

HOW DO I WRITE...?

Scaffolding Preschoolers' Early Writing Skills

Sonia Q. Cabell ■ Laura S. Tortorelli ■ Hope K. Gerde

Providing young children with rich writing experiences can lay a foundation for literacy learning. This article presents a framework for individualizing early writing instruction in the preschool classroom.

During free-choice time, Mrs. Jackson (all names are pseudonyms and vignettes fictional) moves around her preschool classroom. Her students are busy in centers—some engaging in dramatic play, some working in journals, and some drawing animals at the science center. Carmen looks up to Mrs. Jackson as she passes her table and asks, “How do I write *snake*?”

Mrs. Jackson looks around the classroom at her students, who are just beginning to experiment with writing. Some students, like Carmen, know the names of all the letters and can produce most of them accurately. A lot of Carmen’s classmates, however, are still learning to write their own names, and others do not yet know the difference between drawing and writing. How can Mrs. Jackson help all of her students when they are in such different places in their development?

How should Mrs. Jackson respond? Should she name the letters of the word? Focus on the sounds in the word? Encourage Carmen to write down her “best guess” and praise her hard work? And how should Mrs. Jackson help the next child, and the next?

Many preschool teachers recognize the importance of early writing by making writing materials available in their classrooms and providing opportunities to write during the school day (Gerde

& Bingham, 2012). However, for teachers like Mrs. Jackson who want to offer explicit writing instruction to their students, the diversity of skill levels in a typical classroom presents a real challenge. Preschool teachers receive limited practical guidance about how to apply the research on early writing to help individualize instruction for children. Not surprisingly, recent research indicates that few teachers understand how to appropriately scaffold instruction to help children take the next step in their writing development (Gerde & Bingham, 2012).

In this article, we offer a straightforward framework that teachers can use to easily evaluate children’s writing and help children take the next step in development. We address why it is important to foster early writing skills, how writing typically develops in young children, and how teachers can actively support this development. We discuss in detail four different students who might appear in a typical preschool classroom and how

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teachers can use their understanding of early writing to shape instruction for these students.

We also provide examples and concrete suggestions for fitting individualized writing instruction into common classroom contexts, including centers, journaling, and morning message. This article will help teachers individualize early writing support for all students and at the same time foster other important early literacy skills through writing.

Early Writing and Why It Matters

Early writing, often used synonymously with the term *emergent writing*, encompasses the following: (a) the manual act of producing physical marks (i.e., mechanics), (b) the meanings children attribute to these markings (i.e., composition), and (c) understandings about how written language works (i.e., orthographic knowledge; Berninger, 2009). Although mechanics and composition are important features of early writing, we focus our attention on orthographic knowledge—how children’s marks reflect growing understandings of the writing system.

These understandings include both general conventions (e.g., print goes from left to right on a page) and understandings of specific features (e.g., speech can be represented by individual sounds, which can be written down using letters). We use the term *early writing* to refer to children’s representations of their knowledge

about the writing system (i.e., orthographic knowledge).

Early writing is one of the best predictors of children’s later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008). Specifically, early writing is part of a set of important foundational literacy skills that serve as necessary precursors to conventional reading (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998), including developing understandings of both print (i.e., print concept and alphabet knowledge) and sound (i.e., phonological awareness).

Print knowledge includes general understandings of how print works (e.g., left-to-right directionality) and the names and sounds of the alphabet. Knowledge about sound, or *phonological awareness*, includes the ability to attend to and manipulate sound structure of language, progressing from awareness of larger chunks (e.g., sentences, rhyme, beginning sounds) to blending and segmenting individual units of sound (i.e., phonemic awareness), for example, understanding that the word *cat* is made up of /c/, /a/, and /t/. These early skills work together to lay a foundation for later reading success (NELP, 2008).

As children integrate their knowledge of print and sound, they begin to grasp the *alphabetic principle*, a critical achievement in early literacy. The alphabetic principle is the understanding that oral language is made up of smaller sounds and that letters represent those sounds in a systematic way. Children can grow in their understanding of how print and sound work together

through experimenting with writing. Writing serves as a type of laboratory, in which even very young children are actively creating and testing hypotheses about how writing works (Bissex, 1980). Children notice print in their environment and use their experiences to invent and revise ideas about the rules that govern writing, “cracking the code” of literacy one piece at a time.

For example, a child might believe based on his experience with print and knowledge of the world that really big animals have really big written representations. So he might represent the word *elephant* with a very big and wide scribble and might represent the word *bee* with a very short, tiny scribble. As he begins to grasp the alphabetic principle, his hypotheses change, and he may later represent the word *elephant* with an L and the word *bee* with the letter B.

How Early Writing Develops

To help young children develop as writers, teachers need to understand

Pause and Ponder

- What benefits does writing have for young children? What does children’s writing tell us about their understanding of print and sound?
- What is the alphabetic principle, and how can it help teachers individualize instruction?
- What opportunities for writing do you provide in your classroom? How could you use the strategies presented in this article to encourage your students to write more and more often?

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typical writing development and use this knowledge to identify what children already know and what they are ready to learn next. Specifically, each child's writing provides teachers with a window into what that child knows about print and sound.

Children learning to write in an alphabetic language such as English typically follow a specific sequence of development (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008; Clay, 1975; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Hildreth, 1936; Kaderavek & Justice, 2000; Lieberman, 1985; Schickedanz & Casbergue, 2009; Temple, Nathan, & Temple, 2012). Drawing on this body of work we next describe four levels of early writing development, designed to provide teachers with a straightforward framework with which to evaluate children's written efforts.

Drawing and Scribbling

Early in development, children's drawings are their writings, and children make no distinction between the two when asked to write. Children then begin to make separate marks representing “writing” apart from their drawings, a key developmental event indicating that children have begun to grasp the functionality of writing as separate from illustration. These early marks are often directionless scribbles. These scribbles then begin to take on features of written text children see in

their environment, becoming horizontal and moving from left to right on a page. The scribbles eventually evolve into separate, distinct characters (e.g., Lieberman, 1985).

Connections to other literacy skills.

Children who are drawing and scribbling usually do not yet understand that writing is related to speech. Similarly, when listening to a storybook being read aloud, children at this level may not understand that the text carries its own meaning, and that the words the teacher is saying to tell the story come from the text (Justice, Pullen, & Pence, 2008). Their alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness skills are at the beginning points in development. They may know a few letter names, such as the first letter in their name. They may also be working on phonological awareness skills that attend to larger units of spoken language, such as rhyme.

Letters and Letter-Like Forms

Next, children begin to write with letter-like forms and a few letter shapes. Although these early forms mimic letter shapes, they are at first not

conventional letters. When children do begin writing conventional letters, they often produce what may appear to be random strings of letters because they do not yet connect letters to the sounds in spoken language. Children typically begin by reproducing letters found in their names. The first letter of their first names, along with other name letters, are usually seen repeatedly in children's early writing (Treiman, Kessler, & Bourassa, 2001). Children at this level may mix symbols and numbers with random letter-like forms and conventional letters.

Connections to other literacy skills.

When children are consistently writing with seemingly random letters and letter-like forms, they understand that print carries meaning, but they still do not generally understand that letters represent the sounds in spoken words in a systematic way. Although they may be growing in phonological awareness and developing knowledge of the alphabet, including the names of some letters, they have not yet made the speech-to-print connection. Because they represent their knowledge of print in their writings without representing sounds, their messages cannot be understood by adults without children's interpretations.

Salient and Beginning Sounds

Children reach a critical point in writing development when they start to represent the sounds that they hear in spoken language. Relying on their growing knowledge of both print and sound, children begin to invent

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spellings, which means they create logical phonetic spellings based on their knowledge.

They often represent *salient* sounds, or the sounds that are the most prominent because of the way they feel in the child's mouth (Bear et al., 2008). For example, a child might write *B* for the word *baby*, because her lips come together twice when saying the word. She might spell *V* for *elevator*, because that sound is the most distinct due to the vibration felt when saying the word. She might logically substitute *F* for *V* because the sounds feel similar on the lips. Beginning sounds in words are often the most salient ones, so children will have many beginning sounds in words represented. When writing a sentence, children may represent a letter for each salient sound they hear, for each word or for each syllable. For example, when writing the sentence, *I like juice*, a child may write *IKJ* without any spaces.

Connections to other literacy skills.

Children who are writing with salient and beginning sounds are beginning to grasp the alphabetic principle. At this point, children combine their knowledge of print and sound for the first time. They are just beginning to understand this principle and cannot yet identify where spoken words begin and end in written text (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003), so they usually do not use spaces between words while writing. This understanding shows up in children's "reading" as well. When finger-pointing to the words in memorized texts such as songs and nursery rhymes, children will most likely point to words according to stress units or syllables, getting off track on multisyllabic words (Flanigan, 2007).

Beginning and Ending Sounds

As children's phonemic awareness grows to the point at which they can

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attend to individual sounds in words, they begin to represent beginning and ending sounds of words in their writing. They also consistently write with spaces between words, indicating that they understand where word boundaries occur. When writing the simple consonant-vowel-consonant pattern word *map*, children at this level will write *MP*.

Children also use a letter-name strategy when beginning to spell, using their knowledge of letter names to create spellings; for example, *eight* might be spelled *AT*. Children who are writing with beginning and ending sounds generally do not consistently represent the middle sounds in words, especially vowel sounds, until the next phase in their development (see Bear et al., 2008).

Connections to other literacy skills.

Children's invented spellings mirror their early reading ability very closely (Morris et al., 2003). At this level, they are able to finger-point accurately to the words of a memorized rhyme and make self-corrections if they get off track. They actively use their knowledge of letter sounds and letter names to help them identify words, but often guess based on the first letter and sometimes last letter of a word, not yet attending to the vowel sounds; *cat* and *cut* would be most likely read the same way (Ehri, 2005). Over time, children's spellings become more conventional as they learn to represent all the sounds in words.

Providing Appropriate Support for Young Writers

This developmental writing framework provides teachers with guidance for appropriately scaffolding young children's efforts in early writing. The next sections provide classroom examples of individualizing writing support for children in each of the four developmental levels. In each example, Mrs. Jackson uses her observations of what the child already knows (as represented correctly in his or her writing) and what he or she is on the verge of learning (according to his or her level of development) to scaffold work for that child within his or her instructional range. By using the framework outlined in the Table, Mrs. Jackson is able to efficiently provide support to each child, moving him or her toward the next step of writing development.

Drawing and Scribbling: **Katrina**

"This says *castle*," Katrina says, pointing to her drawing of a castle in her journal. Katrina is an imaginative young girl who, inspired by story time today, wants to build a castle in the block center. The center is already full, so Katrina must sign up for the next turn, writing her name as a single horizontal scribble. While she waits, she draws a plan for her castle in her journal. Mrs. Jackson provides time in class every day for students to write or draw in their journals and encourages their use throughout the day.

Table Scaffolding Children's Writing Using Individualized Strategies

Level of development	Goals for children	Centers	Examples of appropriate strategies to support writing		
			Journals	Morning Message	
Drawing and Scribbling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To distinguish writing as separate from drawing To write with individual units Expanding name writing from initial letter to complete name 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create sign-in for high-traffic centers. Incorporate writing into play activities (e.g., take an order, sign for a package). Initiate opportunities to write down the words children speak. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask children to tell you about their drawing and write their words. Ask children to sign their work, praising scribbles, letter-like scribbles, and initials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Point out children's name letters in the message. Invite children to respond to the morning message and take dictation from them, drawing attention to this process by stating that you are writing their words down. 	
Letters and Letter-Like Forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To represent salient or beginning sounds in words To make connections between print and sound 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide play activities in which children write names (e.g., tour guide name tag, tickets for airplane, sign in at doctor's office). Offer activities that promote letter-sound correspondence. Brainstorm and write a list of words that begin with the same sound. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide writing prompts that support children to draw and write about themselves, their family, and peers. Ask children to identify initial sounds/letters in words and write those letters. Support children to verbalize what they will write first. Then ask what sounds they hear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize beginning sounds in words while writing. Draw attention to words in the message that begin with the same letter or sound, particularly name letters. Invite children to write their name as they participate in interactive writing. 	
Salient and Beginning Sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To write beginning and ending sounds in words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide play activities in which children write words (e.g., signs for the zoo they built in blocks, label a map). Sort picture cards with contrasting beginning sounds (e.g., /m/ and /s/) to solidify beginning sound knowledge. Play games to recognize ending sounds; begin with children's names. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide writing prompts that support children to draw and label. Ask children to verbalize what they want to write. Have a child identify the initial sound, then say the word again and identify the ending sound. Enunciate syllables and ending sounds to help children hear more than the initial sound in words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enunciate beginning and ending sounds in words as you model writing. Invite children to respond to the morning message and write their names and some words in their dictated sentence. 	
Beginning and Ending Sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To include the middle vowel sound To write complete words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sort simple word families (e.g., -at and -an) Provide play activities for children to generate sentences (e.g., write a letter to a peer, a recipe, scientist notes) and encourage them to write down all the sounds they hear in each word. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draw attention to middle sounds and ask children which sounds they hear. Ask children to illustrate their work to generate more detail for stories. Then have children tell you about the details and write about them. As they write more words, children have more opportunity to practice stretching out the sounds in words. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite children to share the pen by writing several words in their dictated sentences. Draw horizontal lines to represent each letter of a word to provide a cue for each sound/letter in the word. Support the child to listen for each sound in a word as they say the word. 	

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At this point in her development, Katrina has had little experience with print and pays more attention to the pictures in books. Her journal pages contain only drawings, and she draws or scribbles when asked to write. She can recognize her name and about three letters that appear in her name, but she has not yet begun to learn the sounds associated with these letters and does not yet incorporate them into her writing.

As indicated by the Table, there are three important goals for Katrina’s writing development. She needs to develop a distinction between pictures and text, start using individual units while writing, and develop her representation of her own name beyond the first letter.

Mrs. Jackson decides to focus on the first goal today and uses the picture book from story time as an example of the difference between pictures and print. “I love your castle, Katrina! Let’s look at our book again. Yes, there’s a picture of a castle there too! And let me show you one other thing, over here, there is the word *castle*. See, the book tells the story in two ways—in the pictures and in the writing.” Mrs. Jackson coaches Katrina to add some scribbles beneath her picture and praises the result—“It looks like the book now!” She then directs Katrina’s attention back to the book, highlighting how each word is made up of letters. She focuses on some words that include the letter *k*, the letter most familiar to Katrina.

Going forward, Mrs. Jackson will engage Katrina in a dialogue about her journal entries, over time encouraging her to incorporate familiar letters into her writing. Although Katrina’s journal does not at all resemble conventional writing at this point, it is the first step toward making print concrete for Katrina. At this point, Katrina’s writing development focuses on increasing her knowledge of print; she is not yet ready to integrate phonological awareness or her letter-sound knowledge into her writing activities.

Letters and Letter-Like Forms: Marvin

Marvin is playing doctor in a dramatic play center, writing and signing prescriptions for other students in his group. All of Mrs. Jackson’s centers include opportunities and materials for writing. Mrs. Jackson encourages students to make signs and labels for their creations at the blocks and clay centers, draw and label animals and plants in the science center, and incorporate writing into dramatic play, for example, taking orders in a restaurant. Centers give children the chance to experiment with writing at

their own level in playful, authentic contexts.

Each prescription Marvin writes includes his name, which he writes as *MAV*, along with a few other characters that look like letters or numbers. As is often the case for young writers, Marvin’s name writing is more advanced than his other writings. He remembers what his name looks like from memory rather than writing letters based on the sounds he hears; he doesn’t yet understand that *Marvin* starts with the /m/ sound. Over the course of the week, Marvin has written several journal entries using a combination of *M*, *A*, *V*, and other characters that resemble letters and numbers, as is typical for children at this second level of writing development.

Judging by the letter-like forms he includes in his writing, Marvin does understand that he should be writing more than three letters, but he isn’t sure what to add. Because Marvin’s writing does not have any connection to the sounds in the words, the goals for his instruction should push him toward making that connection and developing the alphabetic principle. As indicated by the Table, Marvin needs to make connections between print and sound and use that knowledge to begin to represent beginning or salient sounds in his writing.

When Mrs. Jackson stops by the play center, she praises Marvin: “I like how you wrote your name! Let’s write your friends’ names on their

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prescriptions, too!” She then talks to Marvin about the letter *M*—it is the first letter in his name, and the first sound in his name is /m/. They practice saying “/m/, /m/, Marvin” together while pointing to the letter *M*. Then Mrs. Jackson asks Marvin which of his “patients” in the dramatic play center have names that start with /m/. With her support, Marvin identifies Maria and Meredith and writes their names down as *M*'s combined with scribbles. With Mrs. Jackson's direction and support, Marvin is also able to identify the /s/ at the beginning of *Sam* and /l/ at the beginning of *Liz*. In each case, Mrs. Jackson identifies the letter that makes the target sound and helps Marvin write the letter on the prescription.

Marvin is developing an understanding of how letters represent sounds at the beginning of words, a first step toward grasping the alphabetic principle. Going forward, Mrs. Jackson will encourage Marvin to identify beginning and salient sounds and to match those to letters in his writing in play centers and in his journal, embedding this systematic connection in his mind.

Salient and Beginning Sounds: Carmen

“How do I write *snake*?” asks Carmen. Carmen is working on a draw-and-label activity in the science center. Because centers allow each child to work at his

or her own level, Carmen has labeled a picture of a tiger with *T*, an elephant with *L*, and a snake with *S*. Her ability to identify a salient sound in each word and match it to a letter indicates that she has begun to sound out the words she writes phonetically, and this pattern holds throughout her other class writings this week.

Carmen has an initial understanding of the alphabetic principle and understands that speech is systematically connected to print in a left-to-right fashion. Like most children in this level of writing development, she often uses only one letter to represent syllables or entire words, rather than representing each individual sound.

Her writing skill reflects her other literacy skills; Carmen knows all the letter names and letter sounds and has excellent awareness of the beginning sounds in words. However, when finger-pointing to a known text, such as a nursery rhyme, she often gets off track when she encounters two-syllable words. She generally cannot distinguish between written words that begin with the same sound. For example, she

may identify the same word as *mom* or *mother*.

As indicated by the Table, the key goal for Carmen is beginning to hear and represent additional sounds in words in her writing, in particular identifying both initial and final sounds in words. Mrs. Jackson looks at the *S* on Carmen's paper. “I like the way you wrote down the first sound you heard in the word *snake*. *S-s-s-nake*. Great job! Do you hear any other sounds in *snake*? Let's say the word together and stretch it out.”

As they stretch out the word, Mrs. Jackson emphasizes the final /k/ sound, which Carmen identifies. Mrs. Jackson follows up by asking, “How do you write [the sound] /k/?” Carmen might choose the letter *C*, because that letter represents the /k/ at the beginning of her own name. Carmen settles on the spelling *SC*, and Mrs. Jackson praises her effort, because Carmen is using the letter-sound correspondences she knows to write based on the sounds she hears within words. During both center and journal time, Mrs. Jackson will encourage Carmen to listen for the final sound in the word and represent that sound in her writing as well as the initial sound. Carmen is spelling!

Beginning and Ending Sounds: Jayden

Jayden is working in the story-writing center, recounting and illustrating the class's recent field trip to a farm. He has written his own name and the names of

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his friends accurately and has begun to list some animals they saw on the trip, for example, *DG* for *dog*, *GT* for *goat*, and *PG* for *pig*.

Jayden is a diligent writer of words, working very slowly and carefully sounding out words. He has memorized a few simple words that he always writes accurately, such as his friends’ names. His other writings this week show that he is primarily writing with beginning and ending sounds in words. He represents most consonant sounds correctly in writing but may still exhibit some confusion with letter names, such as writing *YN* for *when* because the pronunciation of the letter-name *Y* (“why”) makes the /w/ sound.

Jayden knows virtually all letter names and letter sounds. In terms of vowels, he is most familiar with the long sounds, which match the names of those letters. For example, he writes *snow* as *SO*. He is also able to track a memorized rhyme, self-correcting as he attempts to make the speech-to-print match. He is also actively using his knowledge of letter names and letter sounds to help him sound out words, but this process is slow and labor-intensive for him. He has trouble distinguishing between similar words such as *bed* and *bad*, as he does not always attend to vowel sounds in words. When reading, he relies heavily on contextual clues and picture supports to guess the right word when he is unsure.

Because Jayden is working at the fourth level of writing development,

two goals are appropriate for him: consistently representing middle vowel sounds in his writing, and writing some simple, complete words. Achieving these goals will also support his reading development by helping him sound out words more accurately.

Mrs. Jackson tries to draw Jayden’s attention to the vowel sound in simple words. To build on Jayden’s spelling of the word *goat* (*GT*), Mrs. Jackson draws a rectangle with three sections, or boxes, on a piece of paper. She writes the letters *G* and *T* in the first and last boxes, respectively. “You wrote two sounds, but there are three. *G* is at the beginning of *goat*; *T* is at the end of *goat*. What do you hear in the middle?” Mrs. Jackson emphasizes the long /o/ sound. Jayden identifies the sound and writes an *O* in the middle box, spelling *GOT*. This spelling represents a step forward in that Jayden is focusing on the medial vowel sound. Moving forward, Mrs. Jackson will support Jayden by continuing to work on both long and short vowel sounds in other simple words.

Putting It All Together

As demonstrated by Mrs. Jackson’s classroom, preschool children vary widely in their ability to write, and individual instruction is key to scaffolding each child’s development. Teachers can also support children of all levels of writing ability within one activity, however, by strategically individualizing how they involve each child.

The morning message is one activity Mrs. Jackson uses to engage children in the process of writing by cocreating a meaningful message for the class. Although this activity is teacher directed, Mrs. Jackson creates an interactive writing environment by modeling the writing process for all children and engaging some children each day in writing as they share the pen.

Mrs. Jackson begins, “Children, we are going to write the words to our message so we can read them.” This statement reminds children such as Katrina that we read the words we write. She says and writes, “This week we are studying transportation. Mrs. Jackson peddled her bicycle to school today.” When she comes to the word *bicycle*, she asks, “Who can help me begin the word *bicycle*? Marvin, what sound do you hear at the beginning of *b-b-bicycle*?” Mrs. Jackson calls on Marvin because she knows he needs practice making connections between letters and their sounds. Marvin responds, “*b-b-bicycle*.” “Great, Marvin, *bicycle* does begin with /b/. Does anyone know what letter makes the /b/ sound?” Carmen exclaims, “*B!*” “Yes, *B!*” Mrs. Jackson offers Marvin the marker so he can write the *B*.

Next she asks the children, “How did you get to school today?” Both Katrina and Carmen rode the bus, so Mrs. Jackson brings them up together. She reads aloud as she writes, “_____ and _____ rode the _____.” She invites Katrina and Carmen to write their names in the blanks. Katrina scribbles from left-to-right, and Carmen writes all the letters in her name. Pointing to each word, Mrs. Jackson reads, “*Katrina and Carmen rode the...* What word is next, Katrina? What type of transportation did you and Carmen take to school?” Katrina says, “*Bus.*”

Mrs. Jackson draws three small boxes in the last blank, one to represent each letter in the word. She says to the class, "Let's write the word *bus* together. *Bus* has three letters, 1, 2, 3 [points to the three boxes]. Let's think about the first sound in the word *bus*. *Bus* and *bicycle* begin with the same sound! What letter should I write? ...Great, *bus* begins with *B*. Carmen, what other sounds do you hear in *bus*?" She emphasizes the /s/ at the end of *bus*. Carmen replies, "S," and Mrs. Jackson directs her to write the *S* in the last box.

"Great you heard /b/ for *B* and /s/ for *S*. Listen closely because there is another sound in the middle of the word. *Buuuuuus*. Jayden, what do you hear?" Jayden says, "U" and adds the *U* into *BUS*. At the end of their writing, Mrs. Jackson reads the entire message, pointing to each word and asking children to read along with her.

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Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a framework for teachers to understand the goals and types of activities for supporting children at each level of early writing development (see Table). How can teachers use this framework to help children move forward in their writing development? The first step is to determine each child's current level of development through observing children's writing. A thoughtful, ongoing examination of children's early writing can provide teachers with a window into children's knowledge of print and sound that can inform productive instruction.

Although writing progresses in a developmental order, it is not necessarily the case that children master one level before moving to the next. Many children move back and forth between levels of difficulty, particularly across writing tasks (e.g., name writing vs. story writing), sometimes exhibiting different levels on the same day! Because children show this flexibility in their writing, it would be helpful for teachers to evaluate three or more writing samples taken over the course of a few days across different classroom contexts. Only one of these samples should be name writing, as children tend to write their names at a more sophisticated level than they do other words (Levin, Both-de Vries, Aram, & Bus, 2005).

From these writings, a teacher can identify the *highest* level at which children are consistently writing

(apart from their name-writing representation). There is one key question to consider when determining writing level: Are children representing any sounds in their writing? The answer to this question tells teachers whether children are beginning to grasp the alphabetic principle (i.e., salient and beginning sounds; beginning and ending sounds). After determining each child's level, teachers can use the Table to readily identify the appropriate goals and teaching strategies for each level across common classroom writing contexts.

Effectively incorporating support for children's varying writing skills provides a gateway to developing other critical literacy skills and significantly contributes to later reading achievement (NELP, 2008). The knowledge teachers gain from assessing children's writing samples can be used to select appropriate, individualized strategies for scaffolding and expanding children's writing efforts. Individualizing writing instruction provides meaningful and approachable writing experiences for all children, setting the stage for reading and writing success for years to come.

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TAKE ACTION!

1. This week, collect at least three writing samples from each of two children.
2. Based on the writing samples, assess each child's highest level of writing development. Remember to obtain more than just name-writing samples!
3. Look at the Table to identify each child's stage of writing and potential goals for that child.
4. Reflecting on the examples in this article, think about strategies you can use to help each child move forward in his/her writing.
5. Implement these individualized strategies for each child and see how they respond.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

IRA Journal Articles

- “Social Contracts for Writing: Negotiating Shared Understandings About Text in the Preschool Years” by Deborah Wells Rowe, *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February/March 2008
- “Writing Workshop in Preschool: Acknowledging Children as Writers” by Kelly A. King, *The Reading Teacher*, March 2012

IRA Books

- *Building a Foundation for Preschool Literacy: Effective Instruction for Children's Reading and Writing Development* (2nd ed.) by Carol Vukelich and James Christie
- *Oral Language and Early Literacy in Preschool: Talking, Reading, and Writing* (2nd ed.) by Kathleen A. Roskos, Patton O. Tabors, and Lisa A. Lenhart

Even More!

- Baker, E.A., and Rowe, D.W. (2008, September 15). Preschool writing. (*Voice of Literacy* podcast): www.voiceofliteracy.org/posts/26532
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