

I Have a Voice and Can Speak Up for Myself Through Writing!

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Abstract

Writing can be a method of expression for those who cannot or do not feel comfortable expressing themselves verbally. For students with disabilities, however, writing can be a challenging task because they often fail to see writing as a process. This article examines how to use the self-regulated strategy development model of writing, an evidence-based practice, to teach middle and high school students with emotional/behavioral disabilities to use persuasive writing as a tool to advocate for their needs and wants. Writing can help students develop self-determination skills and self-expression with the time needed to reflect on what they want to say, making the process of writing an empowering one. Example lessons, guidelines, and sample materials are provided.

Keywords

persuasive writing, self-regulated strategy development, self-determination, self-advocacy

Learning how to communicate through writing is a critical skill for students in order to be successful in school, college, the job market, and social life (ACT, 2008; Graham, 2006). The process of writing, however, involves many skills students need to master to become effective writers. Lack of planning, poor organization, difficulty developing content, and missing details to support arguments are problem areas for students with disabilities, including those with emotional/behavioral disabilities (EBD). Furthermore, students do not typically know how to apply self-regulatory skills, such as goal setting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating their writing, and some are unaware of the audience when writing a paper (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003). All these difficulties influence students' writing self-efficacy, or confidence in their writing abilities, causing apprehension toward writing, feelings of low motivation, and negative attitudes that influence overall writing performance (Garcia & de Caso, 2008).

In particular, students are expected to master persuasive (i.e., referred to in CCSS as "argumentative") writing by developing logical arguments with sound reasoning to support their claims. These expectations start in the early grades, and teachers have the responsibility of preparing their students for the future demands they will encounter in adulthood. Considering the challenges students with EBD face when writing, they need support in developing their persuasive writing skills, especially in relation to real-world experiences that call for self-determination. In addition to the academic challenges students with EBD face, they also experience challenging behaviors that sometimes hinder their abilities to think things through, develop logical arguments, and take into consideration the opinions of others (Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). This makes persuasive writing an exceptionally challenging skill for this population to acquire.

The Importance of Writing and Self-Determination

In recent years, with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), writing has been emphasized much more heavily than in previous waves of standards-based education

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Just as writing is a skill of extreme importance for students with EBD to master for the future, teaching these students self-determination skills is also extremely important for helping them succeed in life. A student who has developed self-determination skills is able to set appropriate goals, make good decisions, problem solve, understand his or her needs and wants (i.e., self-awareness), speak up for himself or herself to ensure that wants and needs are met (i.e., self-advocacy), believe in his or her abilities (i.e., self-efficacy) and is able to monitor and evaluate his or her progress (i.e., self-monitoring and self-evaluation; Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood 2001; Wehmeyer, Field, Doren, Jones, & Mason, 2004). Students with EBD, in particular, can benefit from explicit instruction on these self-determination components because research has indicated that these students are less knowledgeable about self-determination and have a significantly lower ability to engage in self-determined behaviors in comparison to students with learning disabilities (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Carter, Trainor, Owens, Swedeen & Sun, 2010). Further, students with EBD have poor high school completion rates and postschool outcomes compared to their peers with and without disabilities (Ackerman, 2006). Considering the most recent research identifying self-determination skills as an evidence-based predictor of postschool engagement (Test et al., 2009), it is critical that explicit instruction on these skills be provided to this population early and be purposefully incorporated into secondary transition planning.

Teachers' lack of training on how to teach self-determination skills combined with time constraints because of content-area teaching demands are factors that have been identified as obstacles for teaching self-determination skills (Konrad, Walker, Fowler, Test, & Wood, 2008). The good news is that teaching self-determination skills can be done by incorporating instruction on strategies for learning, self-regulation, self-directed learning, goal setting, and problem solving (Wehmeyer et al., 2004) into academic content. Thus, one way teachers can promote self-determination skills is by embedding them into their writing instruction.

The writing process gives students multiple opportunities to practice self-determination skills. The act of writing in itself easily involves the application of seven major self-determination skills (i.e., making good decisions, setting appropriate goals, having self-awareness, applying problem-solving skills, self-advocating, self-monitoring, and self-efficacy). In particular, the persuasive-writing genre has a direct linkage to self-advocacy, which can be directly targeted because of the platform persuasive writing provides as a means to speak up for oneself (Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013; Cuenca-Carlino, Mustian, Allen, & Gilbert, 2015; Cuenca-Sanchez, Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Kidd, 2012). Additionally, self-advocacy is one of the most important

self-determination skills students with disabilities need to develop to successfully and independently navigate adulthood (Hart & Brehem, 2013). Further, it has been noted that students with EBD experience more difficulties advocating for themselves when compared to other students with disabilities (Wagner et al., 2003). Learning to use persuasive writing as a self-advocacy tool can be particularly useful for students with EBD by helping them organize ideas, reflect on their thoughts, and express themselves in positive ways using logical and coherent arguments rather than disjointed reasoning and acting impulsively (Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013). Specifically, the combination of self-determination skills and persuasive writing focuses on a six-step process: (a) making a good decision, (b) applying self-advocacy skills, (c) setting a goal or goals, (d) using self-efficacy, (e) exhibiting problem solving and self-awareness, and (f) self-monitoring and self-evaluating. Figure 1 defines that six-step process in more detail.

This article seeks to inform practitioners of a way to infuse self-determination skills with persuasive-writing instruction. Specifically, through the use of an evidence-based writing strategy called self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), a step-by-step process shows teachers how to teach self-determination skills, with specific emphasis on self-advocacy through writing.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development

Many reviews of research have found strategy instruction to be an effective method for teaching the writing process to students with EBD. One strategy in particular, called SRSD and identified as an evidence-based practice for students with EBD (Ennis & Jolivette, 2012), has been shown to be effective in helping students grasp the writing process, become better writers in a variety of writing genres (i.e., story writing, persuasive writing, opinion writing), and become more self-regulated learners (Graham, 2006). This strategy involves teaching the writing process in six stages by using mnemonics to help students remember the writing genre to be learned. The SRSD stages of instruction include the following: (a) develop background knowledge, (b) discuss it, (c) model it, (d) memorize it, (e) support it, and (f) independent practice (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008). The purpose of these stages is to help students explicitly learn the process of writing, gain confidence in their skills, become self-regulated writers, and independently develop writing products of high quality.

A plethora of studies on SRSD for students with EBD have been conducted over the past several years in elementary (e.g., Lane et al., 2008; Little et al., 2010), middle (e.g., Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013; Cuenca-Sanchez et al., 2012; Hauth, Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Regan, 2013; Mason, Kubina, Valasa, & Cramer, 2010; Mastropieri et al.

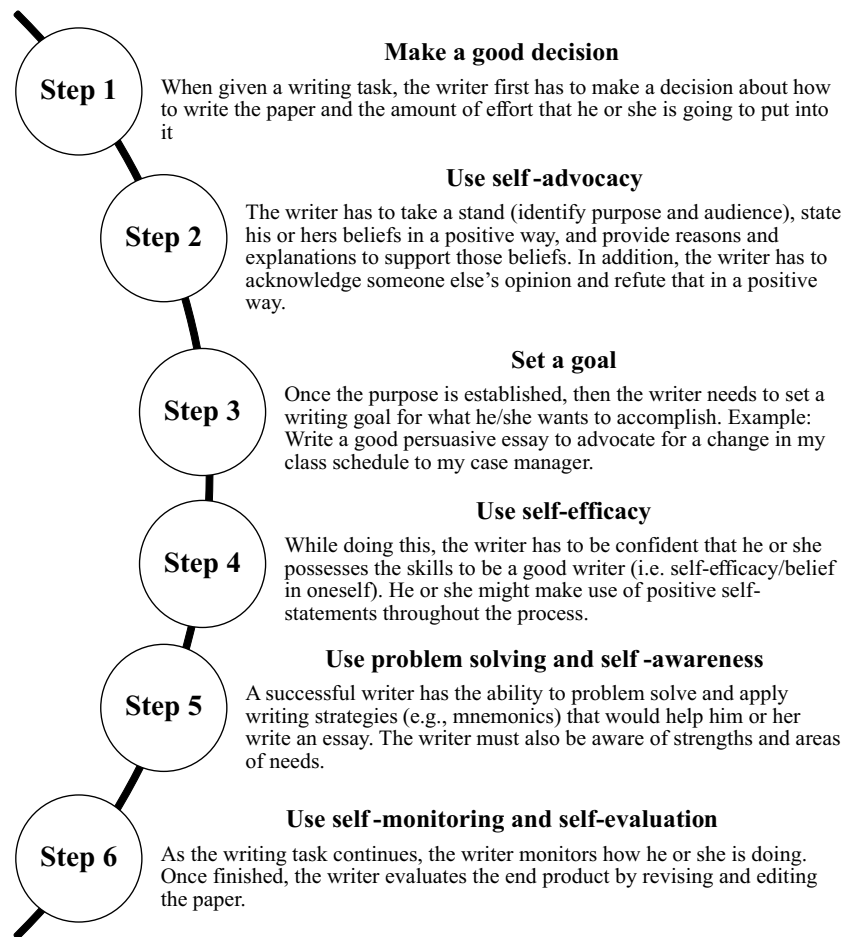


Figure 1. Six-step process for combining self-determination and persuasive writing.

2012), and high (e.g., Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2015; Mason, Kubina, & Hoover, 2011) schools, resulting in students' gaining knowledge on the writing process, increasing the quality and quantity of their writing, and becoming better writers overall. In some of these studies, the focus of the intervention has been story writing; whereas in others it has been persuasive writing. In other studies, self-determination training was taught within the SRSD framework of instruction, giving students the opportunity to concurrently develop their writing and self-determination skills (Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013; Cuenca-Sanchez et al., 2012; Konrad & Test, 2007).

Developing Self-Determination Skills Through Writing

The SRSD framework in itself provides the platform for the development of self-determination skills. During each stage of the SRSD framework, explicit instruction on the

previously described self-determination skills can be provided (Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013; Cuenca-Sanchez et al., 2012; Konrad & Test, 2007) to help students learn to write a particular genre and for a personal purpose. Specifically, SRSD combined with self-determination skills training is an effective way for involving students in the individualized educational program (IEP) process, with particular emphasis on students' becoming competent in self-advocating in writing for their transition-focused needs (Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2015). Students can use their IEPs and included transition plans as a basis for choosing for themselves, with support from their teachers, which areas they feel it necessary to self-advocate and to whom (e.g., teachers, parents/guardians, peers, administration, potential employers) it makes sense to address their points of view. The SRSD framework allows the teacher to prepare students for this combined self-determination and writing process. Following is a description of each SRSD stage with examples of how to teach each stage.

Develop Background Knowledge

In this stage, the teacher explicitly defines and teaches the meaning of self-determination and the skills that compose this concept. Specifically, the teacher discusses self-determination, soliciting input from the class on what students think it means. As part of the self-determination instruction, the teacher discusses the meaning of the most important self-determined behaviors/skills used when writing (Algozzine et al., 2001) and models how to exhibit self-determined behaviors through the writing process by walking students through examples. For instance, the teacher can say:

Imagine you are asked to write an essay to convince your teacher you are a good student who deserves to earn the class representative position on the student council at your school. Here's how you might use self-determined behaviors to accomplish this.

At this point, the teacher discusses what it means to persuade and how students can persuade through the act of writing so that students can understand the power and responsibility they have in the writing process. A chart, such as the one shown in Figure 1, can be used to visually show students how persuasive writing and self-advocacy are related.

Throughout this process, students provide their thoughts and contribute to the discussion as well. This is also the stage in which a teacher may choose to provide lessons on IEP components (e.g., strengths and needs outlined in present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, course of study, postsecondary goals, annual goals, transition activities) so that students understand and are better able to determine their own personalized self-advocacy topics during the later writing process (Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2015). To facilitate the process, teachers can engage students in a brainstorming activity related to different areas in which they may need to advocate for things they need or want. Teachers can use guided questions or have students work in pairs. Figure 2 provides an example of a completed brainstorming sheet teachers can use with students.

Discuss It

During this stage, the teacher introduces the mnemonic to be used for writing persuasive essays. The use of mnemonics to teach academic skills has been found to be effective in helping students learn and retain information (Scruggs, Mastropieri, Berkeley, & Marshak, 2010) and can be particularly beneficial for students with EBD, who often experience comorbid attention problems (Wei, Yu, & Shaver, 2014) and semantic memory deficits (Scruggs et al., 2010). Two mnemonics are often used in SRSD instruction for persuasive writing (i.e., STOP+DARE and POW+TREE; Harris et al., 2008). For teaching students to use persuasive writing as a self-advocacy tool, both mnemonics might be appropriate.

The mnemonic STOP+DARE has two components. STOP represents the planning process: Suspend judgment, Take a side, Organize ideas, and Plan more as you write. When suspending judgment, students will brainstorm ideas both for and against the issue at hand before taking a side. As such, the STOP+DARE mnemonic works well when the writing prompt is more open-ended, allowing students to think of ideas on both sides. Then, students will organize ideas by listing reasons that support their beliefs. Students must also address and refute at least one argument against their beliefs. Students are then encouraged to plan more as they write using the DARE mnemonic. DARE represents the structure of the essay: Develop a position statement, Add supporting details, Report and refute counterarguments, and End with a strong conclusion.

Similarly, the mnemonic POW+TREE has two parts. POW represents the organization and planning writers need to do before writing the essay: Pick my idea, Organize my notes, and Write and say more. Once students have picked their idea, then they organize their notes using the mnemonic TREE, which represents the components of a persuasive essay (Topic sentence, Reasons [three or more, including at least two counterreasons], Explanations, and Ending). Finally, they use their notes to write the persuasive essay and say more. Regardless of the mnemonic selected, the teacher explains that the mnemonic is a problem-solving strategy that will help students write good persuasive essays.

At this stage, the teacher also discusses transition or linking words (e.g., *first*, *second*, *in addition*, *furthermore*, *on the contrary*, *in conclusion*, *in summary*) and why they are important, and provides students with a good example of a persuasive essay so that students examine the essay and identify the parts according to the mnemonic used (i.e., TREE or DARE). Using this essay as an example, the teacher then introduces counter-reasons and discusses why they are important in a good persuasive essay. This discussion is particularly important for students with EBD because it encourages them to reflect on other people's points of view. Students with EBD experience social skills deficits and may exhibit socially inappropriate or undesirable behaviors, which in turn affects the development of positive peer and adult relationships (Kalberg, Lane, Driscoll, & Wehby, 2010). By embedding perspective-taking instruction within the SRSD framework, students with EBD are also provided with social skills support to help increase the facilitation of positive and appropriate interpersonal communication.

Model It

A key component of SRSD instruction is the use of graphic organizers to help students organize their thoughts prior to writing. When graphic organizers are used as a tool in the writing process, they have been shown to aid students in developing confidence in their writing abilities, improve

Self-advocacy Topics Sheet

| Areas | Needs and Wants | What do I need to know or demonstrate to advocate for what I need or want? Possible solutions/suggestions |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| School | I have a difficult time in math class solving linear equations | -I learn best when provided with hands-on activities -More examples -Working with a classmate |
| | Don't feel prepared to take the upcoming social studies test | -A study guide could help me study -I have a hard time understanding some vocabulary -Get anxious taking tests, I could use extended time. |
| | Go on a field trip to a nearby college | -Want to learn about college, it can help me decide where to go when I graduate -Want to see what is like to be a college student |
| Home Independent living | Want to take a drawing class after school | -Very interested in art -Help with the house chores -Use part of my allowance to pay for the class |
| | Take city transportation independently | - Will be responsible and careful -Will help me become more independent |
| Employment | Applying for and securing a job over winter break | -Want to earn some money to buy gifts -Good way to be entertained -I can help to pay bills |
| | Permission to job shadow | -Help me better understand what a job entails - Can help me decide what career I want to pursue |
| | Practice job interview skills | -Will help me prepare for a real job interview -I get anxious interviewing so practicing will help me |

Figure 2. Example of secondary transition-related topics on which students with disabilities might self-advocate in writing.

writing performance, and increase their writing fluency (Ellis & Howard, 2007). Thus, during the *model it* stage, the teacher introduces the graphic organizer that incorporates the strategy (e.g., STOP+DARE, POW+TREE), provides an overview of how it is used, and then models using it with an example scenario according to the students' ages and interests. During this time, the teacher can solicit student input and assistance in completing the graphic organizer. For example, if the teacher is in a high school setting, the following scenario might be appropriate:

Susan is a sophomore at Redbird High, and she just turned 16 years old. Exciting, right? She believes she is ready for a summer job and wants to work at the animal shelter that is close to her house. Susan's parents are not completely convinced she is responsible enough to handle this job. Susan talked to her teacher, Ms. Reynolds, about her situation, and Ms. Reynolds encouraged Susan to advocate for herself by writing [a persuasive essay] to her parents in a way that states her point of view and her reasons for wanting a job at the animal shelter.

Figure 3 provides an example of how the POW+TREE graphic organizer is used to plan and organize the thoughts needed to write a strong persuasive essay.

Once the graphic organizer is completed, the teacher models transferring the notes from the graphic organizer into writing a complete essay. If using the POW+TREE mnemonic, this step would correspond to the *W* in POW, Write and say more. If using the STOP+DARE mnemonic, this step would correspond to the *P* in STOP, Plan more as you write. It is important to emphasize to students that a big part of self-efficacy is to make positive statements about what they can do as writers. Therefore, when modeling the completion of the graphic organizer and how to transfer those notes into essay format, teachers should strategically make positive self-statements aloud so that students can hear those statements. For example, a teacher might say,

"I know I can and will write a really great essay today" as a start to her or his writing. "I think I am doing a great job with this essay! I have strong reasons, and I have acknowledged other people's points of view."

Likewise, the teacher models how to monitor progress during the writing process. The use of a self-monitoring checklist with the components of a strong persuasive essay can also aid students during this time.

| POW + TREE | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| T | TOPIC Sentence | | | |
| | Am I stating what I need/believe in a positive manner? | | | |
| <i>I believe I am responsible enough to get a summer job at the animal shelter.</i> | | | | |
| Transition Word | R | REASONS -3 or more Do I have valid reasons? | E | EXPLANATIONS Am I explaining my needs and wants? |
| <i>To begin</i> | <i>I want to earn money of my own.</i> | | <i>I will have money to buy items that I want and be more independent.</i> | |
| <i>Second</i> | <i>The animal shelter is close to our home.</i> | | <i>I can walk there, ride my bike, or take the public transit.</i> | |
| <i>Third</i> | <i>This job will provide me with valuable work experience.</i> | | <i>I love animals, and it will give me a chance to strengthen my time management skills, and patience.</i> | |
| | CR Counterreason 1 Am I considering other points of view? | | E EXPLANATIONS | |
| <i>On the other hand</i> | <i>You might think that I am not responsible enough for a job.</i> | | <i>You might think that all I will want to do is hang out with my friends instead of working.</i> | |
| Politely refute and use appropriate explanations | | | | |
| <i>However</i> | <i>My grades this year proved that I am a hard worker when I try my best. I am organized and will keep my work schedule a priority.</i> | | | |
| | CR Counterreason 2 | | E EXPLANATIONS | |
| <i>In addition</i> | <i>You might worry that work will be too stressful for me.</i> | | <i>Sometimes when I get overwhelmed, I will shut down and not want to work anymore.</i> | |
| Politely refute and use appropriate explanations | | | | |
| <i>Moreover</i> | <i>If I do get stressed, I will advocate for my needs by talking to someone I trust about my emotions, like my counselor.</i> | | | |
| E | What do I want my reader to remember? | | | |
| <i>Overall</i> | <i>I truly believe that I deserve to work at the animal shelter this summer</i> | | | |

Figure 3. Example of POW+TREE graphic organizer used to write a persuasive essay.

Memorize It

The purpose of this stage is to help students review and memorize the mnemonics, procedures, and steps learned to this point. This review can be done in various ways to engage the students themselves. For example, the teacher may use choral responding or response cards with the class to assess students' independent knowledge of the mnemonic. The teacher might also use a Smart Board or laminated poster to slowly cover each step of the mnemonic to check for memorization. While it is okay to call on individual students who raise their hands to volunteer, the key in this stage is to provide *all* students with opportunities to actively practice the memorization techniques.

Support It

The purpose of this stage is to scaffold instruction until students are able to use the strategy independently without the teacher's guidance or use of the support materials. In this stage, each student has all materials, including the graphic organizer, to aid them in the writing process. Students can

come up with some topics they want to write about related to self-advocacy by reviewing their own IEPs, or the teacher can provide the topics and discuss with the students the importance of each topic for their futures (Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2015). For example, asking for accommodations on a test, advocating for vegetarian options on the lunch menu, advocating for getting extra work to improve a bad grade, participating in extracurricular activities at school, and being part of a sports team are all scenarios in which self-advocacy skills can be applied through writing.

The role of the teacher in this stage is to facilitate learning, monitor each student, and provide assistance when necessary. To evaluate student success during this time, it is suggested that the teacher review each essay and assess it using a rubric for holistic quality, including the correct use of explicitly taught persuasive essay components. Figure 4 provides a list of recommended rubric components that could potentially be used with this type of writing. Further, if the teacher wants to measure improvements in essay length or structure, he or she might evaluate students' essays for total words written or correct word sequences. Peer editing can also be utilized as formative feedback. During this

| Component | Requirement |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Topic sentence | The topic sentence clearly defines the writer's position on the topic and or need. |
| Reasons | The writer includes three or more reasons and all reasons are related to the topic sentence. |
| Explanations | The writer includes an explanation for each of the three reasons provided. The explanations or examples are specific or relevant and connect to each reason. |
| Counterreasons | The writer anticipates the reader's concerns, biases, or arguments and provides at least two counterreasons. |
| Refute | The writer refutes each counterreason and states why his or her position is logical and needed. |
| Ending | The writer effectively restates his or her position to begin the closing paragraph. The conclusion is strong and leaves the reader solidly understanding the writer's position. |
| Logical Sequence | Arguments and support are provided in a logical order that makes it easy and interesting to follow the author's train of thought. |
| Transition Words or Phrases | A variety of thoughtful transitions are used. They clearly show how ideas are connected. |
| Self-Advocacy Use | The writer exhibits the use of self-advocacy through positive, yet assertive arguments to support his or her position or need. |
| Paragraph Structure | Each paragraph is properly indented and contains a minimum of three complete sentences. |

Figure 4. Recommended rubric components for evaluating a persuasive essay.

phase, it is expected that students will work at different paces, and they should remain in this stage until the teacher feels they can successfully enter into the independent practice stage of SRSD instruction.

Independent Practice

The final stage, independent practice, allows students multiple opportunities to practice, refine, and become more fluent in the writing process independently. In this stage, students also move at individualized paces while being closely monitored by the teacher. Students are less reliant on teacher support at this point in the process, and they no longer use the materials previously provided. From this point forward, students are independent in their persuasive essay writing. It is important to continue the previously described assessment process during this phase of SRSD instruction to ensure students maintain learned skills and to modify instruction as needed based on student needs.

Conclusion

While this article focuses specifically on working with students who have EBD, teaching the writing process can be fun and rewarding for teachers and extremely beneficial for all students. The act of writing gives students an opportunity to have a voice and can serve as an outlet for expressing needs and wants (Tindal & Crawford, 2002). When students learn to write in a structured and organized way, they have more time to reflect on what they want to say. If writing is taught to students within the context of self-determination,

students internalize that persuasive writing is a powerful tool to advocate for things they need, want, or believe in (Cuenca-Carlino, & Mustian, 2013; Cuenca-Carlino et al., 2015; Cuenca-Sanchez et al., 2012). This connection can help students become more aware of the importance of clearly stating their positions, providing valid reasons with explanations, and considering others' points of view in a positive way if they want to be successful.

Being asked to write essays when students lack the requisite skills to do so can be extremely frustrating. However, as students' progress through SRSD writing instruction and see how their writing has improved, they feel more successful and tend to persevere and remain determined to achieve their writing goals. When students are engaged in the writing process, teachers should emphasize and reinforce positive academic behaviors, celebrate all big and small improvements students make in their writing products as they develop, and model consistency and determination to their students when teaching writing. By following these guidelines, teachers can equip their students with the competence and self-confidence to say, "I have a voice and can speak up for myself through writing!"

Authors' Note

For copies of materials described in this manuscript, you may contact the first author of this article.

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