

Scaffolding the writing process

How do I move my students from non-writers to independent writers?

By Suzanne Feit

Writing is really a cognitive skill. It is a means to get ideas on paper. This sounds simple, but if the only tool available to a student is a pen or pencil, then writing initially becomes a fine motor challenge. For students with significant physical or learning challenges, the pencil is not a realistic solution. Computers can by-pass the fine motor planning of forming letters and enable students to write. However, if the only input is a QWERTY keyboard, then writing becomes a spelling or complex process of putting words together to demonstrate ideas. This approach might be like teaching someone to jog before learning to walk! Using *Classroom Suite 4* and IntelliKeys, there are many strategies available to scaffold the writing process and empower students to become independent writers.

The development of literacy skills has become a national priority. IEP Goals and Standards-based instruction mandate we teach all students literacy skills of reading and writing. Scaffolding the writing process to move students from non-writers to successful independent writers is a challenge for many educators. When working with students with physical, cognitive, or learning disabilities, the challenge is even greater as typical teaching methods are not effective. The world of assistive technology can provide the solution. UDL, guided support and student practice time are the key components for facilitating student success and independence.

The challenge we face is how to transform a non-writer into a successful, independent writer. Students will not be successful writers if they cannot read, so this article first must address how we support reading skills as well as writing skills. The new *Classroom Suite 4* from Cambium Learning Technologies focuses on the foundation skills for reading instruction. This focus coupled with the writing support that *Classroom Suite* has always offered, means that we now have the scaffolding to move students to independent writers.

The Challenge is how to move a child with learning, cognitive, or physical disabilities from being a non-writer to a successful, independent writer. The Solution is to couple templates in *Classroom Suite 4* with classroom instruction to provide differentiated, accessible writing lessons. The Result is students who achieve academic success.

The new *Classroom Suite 4*

contains dozens of templates that directly address the key components of reading instruction. Many newly designed templates allow students to develop the foundational skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. This builds a solid foundation for all learners to be able to recognize sounds, syllables and systematically develop the ability to connect sounds with letters to form letters into words.

Access for all learners

Good software will provide the opportunity for students to practice independently. The skills required to express thoughts while addressing accessibility is a high priority. The IntelliKeys keyboard or IntelliSwitch are the recommended alternative to the standard keyboard and a great way to provide alternative access.

Classroom Suite 4 provides a solution that is accessible to all learners. One feature of the software is the ability to customize



Figure 1.

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toolbars with words, phrases and sentences. This allows students to easily practice writing language patterns even before they learn to spell. All these elements of writing can be moved to the IntelliKeys using Overlay Maker 3. This scaffolds the writing process and reduces the overload on the students. (See Figure 1). The screen is also accessible to switch users because all toolbars on the screen can scan. Research shows that not only is this invaluable in promoting writing skills, but there is a strong correlation to building language skills. Once students can see and work tangibly with the language pattern, their own language emerges.

Reading support

The key components of good reading instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The new *Classroom Suite 4* aligns with the National Reading Panel and curriculum maps for many popular national reading programs. In addition, there are specific templates that address baseline assessments for data collection. All of this information is saved into the student portfolio for tracking and alignment with IEP goals and objectives.

Phonemic awareness

This is a screenshot from *Classroom Suite 4* (Figure 2). Students practice matching words with the same initial sounds. Each lesson provides explicit instruction with instructional targets and a clear purpose for learning. There is adequate modeling, guided practice and corrective feedback. Assessment is built in to each activity and data collected.



Figure 2.

Phonics

Students click and listen to the specific sounds they hear in a spoken word, and put them in order. There is also a distracter provided to help students avoid common errors while challenging them to focus and

listen to the sound components (Figure 3). This reinforces phonics, as well as serve as a precursor to spelling.

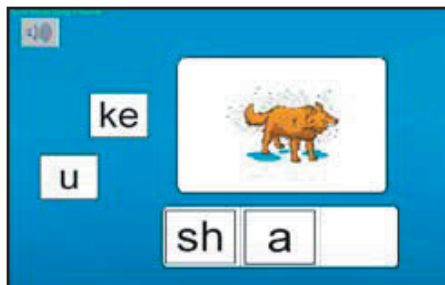


Figure 3.

Reading fluency

Activities help students identify and practice reading over 300 high frequency words from the Dolch word list. Students record and listen to their responses and practice independently. Teachers love this opportunity to promote skill building. The recorded voice is saved in the student portfolio. Teachers can also add curriculum-relevant sentences to practice reading fluency (Figure 4).

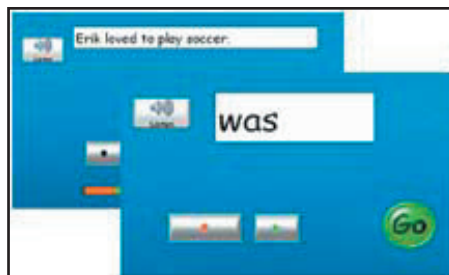


Figure 4.

Classroom Suite 4 provides students with explicit instruction, constructive practice and embedded assessments. Teachers gauge progress and individualize instruction for their students. This is the reading fluency scaffolding needed to build a foundation for writing independence. Students need to be able to identify sounds, letters and words so that they can then put them together to compose sentences and express their ideas. These activities are also accessible to AAC users who also need support to develop language fluency.

Writing templates

To create a sequential writing curriculum, educators must pay attention to what skills need direct instruction. Student practice is very important. While the exact statistical number might vary with studies, students with special needs require

more than 220 successful repetitions of an activity for mastery. Experience has shown us that tools that allow students to check their work, get immediate feedback and support independent learning are key factors in building literacy skills. Repetition and reinforcement are keys to successful learning.

Classroom Suite 4 provides unlimited opportunities and activities that break down the writing process into discreet skills. Educators also have an opportunity to create activities that target skill development. In addition, there are over 2600 activities on the IntelliTools Activity Exchange at <www.intellitools.com>. Teachers and therapists around the world who have used them successfully to promote literacy with their students have submitted these files.

6+ Traits of Writing

One good resource for learning the components of a good writing program is research the 6+ Traits of Writing. Many resources guide teachers in learning to structure and assess student writing. The basis is to create a structure for students to gather ideas, organize their work, explore word choice, find their voice, build sentence fluency, edit and present their work. Templates in *Classroom Suite 4* provide the scaffolding to build these skills. The use of graphics and text allow students to put ideas together with ease and support.

Sentence Builder

This activity allows students to select pictures and put them together to form sentences. They can change an adjective or verb and instantly see the new concept come to life! The dog can even bark on the screen to help build comprehension (Figure 5). This is also a wonderful tool for students learning English as a second language.

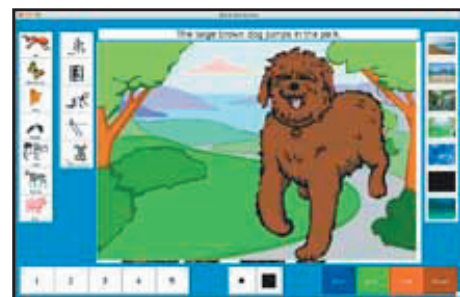


Figure 5.

Errorless writing

Building sentence fluency is fostered with activities that allow students to select words and phrases and then listen to them read aloud. The text can also speak each letter, word and sentence to promote fluency (Figure 6).

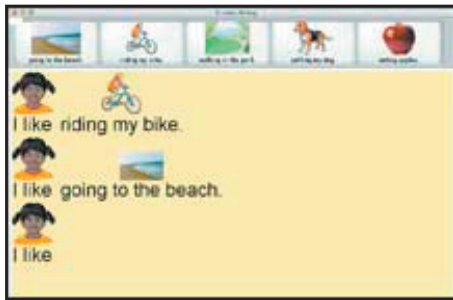


Figure 6.

Building vocabulary

A picture on the screen is useful to help students focus on the subject and guide the writing process (Figure 7). *Classroom Suite 4* allows teachers to add word banks to promote writing fluency. There is also built-in word prediction. These supports encourage students to expand their vocabulary. Using Talking Tooltips, each word can be read aloud when the student simply glides the mouse over a button. There is also a talking spell checker.

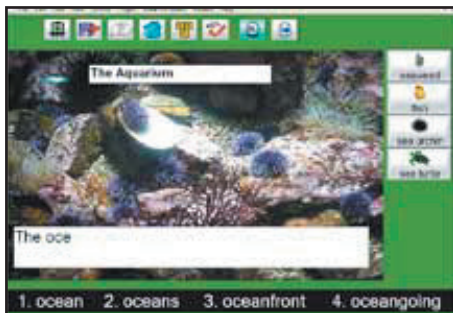


Figure 7.

Presentation

The StoryMaker activity allows students to create their own pictures and write about them (Figure 8). In primary schools, many teachers visit the lab and have students practice their vocabulary and spelling words by having them illustrate and use the words in context. It is a fun and motivating way to promote independent writing.

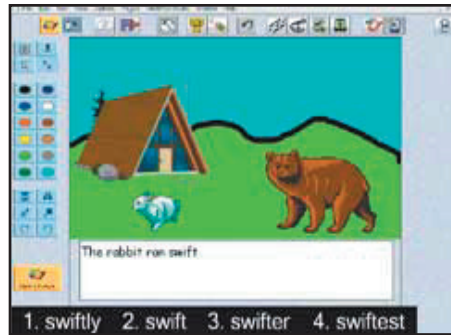


Figure 8.

Integration into the school curriculum

The Writing folder in *Classroom Suite 4* aligns directly with common writing assignments. Students are guided and supported in the writing process. Files are set to read aloud for auditory feedback. There are journals, autobiographies, and templates for writing business and personal letters. Each of these files contains leveled templates that guide and support the writing process. These documents contain word banks, a talking spell checker and word prediction to provide support while promoting independence. Even the blank writing document contains on-screen keyboards and supports for all learners.

Many of our students often have a longer learning curve. They struggle with forgetfulness, difficulty engaging, and poor concentration. Using *Classroom Suite 4* keeps students engaged while providing leveled and structured practice. The IntelliKeys can promote access by limiting the complexity of the standard keyboard. Overlays can support the writing process and gradually the word-by-word overlays are replaced by an alphabet layout. When teachers 'begin with the end in mind' they set a level that students can master and then increase the difficulty when the student is ready to progress.

Students learn best when they become active learners. Students learn best when they learn a skill and apply it in a variety of ways. With technology developed with UDL in mind, and appropriate computer access, writing can be effectively integrated into all areas of classroom life, both on and off the computer.

The templates included in the software allow educators to provide a customized, child-centered approach to curriculum instruction. Educators can build student

portfolios and generate reports to evaluate student strengths and identify areas that need further reinforcement. *Classroom Suite 4* provides a complete solution for struggling writers and their teachers. A network of IntelliTools Authors continues to create templates and tools to support writing. Please visit the IntelliTools Web site at www.intellitools.com to locate additional templates and activities successfully used in classrooms around the world to support writing for all students.

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