

POW Plus TREE Equals Powerful Opinion Essays

Improving Writing in the Early Grades

By Karen R. Harris, Steve Graham, and Linda Mason

In this issue of CASL News, the feature article describes the writing research being conducted at University of Maryland.

Sandy, a third-grader with learning disabilities, was given the following question by her teacher: “Should children your age be allowed to choose their own pet?” Sandy’s class had been working on both developing a paragraph and writing an opinion essay since September; it was now January. Writing to persuade is an important skill in the state curriculum, and one assessed in the state writing competency test. Most of the students were doing well; they were able to write a paragraph of five or more sentences and clearly state their opinion, provide supporting details, and end with a concluding sentence.

Sandy’s teacher described her as “not yet writing” and not especially fond of writing. In response to the question regarding choosing a pet, Sandy wrote the following: “I like children my age should choose their own pet because they’re old enough.”

In consultation with Sandy’s general and special education teachers, we determined that Sandy and two of her classmates would profit from the Self-Regulated Strategy Development approach to writing; we also identified similar students in other classrooms. Some of these students had learning disabilities, and some were considered at risk. All were writing one- to two-sentence opinion essays.

What Sandy Learned—Self-Regulated Strategy Development

With the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) approach, writing and self-regulation (goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instructions and self-reinforcement) strategies are taught through cognitive modeling, explicit instruction, guided

discovery, and peer practice. Students are also assisted in developing positive attitudes about writing and themselves as writers. Sandy and the other students with whom we worked met with their teacher in a quiet area for 20-minute sessions, three times a week.

POW plus TREE. Sandy and her peers had already worked with us to learn *POW*: Pick an Idea, Organize Notes, Write and Say More. The students knew that *POW* is something you should do whenever you write, and that using *POW* “gives power” to anything you write. They had learned *POW* in combination with a story-writing strategy.

Now we began to learn *POW plus TREE* (Topic sentence, Reasons—at least 3, Explain each reason further, and Ending, wrap it up right). The six stages of instruction are briefly described here; detailed lesson plans for each stage can be found through the CASL website at www.vanderbilt.edu/CASL. Each of these stages of instruction typically takes two to four sessions to complete, depending on the amount of time available for each session and the needs of the students.

Stage 1: Develop Background Knowledge

The teacher, Sandy, and a peer began with a discussion of what the students already knew about opinion essays, including the elements that are commonly found in such as essay. Then the teacher introduced *TREE* and stressed that good opinion essays make sense and have several parts. The teacher and students discussed why the



living tree shown in the mnemonic chart they were given fits the parts: the topic sentence is like the trunk, as all of the other parts are connected to it; the reasons and the explanations for your reasons are like the roots because they make the tree strong; and the ending (conclusion) is like the earth because it holds it all together.

Together they read several short essays and identified these parts in each. The teacher and students filled out a graphic organizer for *TREE* (see the CASL website) for each essay they read together. The teacher began helping the students memorize the mnemonic. Finally, each time they met during this stage, the teachers and students discussed how they could “transfer” what they were learning about *POW plus TREE* to other places and times when they wrote. Each time they met with the teacher, each student reported chances they had to transfer *POW plus TREE*.

Stage 2: Discuss It

Although a great deal of discussion obviously takes place during stage 1 and in later stages, we call stage 2 “discuss it”

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POW Plus TREE *Continued from page 1*

because not only does the initial discussion of the strategy continue, but students are asked to evaluate and discuss their own previous writing using what they have learned. During all stages of instruction, the teacher emphasized that learning *POW plus TREE* would take effort and commitment on the students' part, and that effort combined with these powerful strategies would result in being able to write good opinion essays. Each session during "discuss it" began with a quick review of the mnemonic to help memorize it and what it stands for. The teacher decided to continue reading and evaluating a couple more good essays before she had the students evaluate their pretest essay. As they read these model essays, she asked the students to brainstorm additional good reasons and explanations for reasons that the authors might have used.

Next the teacher had all students get out their own opinion essay about choosing a pet and find out what parts they had. She stressed that when they wrote this essay, they had not yet learned this trick for writing opinion essays, and it certainly was no problem if they didn't have all the parts—that's what they were here to learn together. She helped each student evaluate his or her essay, and as a group they discussed what parts were commonly missing.

The teacher also began discussion regarding what else writers do to make their essays powerful; one could: give more than three reasons, use good word choice (what the kids called using "million-dollar words"), catch the reader with an interesting first sentence, and use an interesting ending sentence. Examples of these were noted in the students' essays and in the essays read.

Then each student was given a graph (a line of rockets that were each divided into five parts; this would be used for each time they wrote an opinion essay during instruction) and filled in the number of parts for the first rocket that was the number they had in their pretest essay. For Sandy and her partner, this was one or two parts (typical among all the students we worked with).

Finally, the students and teacher discussed the goal of working together: to write better opinion essays. Good opinion essays tell readers what you believe, give at least three reasons why, and have an ending sentence. Also, they are fun for you to write and fun for others to read, and they

make sense! The students went on to stage 3 when the teacher knew they were ready.

Stage 3: Model It

The teacher modeled how to use *POW plus TREE*, thinking out loud as she planned and wrote an essay. The students participated by helping her as she planned and made notes on the graphic organizer, and as she wrote her first draft. Together they accepted and rejected possible ideas to support her premise and explanations for her reasons. They continued to modify their plan while writing the paper.

While planning and writing, the teacher used a variety of out-loud self-instructions (see examples in the lesson plans on the website). She explained that saying these things to herself helped her work, and that sometimes she said her thoughts out loud and sometimes she said them in her head.

Each student was given a sheet titled "My Self-Statements" and was asked to share one thing she or he would like to say to one's self to help think of good ideas (one of these or one of their own), and then to write it on their sheet in their own words. Students could record more than one if they wanted to. Students were encouraged, but not forced, to use these self-statements throughout the rest of instruction, and their lists were left out near them while they practiced writing.

Finally, the students evaluated this collaborative essay and graphed the number of parts contained (the teacher, of course, had made sure that all five parts—premise, three reasons, and conclusion—were present) on their graphs. If the teacher felt the students could profit from additional teacher-led modeling, this was done. If the students were ready, they proceeded to stage 4.

Stage 4: Memorize It

While listed here as a stage, in fact, practice in memorizing the mnemonic and what it stands for had been going on since Stage 1. At this point, most students had the strategy memorized and were able to write the mnemonic on scratch paper so they could make notes in the future using the mnemonic without a graphic organizer.

As the students said, you can't use what you can't remember!

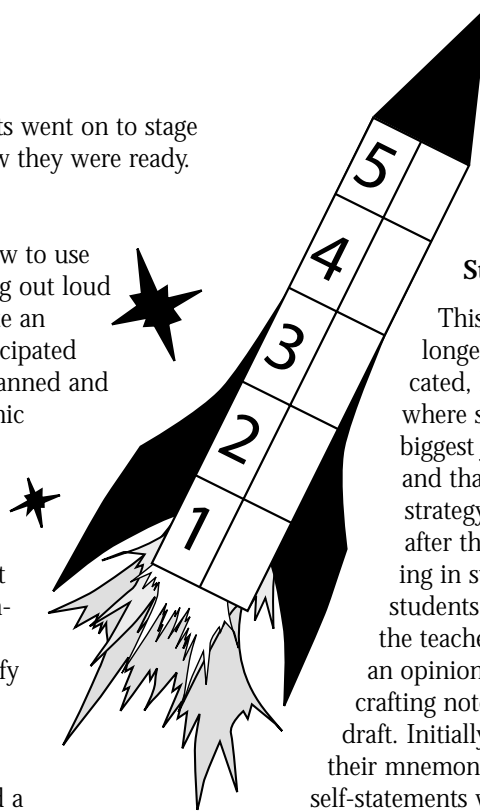
Stage 5: Support It

This stage is often the longest. Research has indicated, however, that it is here where students make the biggest jump in performance and that support in using the strategy is necessary even after the collaborative modeling in stage 3. At first, the students worked together with the teacher's assistance to write an opinion essay, sharing ideas, crafting notes, and then writing a draft. Initially students kept out their mnemonic chart and list of self-statements while they worked and used the graphic organizer. Over time, the teacher provided less and less help, and the students began selecting and working on their own essay prompts. In some groups this happened more quickly than in others—the pace was based on student performance and needs.

For each essay written during "support it," the students first set a goal to include all five essay parts. Each essay was evaluated and graphed. If students used more than three reasons, thus totaling more than five parts, they "busted the graph" and wrote their total above the rocket for that essay. Students were able to help each other throughout this stage as well as receive teacher help. They shared their essays with each other, providing feedback on both strengths and areas where improvements could be made in each other's arguments. Use of the mnemonic chart, list of self-statements, and the graphic organizer was faded and then discontinued during this stage.

Stage 6: Independent Performance

At this point, students wrote one to two opinion essays using the strategies they had learned without teacher or peer support.



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The teacher provided positive and constructive feedback as needed, and students continued to share their essays with each other. Goal setting and graphing were continued for one or two essays, and then the students were told they could decide whether to continue their use in the future. As they had continued to do in the previous stages, the students shared opportunities and ideas for transfer of this strategy with each other and the teacher.

What to Expect

Five weeks after the student Sandy began instruction (13 20-minute sessions later), at the end of independent performance, Sandy wrote the following on her own, planning on scratch paper:

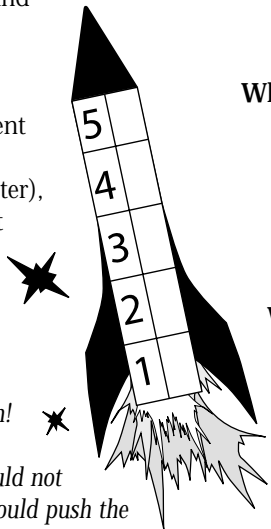
Boys and Girls Soccer Team!

I believe boys and girls should not play soccer together. Boys could push the girls over for the ball because boys play rough sometimes. Girls might not kick too good on their team. Boys might be teasing the girls, because of that boys might get over excited. Boys really want to win the games. Boys might fight with each other because girls got mixed up with the goals. The girls might forget about the game. They went to the mall. Girls might wear some high heels because they forgot their sneakers at home. This is why girls should read my essay if you don't want to be bullied.

Sandy clearly has the concept of an opinion essay and has made the strategies she learned her own. Her progress was typical among the students we taught. Obviously, there is more to be done and more to be learned, but she now has the foundation for doing so.

Strategy instruction is not a complete writing instruction program, but it is a powerful addition to teachers' repertoires. This year, we have broken Self-Regulated Strategy Development for opinion essays and story writing down a bit further and are working with second graders. Wish us luck—and if it works, watch for those lesson plans on the CASL website!

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Accelerating Student Progress: What We Know

This column provides instructional tips and resources and is a regular feature of *CASL News*.

■ Students with reading and mathematics disabilities have more serious mathematical problem-solving difficulties than do those with reading disabilities or mathematics disabilities alone. Students with both disabilities require greater instructional intensity via small-group or individual tutoring.

Where's the evidence? See Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (in press). Mathematical problem-solving profiles of students with mathematics disabilities with and without comorbid reading disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*.

Want to implement? Contact Lynn Fuchs at lynn.fuchs@vanderbilt.edu.

Need someone to get you started? Contact Lynn Fuchs at lynn.fuchs@vanderbilt.edu.

■ Kindergarten programs that focus on word recognition and decoding promote reading development better than programs that focus on phonological awareness alone.

Where's the evidence? See Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L.S. (2002). *Can early decoding instruction promote reading development as well as or better than phonological awareness?* Manuscript available from Doug Fuchs.

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■ Even after careful discussion of a writing strategy and teacher modeling of the strategy while writing, students with disabilities do not show strong improvements in their writing until they participate in supported, scaffolded writing using the strategy. Plan to spend sufficient time in this stage of instruction!

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From The Teacher's Desk *By Linda Mason*

One of the first things I have noticed in working with students who struggle with writing is their frequent negative or maladaptive self-statements. Often these students express their dislike of writing and produce ineffective self-instructions when establishing goals and planning for writing, during the writing process, and while evaluating performance. The development of positive, effective self-instructions during the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) lessons has helped children comprehend the writing process, use the strategies effectively, and develop a positive attitude about writing and themselves as writers.

Before SRSD instruction, Sahara, a second-grade student with learning disabilities and behavioral difficulties, verbalized her thoughts before, during, and after writing without any prompting. When beginning to write, she stated her goal: "I am going to write a two-page paper." While planning what to write and during writing she commented "This is too hard," "I do not know what this means," and "I'm finished now" (even when asked to check her work). Sahara's pre-SRSD instruction performance consisted of a one-sentence restatement of the writing prompt. In evaluating her performance, she counted the words in the sentence and insisted that she had accomplished her writing goals with no reflection on either her original goals or those established by the teacher.

Helping Sahara develop a more effective repertoire of self-instructions required explicit, individualized support and frequent review of her self-instruction sheet initially developed in the modeling lesson. She learned to set effective goals: "I will use all 5 parts of TREE," and "I will write and then say more." She monitored her performance during writing: "Do I have million dollar words?" "Is my paper making sense?" and "Do I have all my parts?" Finally, she evaluated her performance by counting and numbering the parts of her essay, and filling in her rocket. It was exciting to watch her self-instructions transform from "I can't" to "I did it!"

Where's the evidence? See: Harris, K. R., & Graham, S. (1999). Programmatic intervention research: Illustrations from the evolution of self-regulated strategy development. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 22, 251-262.

Want to implement? See the CASL website at www.vanderbilt.edu/CASL/ for complete lesson plans for self-regulated strategies instruction for writing stories and opinion essays.

Need someone to get you started? Contact Karen Harris at kh9@umail.umd.edu or Steve Graham at sg23@umail.umd.edu

■ When teaching a strategy that involves a set of questions that can be applied widely, help students internalize the strategy over the course of a series of lessons. At first, model the strategy. Then in subsequent lessons have the students repeat the questions aloud in unison; and have students take turns asking the class the questions, with other students volunteering answers.

Where's the evidence? See Williams, J. P., Hall, K. M., Lauer, K. D., & Lord, K. M. (2001). Helping elementary school children understand story themes. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33, 75-77.

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About CASL

The Center on Accelerating Student Learning (CASL) is designed to accelerate learning for students with disabilities in the early grades to provide a solid foundation for strong achievement in the intermediate grades and beyond. CASL is a 5-year collaborative research effort supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Participating institutions are:

- University of Maryland
- Teachers College of Columbia University
- Vanderbilt University

About CASL News

CASL News provides educators and parents with information to make reading, writing, and mathematics instruction more effective in grades K-3. Issues provide information on the effective instructional practices developed by CASL researchers and their school-based colleagues. This issue is dedicated to research on writing being conducted at the University of Maryland.

For a list of CASL research reports, manuals, videotapes, books and other materials, see CASL web site. To order items, send request to:

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