How will any of this learning help you in the future?
7. It’s time to turn the paper in. One writer has said that a piece of writing is never done—it’s just turned in for a deadline. If you had more time, what would you still like to develop in this piece of writing? Why? How would that improve the writing? What strategies would you use that you have not used to this point?
A graduate instructor I worked with conducted an experiment on reflection’s influence in a writing class. On one hand, her finding—that if teachers want higher-level reflection, they must teach what that means—seems obvious. What her research shows, on the other hand, is the impact of our work in making reflection effective. For one thing, she found that the kind of talk we conduct in class can impact students’ valuing of reflection as well as their quality of reflection. When students were making connections orally, the graduate instructor used questioning to push them to make deeper connections that they might not have made without her questioning. The oral work with reflective practices found its way into students’ individual written reflections. Additionally, regular reflection rather than intermittent reflection seems to be important. The graduate instructor used weekly reflections in her experimental class and found statistically significant results. Finally, she found that her comments on students’ writing also needed to reinforce the strategies students used, and their quality of reflection, for their reflection to improve (Green). In other words, to achieve higher-quality reflections, we must, as Yancey says, weave reflection not so much through a class as into it, into its very essence (201). For students to truly become strategic writers, then, they must have multiple opportunities and plenty of time to consider their use of strategies and to ponder on the value to them as writers. And they must have a teacher who reinforces what it means to be an effective and reflective writer.

Applications

Expanding Ideas

As they are polishing a piece of writing, inexperienced writers often have trouble with revision because they don’t generate enough text to work with effectively. There may not be enough to allow them to cut material, no matter how ineffective it is, and still meet length expectations. Because of this problem, Pritchard and Honeycutt encourage content-generating strategies so that students can “revise from abundance” ("Best Practices" 38). That’s the point of expanding strategies: to help extend ideas, or to find hidden ones that could come to light before revision.

The context for this expanding strategy is during the writing process and prior to revision. The ideas in this strategy are common enough; I’ve just put them in a list that creates a word, so that students are more likely to remember and use the elements for generating text. I call the strategy EXPAND, and
students can remember it because that is its purpose: to expand their draft. Students can add to their texts in these ways:

- Entertain a new perspective on your point; add it in as a dissenting voice.
- EXplain a detail in more depth.
- Provide additional examples for points you make.
- Add a story, an example, or more facts.
- Notice a contradiction someone might raise to your ideas—and then show how it isn’t as valid as your own point.
- Develop other voices to support your own: add quotes, paraphrases, or summaries.

Each of these elements should be explained and practiced, as a class and individually, prior to asking students to use the entire EXPAND strategy. After revising their writing, have students reflect on this strategy. Specifically, students should consider how the strategy helped them improve their writing and how they can use it in other writing situations.

**Writing Graphs**

When Graham and Harris discuss self-regulating strategies, they recognize the importance of goal setting and self-assessment of those goals. One method that I’ve found useful to help teach self-regulation is writing graphs. The writing goal is to develop fluency, which as Graham and Harris acknowledge, “may not be the most important aspect of writing instruction” (Making 164). Simply getting words on paper isn’t necessarily good writing. But fluency is still important. When students have the ability to get ideas on paper quickly and easily, they are often able to focus on more substantive matters. Their minds are freed from some lower-level concerns to concentrate on others that matter more. I found, as did Graham and Harris, that as students increase their fluency, they also “learn to extend content, elaborate on concepts, provide detail, and reduce anxiety regarding length” (Making 164). Graphing can help students with self-regulatory strategies.

This is how graphing works: Each day in class, students write for five minutes. They should try to write without stopping, for the most part. Sometimes I provide a topic, but students also have the option to write on topics of their own choosing. Each day, I record the number of words each student writes. At the end of the week, I summarize the results, discussing the range, mean, and median of words written. This helps students see the progress they are making and how they can improve their fluency.
own choice. When the time is up, students count the number of words they have written and add the data to a graph they keep to monitor their progress in getting more words on paper. If students have regular access to computers, they can both write and graph on the computer (using the word-count feature) and keep the entries and graph in a special folder. If they don’t have access to computers, the same thing can be done in class with traditional technology: pencils and spiral notebooks. The graph is kept on a piece of graph paper with the date written in the row at the bottom of the graph and the number of words indicated in the vertical columns. Students attach the graph to the inside cover of the spiral notebook so it’s easily accessible and visible. Each quarter, students work toward improvement by writing more words as time goes by. Graham and Harris found that keeping a “visual record of improvement has proven to be highly motivating to the majority of writers” (Making 166). The use of the graph provides both a goal (improvement) for students to work toward and a way to monitor progress toward that goal.

Although freewriting can teach students a strategy for generating ideas and for determining what a writer knows, useful to their writing development, the graphing serves as a self-regulatory strategy. We should help writers see how the graph can be useful as a tool for setting goals and monitoring progress toward those goals. Through discussion and student reflection, we can help students discover other goals that they might set for their writing, and other tools that they might employ to monitor those goals, even when they don’t use something as visible as the graph. For example, when students are writing something based on research, I often ask them to set a goal of how many facts they are going to collect when we spend a class period in the library. My students write their goal at the top of their note-taking paper, but others might choose a different method for recording the goal. The point is that students don’t just think it—they have to write it down. I don’t know where he learned this, but my husband always says that a goal is just a dream unless we write it down. I’ve found that to be true: if students don’t write their goals, they’re unlikely to monitor or adjust them as needed. After the class time in the library, I take a few minutes to ask students to review their work and to write about their achievement of the goal. If they met the goal, they write about what helped them. If they did not, they reflect on what prevented them from meeting the goal, and they readjust, noting how they will make up what they didn’t accomplish, so they can stay on track in their inquiry. Although not all goals are as measurable as the examples I’ve given here, any way that we can help students set goals and monitor them builds self-regulatory behaviors toward writing.
Annotated Bibliography


This book was influential in my own understanding of teaching writing. It gives an overview of what is meant by strategic writing instruction, and it provides some examples of specific strategies the author used with students. Collins frames the strategies in examples that read like case studies, focusing on specific students, but his text is clear. This is one of the most effective sources for a good view of what is meant by strategic writing instruction.


At the risk of being self-serving, I include my own book here. It differs from the other two in that it’s more focused on applications than is the Collins book, and it’s more about regular classrooms than is the Graham and Harris book. *Strategic Writing* provides an overview of what is meant by strategic writing, but it puts the strategies in the context of specific, varied writing tasks in ways that the other two books do not. In that sense, I think it expands the ideas of this chapter.


Graham and Harris have probably been involved in more research than any other researchers on the topic of writing strategies. Their work, though, as the title of this book indicates, has focused on students with learning disabilities. That said, their work still has application in general classrooms with students of a range of abilities. The strategies collected in *Writing Better* have been validated in multiple studies; here, those strategies are explained clearly, and they are accompanied by extensions and portability discussions. The book has sections for self-regulation strategies, general writing strategies, and genre-specific strategies.
“What works?”

As teachers, it’s a question we often ask ourselves about teaching writing. We consider questions such as:

- How can the writing process, including prewriting, product goals, and inquiry, become more meaningful for students?
- What is the best way to use models in the classroom?
- What can targeted strategies, word processing, or collaboration do for students’ writing?
- How can writing-to-learn develop students’ overall writing skills?
- How can sentence combining and summarizing benefit writing?

Through teacher-friendly language and classroom examples, Deborah Dean helps answer these kinds of questions by taking a close look at research-based practices that have proved to be effective and interpreting the principles behind them.

Based on the Carnegie Institute’s influential Writing Next report, What Works in Writing Instruction will help teachers apply the findings to their unique classroom environments. We all must find the right mix of activities for our own students, and this book offers the best of what is currently known about effective writing instruction to help students improve their writing abilities.