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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Every Child Can Write, Grades 2-5*, by Melanie Meehan. In this excerpt, you'll discover how to determine where and how students get stuck in their process, and how we can help them find the right entry point.

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## When we determine where and how students get stuck in their process, we can help them find the right entry point.

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We have to be able to know where and how students get stuck in their process if we are going to provide meaningful instruction. In John Hattie's 2018 updated list of factors related to student achievement, cognitive task analysis is noted with the fourth highest influence (Hattie, 2018). Cognitive task analysis is when we break down the implicit and explicit knowledge that is involved in completing a complex skill (Clark, Feldon, van Merriënboer, Yates, & Early, 2008). Complex skills involve the integration of both automatic and developing knowledge, which writing definitely does. When we apply this concept to writing, students benefit when they understand the steps in the process and have a clear idea of a progression of attainable goals within that process, regardless of level, regardless of genre.

Think about how we usually teach narrative writing. We teach students how to generate ideas, how to plan, and how to begin the drafting process. Once they are drafting, we can teach them more sophisticated ways to begin stories, to develop them by adding details and dialogue, and to end them. And somewhere along the line, we teach about conventions and maybe even some grammar. In many ways, those skills all stand on the shoulders of the previous skills, as well as the learning that has happened in previous years.

But what happens when there's a breakdown?

Sometimes I make the analogy of breakdowns in writing skills to Swiss cheese when I am talking to teachers. "You have to take action on the cheese if you want to fill in the holes," I say. "Think about heating up the cheese and then think about reteaching the students." Maybe an electrical circuit is an even better analogy for some of our striving writers. In a circuit, if we are missing a connection, the light bulb won't glow. Similarly, if students are missing a step in the writing process, they will stop producing and completing pieces. If they can't think of an idea, they can't plan. If they can't plan, they can't draft. If they can't draft, how will they add details or try out conventions or improve their grammatical/language skills?

So, let's think about the progression of skills across the narrative genre—not so much about the standards, but about the steps in the process—to complete a cognitive task analysis. If we break down the steps of writing a story, it looks somewhat like this:

1. Think of an idea.
2. Plan how your story will go—this could be through talk, pictures, or written words.
3. Decide on the important parts (at the very least, the beginning, middle, and end).
4. Draft, making sure to pay extra attention to the important parts.
5. Include elaboration such as
  - a. Action
  - b. Description
  - c. Talking
  - d. Thoughts
6. Use the best capitalization, punctuation, and spelling that you can.

**TIP!**  
For younger students, I replace the third step with sketching across the pages. Their drawings provide the same scaffold as the beginning, middle, and end decisions. It's more important that they think sequentially and get words onto the page than it is for them to recognize the important parts of their stories. Sometimes drawings can serve as an entry point for our older striving writers. Drawing is an important precursor to writing that is frequently overlooked in upper elementary classrooms.

When students hit the expectation that some types of writing involve research—usually in fourth or fifth grade—then the number of skills that have to be intact for them to get to a final product increases. Not only do they have to think of an idea, plan, and draft, but they also have to read, take notes, categorize and integrate information, keep track of sources, and understand the differences between paraphrasing and quoting. Almost always, striving writers are striving readers, so many of these skills are challenging if not frustrating if not demoralizing.

Once students know the steps of the process, they can better identify the places where they get stuck, where they struggle, or where they need instruction.

## The bridges we provide our striving writers may need to be placed in different parts of the process.

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Chaining is a technique used in behavioral analysis in which complex tasks are broken down into discrete steps (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2019). Applied behavior analysts do a complete task analysis, breaking the overall task down so that they identify each teachable unit into a behavior chain. Slocum and Tiger (2011) explain backward chaining as a system in which we teach the final step of the task analysis initially and progressively teach early components. Universal Design for Learning suggests “setting up prioritization, sequences, and schedules of steps” (CAST, n.d.). We can break these steps down within the order they come, but we can also break these steps down and prioritize them or work from different stages of the process. When we think about these steps and we break them down, we can invite students into the process on different sequences and schedules. While we don’t necessarily think of writing as a “behavior,” we can think of it as a series of discrete steps that students need to understand and progress through. In other words, we can place a bridge into the writing process and help a student to master a specific step. Then, once they incorporate it into their writing repertoire, we show them how that step fits into the chain so they can start to complete the chain of steps independently.

Let’s look at what this could look like within writing. Typically, when we introduce a new writing unit, we generate excitement, immerse the class into the genre, present one or two anchor charts, and we’re off. Sometimes we show students a process chart of the steps early on, and mostly, we move sequentially. We move through the steps, first to final, expecting experimentation, approximation, and mastery.

Striving writers are often striving readers and striving mathematicians. Therefore, they may have gaps in their understanding of the writing process because they are pulled for interventions for reading or math during writing time. Since they already miss enough instructional minutes, do *not* allow any sort of non-emergency excursions during direct instruction! Striving writers can hold off on trips to the bathroom, water fountain, or nurse for the ten minutes or so that direct instruction is happening.

Sometimes it helps our strivers to start in the middle of task, as opposed to the beginning, borrowing some of the thinking of backward chaining. In order to be more intentional about using backward chaining in writing instruction, I first create a task analysis (refer back to Chapter 3). Once we know the discrete steps of the process, it is much easier to *identify* the place where a child becomes stuck. Sometimes, beginning at the beginning plays over and over again into the stuckness, but beginning at a different point can provide a bridge over the mud for a writer whose wheels seem to spin.

## BACKWARD CHAINING IN NARRATIVE WRITING

Over and over, I hear from striving writers that they can’t come up with an idea for a story. Sometimes, necessity is the mother of invention, and one day, while working with a writer who struggled to think up an idea, I sketched a story

across three pages representing beginning, middle, and end. On the first page, I sketched someone trying to think of a story. On the second page, the person came up with an idea, and on the third page, the person looked happy to have written a story.

“Write this,” I said.

The child wrote their interpretation of the story, and seeing the success of this strategy, I sketched out a few more stories. While your stories could be ones you create, mine included the following:

- A child has a loose tooth, wiggles it until it falls out, and then gets a prize for it the next day.
- A child walks into a shoe store with a plan to get a new pair of sneakers. It’s hard to decide because there are so many choices, but the child picks out a pair and seems happy with their choice.
- A pet hamster disappears while playing in its walker, and the child looks all over until the hamster is found and returned to its home.

(All of these and more are included on the companion website, [resources.corwin.com/everychildcanwrite](https://resources.corwin.com/everychildcanwrite), ready for you to download and print for your students.)

These incomplete stories remove the task of thinking of an idea and planning how events will unfold. These stories are scaffolds, invitations into the complicated process of writing. “Sometimes it helps to get the hang of storytelling by having someone else’s story to tell,” I say. Some students benefit from using only one of my shared stories, while others choose to use two or three. Rarely have I had a student write more than that before wanting to generate their own idea and create their own plan. I celebrate and point out to them that while they’re writing *my* stories, they’re practicing some of their own important skills. (See how this is similar to the draw-think-write strategy from Chapter 3, as well? This time, though, the teacher is providing the bridge from thinking of an idea to writing it.)

Backward chaining is a form of a scaffold, so if you’re going to try it, make sure you’re planning for its removal. In this narrative work, students move from using my story starters to creating their own. Because I am thinking about the sequence of learning, sometimes I challenge them to think of an idea with me, then draw it on their own so they are one step closer to independence. Often, they make the jump straight to independence after writing out a couple of mine, though.