A critical focus of effective writing interventions is to help students develop a more sophisticated approach to composing, one that is similar in design to those used by skilled writers (Harris & Graham, 1999). After studying the skills and approaches used by effective writers, Harris and Graham (1996, 1999) designed the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) approach as an intervention to enhance composition skills. Self-regulated strategy development (a) incorporates strategic knowledge by teaching strategies to accomplish an academic task, (b) enhances self-regulation through goal setting and self-monitoring, (c) improves content knowledge by focusing on what students need to write about, and (d) improves motivation through an I can do attitude (Graham & Harris, 2003). This approach has been used effectively with students with and without learning disabilities who are experiencing writing difficulties, irrespective of whether their writing problems were based in the lower level (i.e., mechanics) or higher level (i.e., generation of ideas, planning, organization, revising) aspects of writing (Berninger, 1999). A meta-analysis by Graham and Perin (2007) found that explicitly teaching adolescents the process and planning involved in writing was generally advantageous. A core feature of the effectiveness of the approach is the focus on teaching strategies to promote self-regulation in writing (Graham & Harris, 2003). Characteristics of SRSD instruction include (a) explicit teaching, (b) interactive learning, (c) individualized instruction, and (d) criterion-based assessment viewed as an ongoing process in which new strategies are introduced as older ones are revised and retooled for new and current learning situations (Graham & Harris, 2003). The following intervention was developed based on the SRSD approach to address the unique writing difficulties experienced by an 11-year-old student with a chronic illness.

The PLEASE Strategy Plus Spelling

Born with a compromised immune system, Cassie (pseudonym) received a bone marrow transplant in 1998 and experienced a number of complications from treatment...
that have had a negative impact on her school attendance. She is currently taking immune suppression oral medications and prophylactic antibiotics. There are no known cognitive side effects attributed to the medications.

Cassie receives her sixth-grade educational program in a combination of classroom-based (3 days per week) and distance educational delivery formats within her neighborhood middle school. The six 60-minute intervention sessions took place weekly within the Distance Education office. According to her teachers, Cassie was currently working at or just below grade level in most areas, with notable difficulties in the area of written language. Cassie was administered the *Wechsler Individual Achievement Test–Second Edition* (WIA T-II; The Psychological Corporation, 2002) to confirm areas of academic strength and weakness. The results of the WIA T-II (Writing Prompt A) confirmed reported observations of written expression difficulties, with an overall standard score of 84 (14th percentile). An examination of the quality of Cassie’s paragraph writing skill prior to the intervention, as depicted in Figure 1, indicated text generation as a series of sentences composed with little evidence of the needs of the reader, topic constraints, or organizational elements. Spelling was also identified as a problem within the written text and was assessed just below average (i.e., standard score of 89, 23rd percentile) on the Spelling subtest of the WIA T-II, a single-word dictated spelling test.

**Promoting Cassie’s Self-Regulation in Writing**

The SRSD strategy chosen for this intervention was the PLEASE heuristic for paragraph writing (Welch, 1992). PLEASE is a mnemonic that reminds students of the following steps:

1. *Pick* the paragraph students want to write.
2. *List* ideas that might be included.
3. *Evaluate* the list for relevant ideas.
4. *Activate* by choosing a topic sentence.
5. *Supply* the list of ideas to generate sentences to support the topic sentence.

Graham and Harris (2005b) provided a brief overview of how this strategy might be implemented, and their outline is referenced throughout the description that follows.

**Materials and resources.** A laminated PLEASE card (describing the activity associated with the acronym) was provided to Cassie during instructional sessions (see Figure 2). Additionally, Cassie established an ongoing spelling record form (i.e., the “Have-A-Go” chart) that was used each session to identify possible misspellings. A criterion-based measure to assess paragraph writing was designed to evaluate the number of spelling errors and words in the paragraph and whether the written product included (a) a topic sentence, (b) supporting details, and (c) a concluding sentence. Any words that were identified as misspellings were transferred to the ongoing Have-A-Go chart, and this chart was updated during weekly sessions.

All intervention sessions were preplanned, and in addition to the ongoing curriculum-based measures (CBMs) of paragraph writing, anecdotal comments and insights were recorded immediately following weekly sessions. This anecdotal information provided a rich source of data on the direction, consistency, social acceptability, and overall fidelity of the intervention.

**The approach.** The SRSD model was used to teach the writing strategy, skills, and knowledge targeted for instruction. The SRSD approach explicitly teaches students planning or revising strategies in combination with the skills to regulate the use of these strategies to enhance students’ writing along with their self-efficacy for completing writing tasks (Graham & Harris, 2005b). The procedures include goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-instruction (De La Paz & Graham,
2002). Importantly, the activities within the SRSD model emphasize a collaborative instructional process leading to the enhancement of an internalized, self-regulatory approach to writing.

In an effort to teach Cassie the knowledge and skills needed to internalize and demonstrate the writing and self-regulation strategy, SRSD incorporates a series of instructional stages:

1. **Discuss it**, where current writing performance and strategies are discussed and the target strategy is introduced.
2. **Model it**, where the strategy is modeled aloud combined with self-talk.
3. **Memorize it**, where the steps in the strategy and student’s self-talk are memorized as a mnemonic.
4. **Support it**, where the student practices the strategy under scaffolding.
5. **Independent performance**, where the student independently performs and the scaffolding fades (Graham & Harris, 2005b).

Since difficulty with the mechanics of writing, such as spelling, can interfere with generating content (Graham & Harris, 2005b), spelling instruction followed only after the initial production of text, thereby removing the mechanical demands of spelling for initial text generation. Treiman (1998) suggested that spelling instruction should be embedded in student’s writing experiences to create a meaningful instructional context. Using this approach, certain misspellings within Cassie’s own writing were targeted for discussion, evaluation, and improvement. During this intervention, Cassie’s first piece of writing (Lesson 3) was reviewed, and she reread her writing, circling words that did not look right (Loeffler, 2005). Once errors had been identified, Cassie was encouraged to go back and attempt to correct her spelling. This strategy is documented by the student on the Have-A-Go chart (see Table 1 for Cassie’s Have-A-Go spellings), where the student makes four columns: (a) word from text, (b) have-a-go, (c) correct spelling, and (d) copied spelling (Sipe, 2001). This process was repeated for each of the following written tasks during this intervention. An example of the chart Cassie made during the intervention is shown in Table 1.

**The weekly self-regulated writing sessions.** A description of each of the instructional sessions with Cassie follows.

1. **Discuss it.** An overview of the purpose of the intervention and the first part of the planning and writing strategy were presented. A series of well-written and less well-written paragraphs were read, and parts of a well-written paragraph were identified (i.e., the paragraph has a topic sentence, is about one thing, and has supporting details). This session included a discussion about (a) how well-written paragraphs follow specific form and grammatical rules (i.e., with correct punctuation, capitalization, and sentence structure) and (b) how this knowledge may help Cassie improve her own writing by comparing the two paragraphs for clarity and understanding.

2. **Memorize it.** This session involved a verbal review of what was done in the previous lesson and an introduction of the PLEASE mnemonic. The benefits of each step and how each step could be used when writing a paragraph were discussed. Approaches to memorizing the steps were also presented. A series of Cassie’s previously written paragraphs were reviewed to identify and chart how many of the parts (e.g., topic sentence, supporting comments, concluding paragraph, word count) the student included. This constituted the ongoing data collection for the CBM. At this point, Cassie committed to learning and using the strategy and also committed to weekly charting of the four measured components of paragraph writing. Additionally, at this point the Have-A-Go chart was introduced with Cassie’s previously written examples and modeled. This Have-A-Go chart was an ongoing addition to each piece of writing that was completed during this intervention, totaling approximately 4 hours of instructional time.

3. **Model it.** The process of using the PLEASE strategy was modeled aloud during paragraph writing, and Cassie was encouraged to help apply the strategy to a paragraph written collaboratively and then one she wrote on her own. Next, how the strategy helped in composing the paragraph was discussed as well as those verbalizations used to aid in successful implementation of the strategy (e.g., “Does my paragraph have a topic sentence?”). Similarly, Cassie was encouraged to provide personal self-statements she could use to help in her own writing (e.g., “How do I think it went?” “What did I accomplish?” “What went well and what didn’t?” “What needs improvement?”).

4. **Support it.** This session began with Cassie writing a descriptive paragraph, using the PLEASE strategy and her own personal self-statements. She was encouraged to use the strategy as well as her self-statements. Finally, whether the paragraph had all three parts (i.e., topic sentence, supporting details, and concluding statement) was assessed, and the total number of words was counted. This information was subsequently charted in the ongoing CBM. This process was repeated with an additional paragraph written by Cassie during session and another assigned as homework before the end of the session.

5. **Do it myself.** This session included charting the CBM for the homework paragraph, a review of the PLEASE strategy, a discussion as to when this strategy might be useful, and Cassie’s review of her perspectives about the positive
and negative aspects of using this strategy. She then wrote a final paragraph during session that was subsequently reviewed.

6. **Final evaluation.** A readministration of the components of the Written Expression subtest with the alternative paragraph writing prompt and the Spelling subtest of the WIAT-II was conducted to compare postintervention results with preintervention baseline performance. This paragraph was also reviewed and charted according to the CBM guidelines.

### Evaluating the Approach

Throughout all of the sessions, additional information was collected using observations and field notes, descriptions of instructional interactions, and a CBM of Cassie’s work samples. This assessment included a series of weekly chartings, with initial baseline established from the initial administration of the WIAT-II, across five areas: (a) topic sentence, (b) supporting details, (c) concluding sentence, (d) word count, and (e) number of spelling errors. Explanations of each criterion were simplified for easy understanding by the student and to increase the reliability of this assessment. First, the topic sentence was defined and then demonstrated as being the first sentence of the paragraph and something that gives the reader an idea of what the paragraph is going to be about. Second, supporting details were identified as information that support, or explain, the idea expressed in the topic sentence. It was also explained that paragraphs in English often have more than two supporting ideas. This was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing *a paragraph with no details* and 5 representing *a paragraph with full details*. Finally, the concluding sentence was defined and demonstrated as a sentence at the end of the paragraph that summarizes the presented information. The concluding sentence was further explained as a topic sentence in reverse. The additional word count and spelling errors were reviewed and tabulated at the end of each written paragraph, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Observing Cassie’s behaviors (e.g., being a passive learner who needed prompting and guidance to review her work at the beginning yet engaging more as her skill and evaluations increased) provided ongoing support for the social acceptability of this design. A sample of Cassie’s writing, incorporating the evaluation criteria, is shown in Figure 3.

**Reliability check.** Interrater checks were conducted as a fairly simple method to monitor the reliability of the ongoing evaluations. The other rater (a special education teacher with a master’s degree who had never worked with Cassie) was asked to rate the same paragraphs as those initially rated using the same criteria. A high interrater agreement of 91% was obtained across all of the paragraphs produced by Cassie over the course of the intervention.

### Cassie’s Response to the Intervention

#### Curriculum-Based Measurement Results

Figure 4 shows the results of the CBM for paragraph quality, word count, and number of spelling errors. Both the ratings of the paragraphs and the overall word count for each paragraph shows a steady and marked increase over the sessions. Paragraph ratings increased for the first three paragraphs written, decreased for the next two, and then increased to a high point for the final evaluation. Similarly, word count followed the same pattern. Spelling errors showed a reverse pattern from that of paragraph and word count, with the lowest levels at the beginning and end of the intervention. One reason for this decline has to do with the risks Cassie was taking in her contextual spellings by including words that were more difficult for her to spell in order to better express herself in writing.

Weekly sessions with Cassie required ongoing and specific feedback about her writing performance. It was often necessary to remind Cassie of the purpose for the session and to secure ongoing commitment from her to try her best at the task. The noticeable drop in the charting of the CBM around the third week of instruction was

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### TABLE 2
Weekly Charting of the Four Measured Components of Paragraph Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Topic or Type</th>
<th>Topic Sentence</th>
<th>Supporting Details (1–5)</th>
<th>Concluding Sentence (Y/N)</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 28/07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>67 (6 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 7/07</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>43 (2 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 14/07</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>127 (3 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 14/07</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>96 (3 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 21/07</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>64 (5 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 28/07</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>120 (8 errors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 28/07</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>86 (4 errors)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A 5-point Likert scale was used (1 = no supporting details, 5 = fully supporting details).
directly related to a reduction in scaffolding and a greater expectation by Cassie to take on more of the skill set independently. Her performance was monitored closely, and to Cassie’s credit and the efficacy of the intervention approach, Cassie’s performance rebounded and resumed the upward trajectory soon after the reduction in scaffolding.

**Post-intervention**

The WIAT-II Written Expression (alternative Prompt B) and Spelling subtests were readministered to assess whether Cassie’s paragraph writing and spelling skills had improved over the course of the intervention. Table 3 shows the scores Cassie achieved at Time 1 (preintervention) and Time 2 (postintervention) on the Written Expression and Spelling subtests. A second rater scored both assessments using the scoring instructions of the WIAT-II manual. A high agreement of 100% for Spelling and 92% for Written Expression was obtained. As shown in Table 3, Cassie’s performance on the Written Expression subtest improved by 8 standard score points, a 0.5 standard deviation improvement in performance compared to baseline level (Time 1). However, Cassie’s spelling skills as measured by the Spelling subtest at Time 2 decreased from Time 1. Upon closer inspection of her performance at both times, Cassie reached her ceiling at the same location but failed to spell two previous words correctly. The drop in percentile was further influenced by an increase in age over the course of the intervention.

An indication of the progress Cassie had made within the self-regulated writing approach was observed during the final session. During this session, as was the pattern, the daily lesson was explained to Cassie. Immediately after this explanation, she produced the paragraph homework that had been assigned the previous week and proceeded to read the paragraphs aloud stopping at each section (title, opening sentence, details, and conclusion) to comment specifically as to how these met the expectations we had been discussing for good paragraphs and how the PLEASE strategy was being incorporated into her own writing. These writing samples were by far the best paragraphs she produced up to that point, and she spontaneously verbalized how the strategy was incorporated within her writing.

**Conclusion**

The results of this intervention with Cassie indicated that SRSD was an effective intervention for a chronically ill middle school student with writing difficulties. Cassie’s response to this writing intervention was immediate and positive as indicated by an increase in both the quality and quantity of written output over this short intervention. Additionally, Cassie made a series of positive comments during the sessions (e.g., “I can see my paragraphs getting better on the chart” and “PLEASE [strategy] helps me to keep my ideas on the topic sentence”), lending support to the idea that students find these interventions socially acceptable. In keeping with the essence of SRSD, Cassie developed a structure through which to regulate her writing behavior. She moved from an external reliance on this structure to an internalization of applying the procedures to her own writing. Teaching lower order writing skills, such as spelling, has also been linked positively with improved quality in students’ composition (Berninger & Amtmann, 2003). In Cassie’s case, the CBM data indicated a decline in spelling errors at the onset of the intervention, then an increase in errors, followed by a gradual decline again. This pattern of performance was generally due to Cassie’s taking greater risks in her word choices and using more sophisticated vocabulary and words that she did not know how to spell as her facility with the composing process increased. Spelling has also been described as a particularly difficult skill to remediate (Bruck, 1988), and it is therefore not
It is surprising that after only 4 hours of embedded spelling instruction, limited spelling improvement was observed. Other researchers (Graham & Harris, 2005a) have reported more impressive gains in spelling outcomes than the present results for intensive and explicit spelling interventions over a longer intervention period (e.g., 12 hours). An intervention of longer duration in the present case may have led to a greater improvement in Cassie’s spelling skills. More intervention research is needed to understand how contextualized spelling instruction embedded within writing interventions can effectively be incorporated into an SRSD approach.

The SRSD approach outlined within this intervention description provides teachers and their students with writing difficulties a practical and effective strategy supported by a strong evidence base in the research. Additionally, as this approach was easily implemented and evaluated in the present situation and adapted to Cassie’s unique needs, an extension into a typical middle school inclusive classroom under a differentiated instructional routine is possible. Within this setting, the PLEASE strategy approach and subsequent lesson procedures using the SRSD approaches...
may be easily implemented with a small group of students with similar abilities to promote their writing development and to monitor their response to writing intervention.

**About the Authors**

Todd Milford, MA, is a doctoral candidate in educational psychology at the University of Victoria, Canada. His current interests include special education and large-scale data sets. Gina L. Harrison, PhD, is an assistant professor in special education at the University of Victoria. Her research focuses on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of reading and writing difficulties as well as effective assessment and intervention for literacy-based learning disabilities.

**References**


