Successful writing requires high levels of self-regulation and self-motivation. Although these self-discipline qualities of writers are often hidden from readers, they are widely reported in personal accounts of professional writers. Prominent theories of writing have identified a number of processes that are clearly self-regulatory in nature, such as textual planning, goal setting, organizing, evaluating, and revising. To understand the relations among these processes (as well as other self-regulatory processes) and their links to important sources of self-motivation to write, we present a cyclical social cognitive theory composed of three self-regulatory phases: forethought, performance control, and self-reflection. Students’ acquisition of self-regulatory competence in writing is discussed in terms of a sequence of instructional levels, beginning with observational learning experiences, such as social modeling, tuition, and feedback, and eventuating with self-adaptive control of the writing process.

Becoming a proficient writer involves more than acquiring knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, it depends on high levels of self-regulation and self-motivation because writing activities are usually self-planned, self-initiated, and self-sustained. Writers work under solitary conditions, often over long periods with frequent stretches of meager results, and repeatedly revise output to fulfill personal standards of quality. These demanding personal requirements have led writers historically to develop varied techniques of “self-discipline” to enhance their effectiveness (Barzon, 1964; Gould, 1980; Plimpton, 1965; Wallace & Pear, 1977). The self-disciplined quality of literary competence, although hidden to readers, is pervasive in personal accounts of successful writers. The Pulitzer Prize winning author and renown teacher of writing, Donald Murray (1990) cautions, “Good writing does not reveal its making” (p. 5). “Getting writing done day in and day out, despite interruptions … is what separates the writer from the hope-to-be writer” (p. 15).
In this chapter, we will describe key sources of a writer’s self-discipline from a self-regulation perspective, which is derived from research in diverse areas of human functioning, such as academics, athletics, health, music, and business management (Zimmerman, 1998). Self-regulation of writing is defined lexically as self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions that writers use to attain various literary goals, such as improving their writing skills as well as enhancing the quality of the text they create (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). We posit that a writer’s willingness to implement these self-regulatory processes depends on key sources of self-motivation, such as self-efficacy beliefs, and these sources of self-motivation are influenced reciprocally by the outcomes of self-regulatory efforts and self-reflections regarding those outcomes. This cyclical dependency of writers’ sources of self-motivation and their self-regulatory efforts will be discussed in detail later.

To understand the self-regulation of writing, we first review prominent theories regarding the nature of writing and the role of self-regulation in literary accomplishments. Second, we describe a social cognitive cyclical model that includes key self-regulatory processes and motivational beliefs along with anecdotal accounts of them by well-known writers. Based on this model, we discuss empirical studies of students’ acquisition of self-regulatory competence in writing from social learning experiences, such as modeling, tuition, social feedback, and performance outcomes. Finally, we describe how to teach a sentence revision strategy to a student using social modeling experiences in a series of instructional levels designed to attain self-regulation.

1 Theories of Writing and its Self-Regulation

Historically, theorists have recognized that self-regulatory processes, such as planning, self-evaluation, and adaptation, play a major role in writing. For example, Rohman (1965) conceptualized writers’ use of self-regulatory writing processes in terms of three successive stages: (a) prewriting that involves planning, (b) composing performance, and (c) rewriting that involves self-evaluative editing and revising. Rohman posited that writing is executed according to a linear sequence of stages, but there is extensive evidence that writers seldom proceed sequentially – preferring instead to write recursively with planning and revision recurring at frequent intervals (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Murray (1990) describes recursive nature of writing in the following way, “We start drafting not knowing what we are going to say, and find we are collecting material, and the order in which it begins to arrange itself on the page makes our focus clear” (pp. 7–8).

Flower and Hayes (1980) developed a model of writing that sought to capture the recursive quality that Murray described. These researchers described writing in terms of a writer’s task environment, a writer’s long-term memory, and the writing process. A writer’s environment refers to the literary task or problem, written text as it evolves, writing tools, and external sources of information used during writing, such as a textbook, whereas a writer’s long-term memory involves his or her knowledge of the literary topic, the audience, and personal plans. The process of writing involves three primary components that are similar to Rohman’s stages: planning the text, translating ideas into text, and reviewing the literary draft as it is written. According to Flower and Hayes, textual planning involves three cognitive subcomponents: generating information that might be included in