

# The One Hundred Steps to Writing

Copyright 2005 by Terry Lankutis, Instructional Engineer  
[LankutisT@aol.com](mailto:LankutisT@aol.com) [www.lankutis.com](http://www.lankutis.com)

This article may be reproduced providing all credits remain intact.

Remember the old trick of patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time? Or how about this one... bounce a basketball with your “non preferred hand” while standing on one foot. These tricks can pose quite a challenge and require a great deal of concentration.

These tasks are similar to what many students experience when asked to perform a writing task. I recently completed a task analysis of writing a sentence and found there can be over 100 steps to writing an average sentence!



We often forget how complicated the “simple” task of writing really is.

Let’s look at what this experience is *really* like. First, I must locate a writing utensil. For a student with organizational difficulties this alone can add 5-10 steps to the process.

Next, I begin to formulate the ideas in my mind or attempt to remember the assignment. I must keep this idea in mind as I begin the physical process of writing it down.

As I attempt to keep track of a sentence in my mind, I must also ask myself what the first word of the sentence is, what letter it starts with and does the word need to be capitalized.

Once I’ve answered those questions, I then must think of what the first letter of the first word looks like, how that letter is formed, what line the letter starts on, the spatial relationship that letter must have to the line in order for it to look right, and what direction the pencil needs to move in order for the letter to be formed correctly.

All this and I have only produced *one* letter! *Frustrating*

Now I have to think of what letter comes next in the word and think about where to position it in relationship to the previous letter. I still must attempt to remember the entire sentence I’m trying to produce.

I must repeat these steps 50-100 times per sentence.

What if the process stops or is interrupted for any reason? What if I have to look up a word in the dictionary, go to the bathroom, or go to recess or PE? In some cases, this could increase the number of steps for *one* sentence to well over 200.

As frustrating and time consuming as all this may be, it doesn’t hold a candle to the most discouraging word:

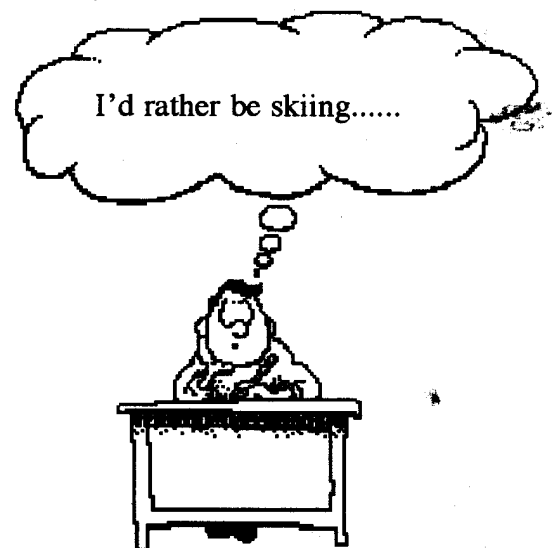
REWRITE!

*Ugh.....*

Can you imagine? I think I’ll just give up and take the *F* on my report card. Any wonder why I produce short sentences with small words or I act out when asked to write a three page, single spaced paper? The thought is just too overwhelming.

For many of us, the task of producing individual letters is second nature. We don’t have to think about how those letters are formed we just do it. This allows our minds to concentrate on content.

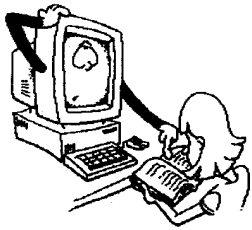
Not so for students who have learning differences such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, attention deficit disorders or a host of other complications. For many of these students the process of sequencing and remembering is extremely difficult.



These students have wonderful ideas and vocabulary but for many of them what blocks the path to success is the frustration of the PROCESS. If they cannot keep the paper on the desk, how can they be expected to write compound sentences?

Let's look at solutions.

It is important to separate the processes of mechanics, spelling, and writing whenever possible until the student gains confidence in their writing ability.



I recommend starting with a talking word processor. If the student hears what they write, they can make corrections immediately. You cannot believe how this simple adaptation helps.

When using a talking word processor, students hear their mistakes and are much happier making the corrections themselves before anyone else ever sees them.

No one will argue the fact that students do need to know how to use a pencil/pen and paper. Even the type of pen itself can make a big difference.

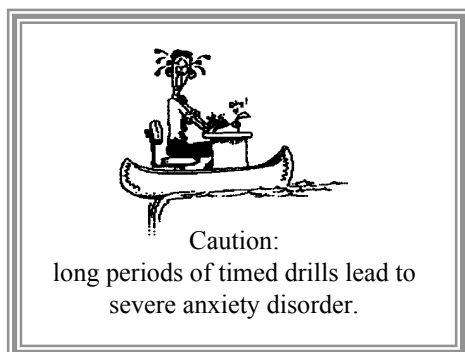
Sometimes if the pen is fatter it provides a better grip. Take a field trip to an office supply store and have the student try out different size pens to see which is most comfortable.

Keyboard or pencil and paper? There are appropriate times for each.

Allowing students to use the computer or devices such as the *AlphaSmart* Keyboard to complete their writing assignments can cut the number of steps in half even if the student is unfamiliar with the layout of the keyboard and uses the *hunt and peck* style.

Keyboarding is important but success happens when there is motivation behind it. Once the student begins to hunt and peck and have successful writing experiences, the anxiety begins to diminish and keyboarding speed increases.

Next I suggest separating the spelling process from the writing process.



Caution:  
long periods of timed drills lead to  
severe anxiety disorder.

*Co:Writer* software is one program that allows you to customize the dictionary to meet your needs. If the student needs to write a report on dinosaurs, they can create their own file with the dinosaur words. Then when they begin to write the report, those words are presented as word choices.

The first step would be to create a file with the words such as Triceratops, in the dictionary. Then as they type the letters Tri the word Triceratops would be one of the choices they see listed.

Allowing the student to separate the steps to writing, allows them to decrease the anxiety, which often accompanies the writing task.

To assist in sorting out visual information, color is a great tool. They can make all the spelling words red or all the verbs green.

*IntelliTalk* and *WriteOut:Loud* are not only word processors with the Text-to-Speech feature. Many of these programs also have the option to change the background color. When writing a Christmas story, the background can be green and the text red.

*You don't get harmony when everybody  
sings the same note.*

*-Doug Floyd*

Finally, goals must be well defined. If the goal is to learn to spell, then the student needs to concentrate on spelling. If the goal is to learn to keyboard or have good penmanship, the focus must be on those tasks.

When the goal is to write, the student must be allowed time to produce thoughts without the pressure of correct letter formation, spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The more students are encouraged to separate these processes, the more successful they become.

Over time, they develop the ability to merge these skills together with confidence and success.

*I quit school in the fifth grade because of pneumonia.  
Not because I had it but because I couldn't spell it.*

*-Rocky Graziano*