



The Invisible Journey of One Writing Assignment

A companion guide to *Why Some Kids “Know It” But Can’t Show It on Paper*

What looks like one ordinary piece of homework is actually a chain of many smaller tasks. This guide follows one example from beginning to end:

“For today’s homework, write one page about whales. Bring it back tomorrow.”

The example is deliberately simple. A Grade 1 assignment and a Grade 10 assignment will obviously differ in complexity, but many of the underlying executive skills are the same. As children get older, we simply expect more of these processes to happen independently and almost automatically.

This is not a diagnostic checklist. Use it to observe. As you go through the steps, notice where your child seems to need more effort, reminders, support, or recovery time. There may be one weak link. There may be several.

The Executive Skills Glossary

Dr. Peg Dawson describes eleven executive skills. I use **executive skills** rather than executive functions because I find it easier to remember that these are skills that develop and can be supported.

Response Inhibition: Thinking before acting and resisting impulses.

Working Memory: Holding information in mind while using it.

Emotional Control: Managing emotions so they do not take over the task.

Sustained Attention: Staying focused despite distraction, boredom, or fatigue.

Task Initiation: Beginning a task without excessive delay.

Planning and Prioritizing: Creating a plan, deciding what matters, and determining what comes first.

Organization: Keeping information, ideas, and materials in order.

Time Management: Understanding and managing how much time is available.

Goal Directed Persistence: Continuing toward a goal without giving up or becoming sidetracked.

Flexibility: Adjusting to changes, mistakes, new information, or another way of doing something.

Metacognition: Stepping back to monitor your own thinking, performance, and progress.

Using This Guide With Your Child

I suggest printing out this guide to add marks as you go. If you don't have access to a printer, write out the numbers where your child seems to be struggling.

Don't begin by asking which executive skill your child is "bad at." Start with the process.

Go through the stages and mark the places where you regularly notice difficulty. You might use:

- ✓ **Usually manages independently**
- ~ **Sometimes needs support**
- **Often gets stuck here**
- ? **I don't know because I don't see this part**

Look for patterns rather than isolated incidents.

If Steps 20 to 27 repeatedly cause problems, the issue may be less about writing and more about **Working Memory and Organization**.

If Steps 39 and 48 are the sticking points, **Task Initiation** may deserve a closer look.

If the child has plenty of ideas but struggles around Steps 43 to 47, **Planning, Prioritizing, and Organization** may be placing a heavier demand on them.

If Steps 55 to 62 are where things tend to fall apart, look more closely at **Sustained Attention, Response Inhibition, Emotional Control, Flexibility, and Goal Directed Persistence**.

If the work gets completed but repeatedly stays in the backpack, the writing itself may never have been the problem.

The purpose is not to find a label. It is to narrow down the question.

What part of this task is feeling difficult?

Once that becomes clearer, the strategy can become much more specific.

Stage 1: The Teacher Gives the Assignment

The homework has already begun, even though the child has not written anything about whales.

1. Notice that the teacher has started giving instructions.

(Sustained Attention)

2. Stop whatever they were doing before the announcement.

(Response Inhibition, Flexibility)

3. Shift attention from the previous activity to the teacher.

(Flexibility, Sustained Attention)

4. Ignore other conversations, movement, noises, or thoughts long enough to listen.

(Response Inhibition, Sustained Attention)

5. Listen through the entire instruction rather than acting on the first part they hear.

(Sustained Attention, Response Inhibition)

6. Hold the beginning of the instruction in mind while listening to the rest.

(Working Memory)

7. Understand that “one page,” “about whales,” “homework,” and “tomorrow” are all relevant pieces of information.

(Working Memory, Planning and Prioritizing)

8. Recognize whether they actually understand what is being asked.

(Metacognition)

9. Notice if information is missing or unclear.

(Metacognition)

10. Ask for clarification if they need it.

(Task Initiation, Emotional Control, Metacognition)

Already, ten things have happened and the child has not written a single word of the assignment.

Stage 2: Recording the Homework

Now the child has to preserve the instruction so it still exists several hours later.

11. Get the agenda, planner, device, or whatever the school uses to record homework.

(Organization, Task Initiation)

12. Find the correct date or place to record the assignment.

(Organization)

13. Hold enough of the teacher’s instruction in mind to begin recording it.

(Working Memory)

14. Copy the assignment accurately.

(Working Memory, Sustained Attention)

15. Include important details such as length, topic, due date, and required materials.

(Planning and Prioritizing, Working Memory)

16. Check what they wrote against what the teacher said or wrote on the board.

(Metacognition, Sustained Attention)

17. Notice if something was missed or copied incorrectly.

(Metacognition)

18. Correct the information before the teacher moves on or the board is erased.

(Task Initiation, Flexibility)

19. Put the agenda or device back where it belongs.
(*Organization*)

Stage 3: Getting the Assignment Home

The school day continues. The homework now has to survive everything else that happens before the child gets home.

20. Remember that the assignment requires materials from school.
(*Working Memory*)

21. Work out which notebook, textbook, handout, or other materials need to come home.
(*Planning and Prioritizing, Organization*)

22. Find those materials.
(*Organization*)

23. Put them into the school bag.
(*Organization, Working Memory*)

24. Pack the agenda as well, if it is needed to remember the assignment.
(*Working Memory, Organization*)

25. Complete the rest of the school day without losing or misplacing what has been packed.
(*Organization*)

26. Remember to take the school bag when leaving school.
(*Working Memory*)

27. Get the bag and its contents home.
(*Organization, Working Memory*)

A child who arrives home without the right notebook may look as though they “forgot their homework.” The link in the chain could have broken much earlier.

Stage 4: Remembering the Homework at Home

Several hours may have passed since the teacher gave the instruction.

28. Remember that homework exists.
(*Working Memory, Metacognition*)

29. Remember that it is due tomorrow rather than later in the week.
(*Working Memory, Time Management*)

30. Work out when there is enough time to do it among dinner, activities, rest, gaming, family time, and other homework.

(Time Management, Planning and Prioritizing)

31. Decide when to begin rather than continuing to postpone it.

(Task Initiation, Time Management)

32. Stop a preferred activity in order to move to homework.

(Response Inhibition, Flexibility, Emotional Control)

This is an important point. Wanting to finish a game and struggling to transition away from it does not tell us whether the child understands whales.

Stage 5: Getting Ready to Work

Even sitting down requires its own small chain.

33. Find the school bag.

(Organization)

34. Find the agenda and check the assignment rather than relying only on memory.

(Organization, Metacognition)

35. Find the correct notebook or paper.

(Organization)

36. Gather a pencil, eraser, computer, reference material, or anything else required.

(Organization, Planning and Prioritizing)

37. Choose or accept a place to work.

(Planning and Prioritizing)

38. Reduce obvious distractions where possible.

(Metacognition, Response Inhibition)

39. Sit down and actually begin.

(Task Initiation)

We are now at Step 39.

The child still has not written about whales.

Stage 6: Figuring Out What to Write

This is where knowledge finally enters the assignment, but even knowing the subject is not enough.

40. Read or recall the exact assignment again.

(Working Memory, Sustained Attention)

41. Retrieve what they already know about whales.

(Working Memory)

42. Hold several possible ideas in mind long enough to consider them.

(Working Memory)

43. Decide which ideas are relevant to this particular assignment.

(Planning and Prioritizing)

44. Let go of interesting information that does not belong.

(Response Inhibition, Planning and Prioritizing)

45. Decide how much information can realistically fit into one page.

(Planning and Prioritizing, Time Management)

46. Decide which ideas should come first, next, and last.

(Planning and Prioritizing, Organization)

47. Organize those ideas into some kind of structure.

(Organization, Planning and Prioritizing)

48. Decide how to begin the first sentence.

(Task Initiation, Planning and Prioritizing)

A child can know an enormous amount about whales and still become stuck at Step 48.

Stage 7: Turning Thoughts Into Writing

Now the child has to hold an idea in mind while simultaneously converting it into written language.

49. Start writing the first sentence.

(Task Initiation)

50. Hold onto the idea while choosing the words needed to express it.

(Working Memory)

51. Keep the next thought in mind while finishing the current one.

(Working Memory)

52. Keep the purpose of the assignment in mind while adding new information.

(Goal Directed Persistence, Working Memory)

53. Stay on topic rather than following every new idea that comes to mind.

(Response Inhibition, Planning and Prioritizing)

54. Continue writing long enough to develop the paragraph or page.

(Sustained Attention, Goal Directed Persistence)

Writing also requires spelling, grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, handwriting or keyboarding, punctuation, and language skills. These are not themselves all executive skills, but the child has to manage them while the executive system is coordinating the larger task.

For some children, even the physical act of handwriting takes substantial mental effort. If a great deal of attention is going into forming letters, spacing words, or controlling a pencil, there may simply be less available for holding and organizing ideas.

Stage 8: Managing Everything That Happens While Writing

The brain still has to protect the task from everything competing with it.

55. Ignore irrelevant sounds, movement, devices, conversations, or thoughts.

(Response Inhibition, Sustained Attention)

56. Notice when attention has wandered.

(Metacognition)

57. Bring attention back to the assignment.

(Sustained Attention, Response Inhibition)

58. Remember where they were after an interruption.

(Working Memory)

59. Notice when a sentence or idea is not working.

(Metacognition)

60. Manage the frustration of making a mistake, forgetting an idea, or getting stuck.

(Emotional Control)

61. Try another word, sentence, idea, or approach rather than remaining stuck on the original one.

(Flexibility)

62. Continue after the mistake instead of abandoning the assignment.

(Goal Directed Persistence, Emotional Control)

This may be the point where a parent sees tears, anger, avoidance, a crumpled piece of paper, “I can't do this,” or a child walking away.

Those behaviours are clues. The checklist can help us ask what happened immediately before them.

Stage 9: Deciding the Writing Is Finished

Finishing the first draft is not actually the end.

63. Recognize that the required amount has been completed.

(Metacognition, Goal Directed Persistence)

64. Read the work back rather than immediately declaring it finished.

(Task Initiation, Metacognition)

65. Check whether it answers the original assignment.

(Metacognition, Working Memory)

66. Notice missing information, confusing sentences, or obvious mistakes.

(Metacognition)

67. Decide what needs to be changed and what is good enough to leave alone.

(Planning and Prioritizing, Metacognition)

68. Make revisions without becoming overwhelmed by having to revisit completed work.

(Flexibility, Emotional Control, Goal Directed Persistence)

69. Decide that the work is complete.

(Metacognition)

Stage 10: Getting the Finished Assignment Back to School

Knowing the material and completing the writing still do not guarantee the teacher will ever see it.

70. Put the finished assignment somewhere safe.

(Organization)

71. Put it into the correct folder, binder, or school bag.

(Organization, Working Memory)

72. Remember the next morning that the assignment is due.

(Working Memory, Time Management)

73. Bring the school bag to school.

(Working Memory, Organization)

74. Remember during the school day that the assignment is inside the bag.

(Working Memory)

75. Notice the appropriate time to hand it in.

(Sustained Attention, Working Memory)

76. Take the assignment out rather than assuming it has somehow been submitted because it made it to school.

(Task Initiation, Working Memory)

77. Hand it to the teacher or place it in the correct submission location.

(Task Initiation, Organization)

Now the assignment is done.

The teacher sees **one page about whales**.

The child completed at least **77 separate steps** to get it there.

And this list could still be broken down further.

One More Thing to Watch: Context

Do this exercise using information from more than one setting whenever possible.

A child may manage Step 54 easily at a quiet kitchen table and struggle with it in a classroom. They may initiate homework with one tutor but not another. They may remember an assignment connected to a favourite subject and forget another one entirely.

That difference is useful information.

Executive skills do not operate in a vacuum. Interest, emotion, distraction, environment, fatigue, stress, the amount of structure available, and how meaningful the goal feels can all affect how easily a child is able to use them.

The question is therefore not simply, **“Can my child do this?”**

It is also worth noticing **when, where, and under what conditions they can do it.**

That gives us a much better place to begin.