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# chapter 1

## Very Gently with No Red Marks

*Writing is easy: All you do is sit staring at the blank sheet of paper, until the drops of blood form on your forehead.*

—Gene Fowler

Writing is a key to successful school experiences and an essential means of communication that helps students learn how to structure and organize their thoughts. Some students with writing difficulties have language or learning disabilities, whereas others do not. Whatever the underlying reasons for the difficulties, for many students, writing is not easy. In fact, writing is the most complex of all the language tasks, and students of all ages can have difficulty becoming proficient writers. Many of you may remember feeling overwhelmed at some time in your school careers by the prospect of having to write a paper. As the due date rapidly approached, your anxiety about finishing the paper increased exponentially.

The numerous skills involved with writing are multifaceted, ranging from the production of legible handwriting to the production of organized discourse. Some students have difficulty with handwriting or with basic writing skills such as spelling, whereas others have difficulty expressing and organizing their ideas or taking notes quickly in a classroom. Think of the many skills that are involved in trying to take accurate notes quickly during a class lecture. You have to listen, identify and comprehend the important ideas, and then paraphrase the material to be written down. You then have to hold that information in memory,

while you quickly jot down the ideas and continue to listen. There is no time to think about letter formation or spelling, or about whether the ideas have been recorded in a meaningful sequence, but you know that the notes have to be written clearly enough that you will be able to read and study them at a later time.

The components of writing are interwoven, and difficulty in one aspect of writing, such as spelling, often contributes to difficulty in another aspect of writing, such as taking notes or expressing ideas. You will want to understand and consider the interplay of these components when you are planning appropriate instructional interventions for students who struggle with writing.

Too often students with writing difficulties develop counterproductive coping strategies, such as writing only words they know how to spell, avoiding expression of complex ideas, or writing as little as they can. For example, Spence, a fourth-grade student with strong verbal abilities, had difficulty with spelling. In answer to a question about how he chooses a topic to write about, Spence replied, “I look at the words on the board and on the walls, then I make up a story using those words and the extra ones I know how to spell, like *the*.” He also noted that his stories usually involve the police because he finally knows how to spell that word. Figure 1.1 illustrates one of his stories involving the “police.” Notice that he has spelled the word *again* four different ways on the last two lines. Clearly, difficulties with spelling affect Spence’s word choice and writing facility.

The writing of Greg, another fourth-grade student, provides an example of the impact of limited spelling skill on writing. As part of a writing assessment, Greg was asked to write responses to several items on the Woodcock-

Hi beams  
One dark night  
a lady left The  
Unvrsed. She got in to  
her Van and Stated home.  
Wine the lade got home  
She called police  
be cuse the man behind  
trem on his hi dens  
augene and augen  
agen and agene...

**Figure 1.1.** Spence's Story with the Word Police.

**Translation:** High Beams One dark night a lady left the university. She got into her van and started home. When the lady got home she called police because the man behind turned on his high beams again and again and again and again...

Johnson III Writing Samples test (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001). When shown a picture of a queen and king, Greg was given the following prompt: "This woman is a queen. Write a good sentence that tells what this man is."

While contemplating the task, Greg mused aloud, "The man is a king. Oh boy! Hard words! I can't spell those words. The man is rich. Another hard word! What can I spell? I can spell mom and dad. Can I use mom in my sentence? The mom is rich. I don't know how to spell rich. What do I know how to spell? Thin! I can spell thin." Following this dialogue, Greg produced the sentence presented in Figure 1.2: *The mom is thin.* Presently, Greg's written expression is hampered severely by his limited spelling skill. Without knowledge of Greg's thought processes, one may surmise that his problem is with oral language and reasoning, rather than with spelling.

Unfortunately, students such as Spence and Greg have trouble constructing meaningful passages because so much of their attention is directed toward spelling. The important question then becomes, How can Greg's and Spence's teachers help them? Although many teachers recognize when a student is having trouble with writing, they may feel unsure of what to do about it.

Some teachers do not receive enough training on how to help students improve their writing. Other teachers received training, but did not have enough practical experience in analyzing written products, detecting the difficulties, and then implementing appropriate instruction. Without training in how to assist students with writing difficulties, teachers become frustrated. For example, during the second week of

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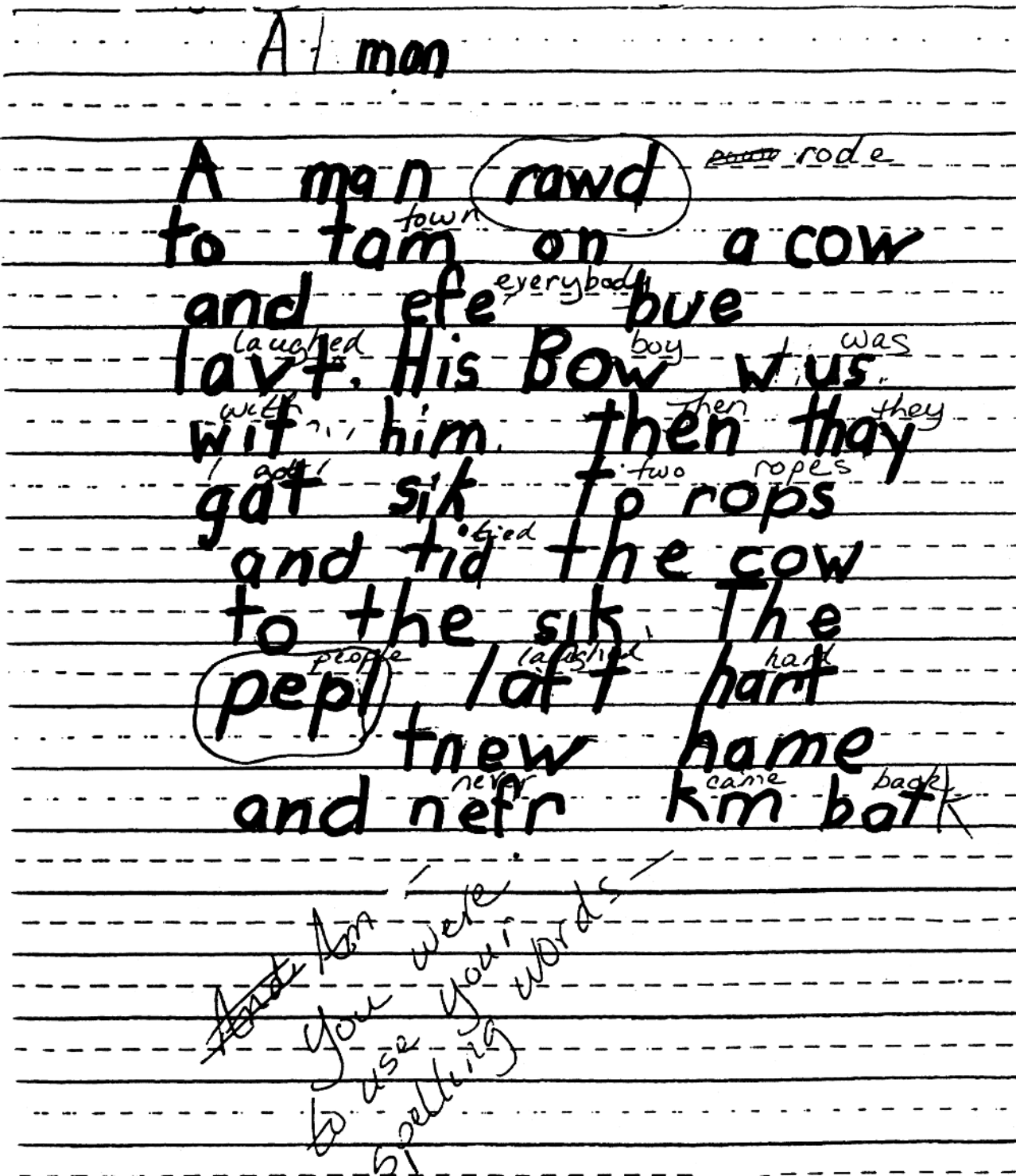


The mom is Thin

**Figure 1.2.** Greg's Written Response on the WJ III Writing Samples Test.

school Ms. Wall, a third-grade teacher, entered the teacher's lounge with a story written by one of her students, Ann. Although Ann was trying to record her ideas, Ms. Wall was concerned

about Ann's present level of development in writing skill. After showing her fellow teachers the paper, presented in Figure 1.3, Ms. Wall asked, "What should I do?"

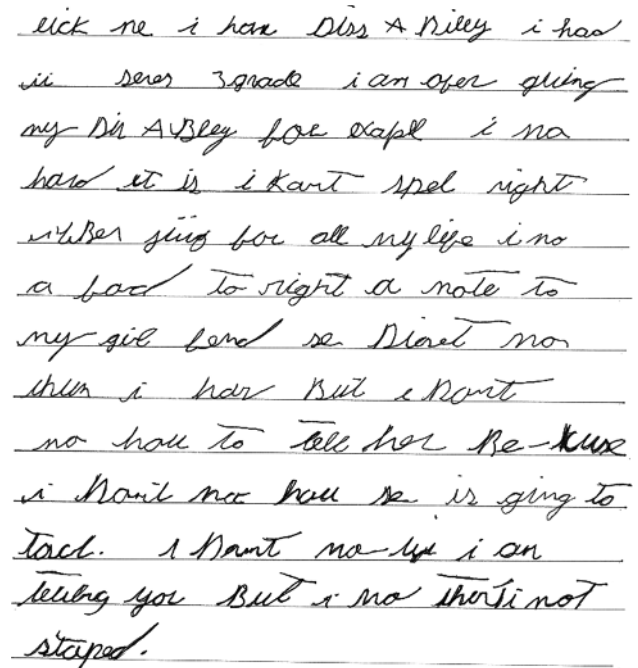


She had written a comment on Ann's paper noting the failure to comply with the assignment of writing a story incorporating the week's spelling words. Although failure to complete the assignment was the least of her concerns, Ms. Wall just did not know what else to say.

Older students also experience difficulty. For example, during the first week of eighth-grade English class, Ms. Downing asked the students to write something about themselves that they would like to share. She provided several examples: "Perhaps you have a special pet or you took an exciting trip this summer; or you could discuss your family or an activity that you really enjoy. The main requirement is to let me know something about you." At the end of the fifty-minute period, Carlos handed her the essay presented in Figure 1.4.

Carlos's difficulty with writing is readily apparent, as is his desire to communicate to the audience, his teacher. So how do we start the process of helping students improve their writing? The process begins *very gently with no red marks*. Ms. Downing appreciated and empathized with the message that Carlos was expressing. She responded to his writing with the following comment: "Thank you for telling me about your struggle with writing. I am looking forward to helping you this year. If you would like, I can help you write a note to your girlfriend." Clearly, students such as Carlos require a caring teacher and intensive, systematic instruction to improve their writing abilities.

Effective writing teachers are able to analyze a student's strengths and weaknesses in writing and then develop specific instructional plans. To select appropriate interventions, you must identify and prioritize the areas of concern, as well as identify the strengths on which to build. With careful analysis of a student's present performance level, instructional programs can be designed to increase writing competence. Recalling your own anxious moments related to writing may help you proceed gently with no red marks as you provide students with feedback on their writing.



lick me i have Dis A Riley i have  
 it been 3 grade i am over giving  
 my Dis A Riley for exaple i na  
 how it is i cant spel right  
 i have been for all my life i no  
 a bad to right a note to  
 my girl friend re Diet no  
 then i have But i dont  
 no how to tell her Re-Kux  
 i dont no how re is ging to  
 tach. i dont no why i am  
 telling you But i no that i not  
 stupid.

**Figure 1.4.** Carlos's Essay to His Teacher.

**Translation:** Like me I have a disability. I've had it since third grade. I am often quitting because of my disability. For example I know how hard it is. I can't spell right. I've been trying for all my life. I know I am afraid to write a note to my girlfriend. She doesn't know that I have but I don't know how to tell her because I don't know how she is going to act. I don't know why I am telling you but I know I am not stupid.

The primary purpose of this book is to help educators become effective writing teachers. It is appropriate for both general and special education teachers who are working with students who struggle in various aspects of writing development. These students require teachers who understand the components of written language and are well versed in assessing difficulties, selecting appropriate interventions, and monitoring progress, all of which are addressed within. It is our hope that this book will increase your understanding of why students struggle with writing, enhance your sensitivity to the diverse needs of your students, and increase your proficiency in analyzing and teaching writing. This book will be useful in

university courses that focus on writing assessment and instruction. It is also a reliable reference for practicing general education teachers at the elementary or middle-school level, as well as for special education teachers, speech-language therapists, and school psychologists who work with students across the grades.

In this second edition, we have maintained the focus on students with language and learning disabilities that affect aspects of written language development. Numerous intervention strategies have been developed for use with these students who often require differentiated instruction. The majority of accommodations and instructional strategies described in this text, however, are applicable to all students with writing difficulties, regardless of the cause.

The book is organized into ten chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter provides a review of the various components of written language and the types of difficulties students may have with handwriting,

spelling, usage, vocabulary, and text structure. The third chapter provides an overview of theoretical perspectives, and the basic principles of an effective writing program. The fourth chapter reviews the various accommodations that can help students be successful. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven contain summaries of instructional strategies that can be used to enhance student performance in the areas of handwriting, basic skills, and written expression. Chapter Eight describes methods of informal assessment, as well as how to use measures of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to monitor student progress. Chapter Nine presents analyses of student writing samples. Some of the analyses have been completed, whereas others have guided questions that could be used for independent study assignments or in-class discussions. Chapter Ten, the final chapter, discusses the concept of “voice” in writing, and reminds us that our first job is to listen to, respect, and respond to the messages that students share with us through their writing.

