



## The Essential Role of Writing in School

by Patricia W. Newhall

Most students learn structured writing in elementary school and the first years of middle school. Students first learn to write sentences, then paragraphs. Assignments often take the form of personal narratives or stories, with a beginning, middle, and end.

In about the fourth grade, the goal of both reading and writing assignments begins to shift. Reading instruction typically moves from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Chall, 1983). The emphasis in writing instruction begins to shift from narratives to facts. The writing becomes more *expository* as we ask students to use their writing skills to explain, describe, inform, or persuade.

Ideally, by the time students are in middle school they can formulate a thesis statement, introduce it, support it with evidence using proper paragraph structure, and develop a conclusion. In other words, they can write a fluent essay. While most students write in all these forms during their school careers, fluent essay-writing is the highest priority in most schools’ curricula. Students are most often assessed on their essay-writing skills, both in the classroom and on state-mandated tests. Even as our culture shifts from written text to multimedia to communicate information, expository writing continues to be the focus in school (Schumaker & Deschler, 2003).

Clearly, students need to learn to express themselves in writing to succeed in school. Yet learning to write is in itself a very complex process. It relies on skills for expressive language, receptive language, decoding/encoding, studying, self-regulation and self-efficacy, and fine motor skills. In applied terms, students need good reading and listening comprehension as well as strong study skills to gather information from texts, lectures, and discussions. They need abstract reasoning and critical thinking skills to select, organize, analyze, and synthesize relevant information and ideas. They need organizational skills to group their ideas and prepare to write. They need to know different text structures — the difference between giving an opinion and setting up a contrast, for example — to organize their writing logically. They need a working knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics. Finally, students need cognitive strategies to choose an appropriate approach to each assignment. Given these demands, it’s not surprising that many students experience tremendous difficulty developing fluent writing skills.

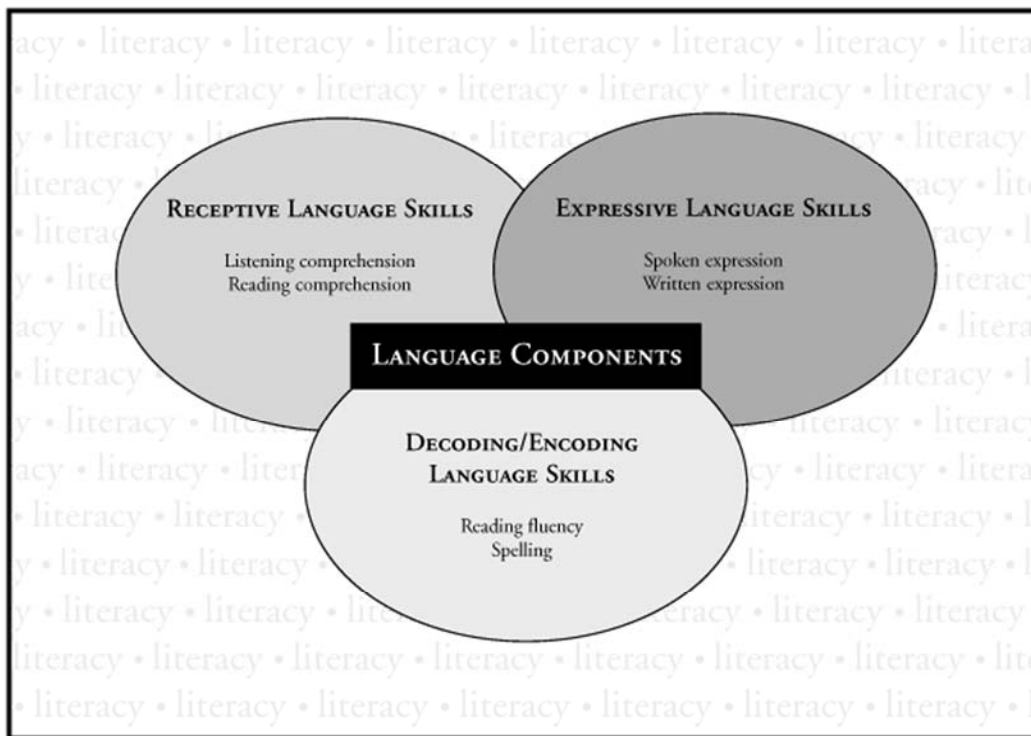
The challenges for students with a language-based learning disability are even greater. Students with LBLD are at a profound disadvantage in school, where most information and ideas are exchanged using language. These students’ difficulties can affect them when they read, think, and study — and most certainly when they write.

## Written Expression and Academic Competence

Students need skills in three interdependent areas to achieve academic competence: literacy skills, study skills, and self-regulation and self-efficacy skills. Attention, memory, and executive function are cognitive processes that support the skill areas.

### *Literacy*

*Literacy* refers to fluency in reading, writing, and speaking. It is the skill set most commonly recognized as essential to academic competence. Literacy results from mastery of expressive, receptive, and decoding/encoding language skills. Figure 2 shows these relationships.



**Figure 2.** The language skill areas that produce literacy.

- *Expressive language skills* enable people to speak and write clearly, meaningfully, and efficiently. *Written expression* is an expressive language skill.
- *Receptive language skills* enable people to comprehend words and sentences.
- *Decoding* is the automatic recognition and grouping of words that is essential to reading fluency and thus the bridge to comprehension. *Encoding* refers to spelling skills. Spelling skills contribute to fluent written expression.

To become literate, students need to have mastered the foundation-level components of spoken and written communication (table 1). Effective written expression requires mastery of all language components from phonemes to discourse. Spelling requires mastery of phonemes, morphemes, and semantics.

<b>Language Components</b>	
<b>Component</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Phonemes	The individual sound units that produce morphemes.
Morphemes	The smallest <i>meaningful</i> units of a word. A combination of morphemes makes individual words. A word may consist of a single morpheme (dog) or several morphemes (re-lay-ing).
Syntax	The rules of grammar that enable the meaningful combination of words in phrases and sentences.
Lexicon	The collection of all words in a given individual's language, or a collection of all the words in a larger community's language, such as a dictionary.
Semantics	The meanings that correspond to words. Words may have denotative meanings (literal definitions) and connotative meanings (implied definitions).
Prosody	The vocal intonations that can alter the literal meaning of spoken language.
Discourse	The linking together of sentences to create communication.
Pragmatics	Discourse plus nonverbal forms of communication (e.g., facial expression, eye contact, and volume).

**Table 1.** The components of language.

### ***Study Skills***

*Study skills* include organizational and memory strategies as well as strategies for analyzing tasks, managing time, and integrating new ideas and information. Study skills help students organize, remember, and apply their knowledge.

### ***Self-Regulation and Self-Efficacy***

Just as critical but less visible are self-regulation and self-efficacy skills. *Self-regulation* enables students to think and behave in ways that lead to meeting a goal. It includes skills for managing time, choosing appropriate study strategies, evaluating progress, and changing approaches when necessary. *Self-efficacy* is students' feeling of confidence that their actions will directly lead to success. Without self-efficacy, students are likely to give up when challenged or assign any success they have to luck rather than their own skills.