

Theme Writing

Program helps students meet stringent demands

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The ability to write well has become more and more important for students with disabilities. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 107-15) in 1997 mandated that students with disabilities participate in the general education curriculum (Goertz, McLaughlin, Roach, & Raber, 2000). The law also dictated that students with disabilities be included in accountability programs (Kearns, Kleinert, Clayton, Burdge, & Williams, 1998; Kleinert, Kennedy, Kearns, 1999). More recently, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requires that students with disabilities in each school make annual yearly progress as reflected in their scores on statewide assessments.

Indeed, 48 states require students with disabilities and other at-risk students to take state writing competency exams; in 18 of those states, students must pass high-stakes exams to graduate from high school (Olson, 2000). As early as the third grade, students in many states must write essays comprising several paragraphs. In addition, college entrance exams such as the PSAT and the ACT now include sections that assess students' writing skills (Martz, Magloire, & Silver, 2002; Robinson & Katzman, 2002).

Fundamentals in the Theme Writing Strategy, a new writing strategy program, is especially suited to help students meet such demands, as well as the writing demands of their general education courses. The

strategy originally was designed to help students deal more effectively with the complex writing demands of secondary and post-secondary settings, but it has been taught to younger students and even adapted for elementary children. It has been taught in general education English classes in which as many as 150 students are taught by one teacher over the course of a day. It also has been taught in special education classes, summer school programs, and tutorial settings, such as after-school programs and programs for student athletes at colleges.

The *Theme Writing Strategy* joins the *Sentence Writing*, *Paragraph Writing*, *Error Monitoring*, and *InSPECT* strategies in the Expression and Demonstration of Competence Strand of the Strategic Instruction Model's *Learning Strategies Curriculum*. The program encompasses two manuals: a student lessons manual and an instructor's manual.

Steps of the strategy

The *Theme Writing Strategy* has five steps that help students write multiparagraph themes (Figure 1 on page 2). It incorporates use of a visual device, the Theme Writing Diagram, to help students organize information for each theme.

The first step, the **Think Step**, requires students first to think about what they know about a topic and to conduct research to gather additional information about the topic.



Next, in the **Organize Ideas Step**, students organize the information that they know and have gathered using a Theme Writing Diagram.

During the **Write a Draft Step**, they then write the theme using a structure that includes an introduction, a body, and a conclusion and that involves connecting paragraphs with appropriate transitions.

In the **Examine the Parts and Meaning Step**, they check that their document meets all the requirements of a theme and that it covers all the planned information.

Finally, in the **Refine and Edit Step**, they edit the theme and create a polished final draft.

Prerequisites

Before instruction in the *Theme Writing Strategy* begins, students must have mastered several related, foundational writing skills.

First, students need to learn to write complete sentences. If they have learned at least simple, com-

TOWER: Theme Writing Steps

Think
Organize Ideas
Write a Draft
Examine the Parts
and Meaning
Refine and Edit

Figure 1

ound, and complex sentences to mastery, they will be able to meet the mastery criteria for theme writing, which include writing complete sentences and writing three different types of sentences.

Second, students need to learn the *Paragraph Writing Strategy* so that they understand the basic concepts and terms associated with topic, detail, and clincher sentences as well as point of view, tense, sequence, and transitions. These concepts and terms are used throughout *Theme Writing*

Strategy instruction, and new concepts are built upon them as instruction proceeds. For example, the concept of the Thesis Statement is built upon students' understanding of Specific Topic Sentences. The concept of the Topic Transition Sentence is built upon students' understanding of Topic Sentences and transition words.

Third, students need to learn the *Error Monitoring Strategy* so they can edit and polish their work in the final step of the strategy. If they

have difficulty spelling, they need to learn the *InSPECT Strategy* so they can use a computerized spellchecker efficiently and effectively.

Instruction in the Theme Writing Strategy

The strategy is taught through a series of 17 lessons. Teachers can choose to spend as much time as they want and as students need on each lesson. For example, they can choose to spend a couple of days introducing and conducting practice activities with Introductory Paragraphs, or they can choose to spend a couple of weeks ensuring students have opportunities to practice writing a variety of Introductory Paragraphs.

The *Theme Writing Strategy* lessons begin with a pretest in Lesson 1. Thereafter, some of the different stages of instruction familiar to those who have taught other SIM strategies (Figure 2 on page 3) are modified and applied in each lesson as needed.

In Lessons 2 and 3, the teacher describes the parts of a theme and

Related articles

Many past issues of *Strategram* have included articles and activities related to SIM writing strategies. Here's a sample:

- "What's new under the SIM Sun? Two-level program offers instructional flexibility," by Jean Schumaker, Vol. 11, No. 5 (description of Fundamentals and Proficiency in the Sentence Writing Strategy programs)
- "A new Starter Strategy: InSPECT," by Charlie Hughes and David McNaughton, Vol. 12 No. 2
- "Integrating SIM writing strategies and other programs," by Rosemary Tralli, Vol. 14, No. 5

Stages of Acquisition and Generalization

Stage 1: Pretest & Make Commitments

Stage 2: Describe

Stage 3: Model

Stage 4 : Verbal Practice

Stage 5: Controlled Practice

Stage 6: Advanced Practice

Stage 7: Posttest & Make Commitments

Stage 8: Generalization

Figure 2

the steps of the *Theme Writing Strategy*.

In Lesson 4, students participate in Verbal Practice activities to learn to name and explain the steps of the strategy.

In Lesson 5, they witness and participate in a demonstration of the Think Step and Organize Ideas Step of the strategy.

In Lessons 6 through 12, the teacher describes and models a new skill related to these steps, and students practice that skill to mastery by completing specially designed worksheets. At the completion of Lesson 12, students are able to complete a TOWER Diagram (Figure 3 on page 4) depicting the information that is to be included in a theme.

In each of Lessons 13 through 15 (lessons associated with the Write a Draft Step), the teacher describes and models how to write one type of paragraph to be included in a theme (i.e., Introductory, Detail, or Concluding Paragraph), and students practice writing that type of paragraph to mastery.

In Lesson 16, which covers the

Examine the Parts and Meaning Step and the Refine and Edit Step, students learn how to check that all the parts of the theme and the information on the TOWER Diagram have been included. They also learn how to apply the *Error Monitoring Strategy* and the *InSPECT Strategy* to themes.

In Lesson 17, they learn how to use all of the steps of the strategy together in sequence. At the conclusion of Lesson 17, they will have mastered writing themes comprising at least five paragraphs.

The instructional program offers teachers a number of options that allow them to adapt instruction to the variety of students they teach, including students with disabilities, low achievers, normal achievers, and high achievers. For example, teachers can choose to teach one or several structures among a variety of structures for Introductory and Concluding Paragraphs. They also can choose to teach different ways of spicing up an Introductory or Concluding Paragraph.

The program has several fea-

tures in common with the other SIM writing programs, including scaffolded skill practice that promotes students' success throughout the learning sequence. Early demands are easy so that students can be immediately successful, and then the difficulty builds slowly until, eventually, students are completing very complex tasks easily and quickly. Additionally, instruction is sequenced within the program so that skills are built across the lessons. Vocabulary words and concepts taught in earlier programs are repeated and reinforced in the *Theme Writing Strategy* program. Also, strategies taught in the other writing strategy programs are incorporated in this strategy. That is, when students use the *Theme Writing Strategy*, they are integrating all the other writing strategies into a flowing whole, plus they are adding the unique steps of the *Theme Writing Strategy*.

The program requires students to complete a series of practice lessons, and they must reach mastery on one type of lesson before proceeding to the next type of lesson. The student lessons manual contains enough lessons of one type so students can practice as many times as needed to reach mastery. As a result, the teacher must be constantly aware of each student's progress within the lessons, must assign appropriate practice lessons each day, must score the lessons, and must give the students feedback with regard to appropriate and inappropriate responses so that each student improves on the next practice attempt. To help facilitate students' quick mastery at each level, teachers use demonstra-

SUBTOPIC SEQUENCE	P.O.V.	TENSE	TOPIC
			TOWER DIAGRAM
			Name: _____
			Date: _____
INTRODUCTORY OPTION		INTRODUCTORY DETAILS	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	
SUBTOPICS			
<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80%; height: 20px;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80%; height: 20px;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 80%; height: 20px;"></div>	
DETAILS			
○ _____	○ _____	○ _____	
○ _____	○ _____	○ _____	
○ _____	○ _____	○ _____	
○ _____	○ _____	○ _____	
○ _____	○ _____	○ _____	
CONCLUDING OPTION		CONCLUDING DETAILS	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	
_____		○ _____	

Figure 3

tions and guided practice activities involving all students in the group before students proceed to independent practice activities.

Theme Writing benefits & research

Instruction in the *Theme Writing Strategy* is advantageous for students for a number of reasons. First, it requires that they *actively* interact with and process information they know. If they need more information, it gives them a means of approaching the task of gathering additional information.

Second, it helps them to create a structure for the information that they know and to use that structure to express their knowledge to others.

Third, the strategy enables them to chunk a large task into smaller chunks. Students who

have difficulty attending for long periods of time can approach each chunk in turn, in separate sittings as needed.

Fourth, the strategy requires that students express in writing their understanding of a topic. This process can enhance understanding and recall of information.

Finally, the strategy requires students to monitor the quality of their writing and to polish their work to create a high-quality final product. As a result, they learn to take pride in their products and to feel good about their accomplishments.

Thus, the *Theme Writing Strategy* can help students become better writers and expressors of information. Use of the strategy should help them become more successful in situations in which

they need to demonstrate their understanding and mastery of information through written products.

Research studies confirm these benefits, showing that the quantity and quality of students' expression of information greatly improves as a result of instruction in the *Theme Writing Strategy*.

Student athlete study. In one study, Dr. Mike Hock (1998) examined whether a group of underprepared students who were taught the *Theme Writing Strategy* could perform as well as a more prepared group of students who did not learn the strategy.

Hock taught the strategy to 28 freshman scholarship athletes enrolled in English 101, a required English course at a Midwestern university. These were students who had earned an average score

of 17.7 on the American College Test (ACT), a college entrance test, and an average grade-point average of 2.8 in high school. Two of the students in this group had learning disabilities, and one had ADHD. This experimental group of students was required to participate in academic tutoring for six to 10 hours per week because of the skills they had failed to learn before college.

A comparison group of 28 freshman scholarship athletes who had earned an average score of 23.2 on the ACT and an average grade-point average of 3.3 in high school also participated in the study. This comparison group had unlimited access to tutors for help with their coursework and also were enrolled in English 101; they did not receive instruction in the strategy.

Although the experimental students earned scores that were significantly lower on a theme-writing knowledge pretest than the comparison students, at the end of the semester, they earned scores that were significantly higher than the comparison students. Also, in the English 101 course, the experimental students earned an average grade of 2.5 (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0), and the comparison students earned an average grade of 2.6. The overall grade-point average was 2.5 for the experimental group and 2.54 for the comparison group during their first semester in college. There were no significant differences between the groups' grades in the English 101 course and their overall grade-point

averages, even though students in the experimental group entered college with poorer skills than the comparison students. All three students with disabilities in the experimental group earned Cs in the English 101 course, and they earned overall GPAs of 2.50, 2.62, and 2.91 during their first semester of college.

There were no significant differences between the groups' grades in the English 101 course and their overall grade-point averages, even though students in the experimental group entered college with poorer skills than the comparison students.

Multiple-strategy instruction.

Two other investigations have involved the instruction of more than one writing strategy. In the first, seven students with learning disabilities in grades 10 through 12 were taught two or more of the following writing strategies: *Sentence Writing*, *Paragraph Writing*, *Error Monitoring*, and *Theme Writing* (Schmidt, 1983; Schmidt, Deshler, Schumaker, & Alley, 1988/89). A multiple-baseline across-measures design was employed for each student. The students' written products were gathered in the special education resource room before, during, and after instruction in each strategy. In addition, written products were collected in their English and history classes

throughout the study without the students' knowledge to obtain measures of generalization across settings. At least one written product was gathered in the subsequent school year from a general education class to determine whether the students maintained their use of the strategies.

All of the students exceeded the mastery criteria related to each strategy that was taught to them on products written in the resource room. By the end of the school year, six of the students had demonstrated that they could write as well in general education classes as they had in the resource class. Before the study, the students' GPA was 2.1 in English and social studies courses taught in the resource room; after the study, their GPA was 2.7 in English and social studies general education courses.

Four of the students had GPAs at 3.0 after the study; none of the students had reached this level prior to the study. The students' mean grade-equivalent scores on the written language subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery were 6.2 at the beginning of the study and 8.2 at the end of the study. (The mean expected score, statistically, was 7.0 at the end of the study). On the district's minimal competency writing exam, the students who learned the *Theme Writing Strategy* earned a mean overall score of 3.5, which compared favorably to the mean score for 11th graders in the district of 2.5. Participating students who did not learn the *Theme Writing Strategy* earned a

mean overall score of 2.4 on the district exam.

The other study that has focused on the instruction of several writing strategies was conducted in five fifth-grade general education classes (Bui, 2002). Students in three of the classes served as the experimental group; students in two classes served as the comparison group. A total of 113 students (including 14 with LD) participated. The same teacher taught the three classes of experimental students to write simple sentences using lessons selected from the *Fundamentals in the Sentence Writing* program. She also used simplified versions of instruction in the *Paragraph Writing Strategy*, the *Error Monitoring Strategy*, and the *Theme Writing Strategy*. The instruction lasted six weeks.

A pretest-posttest comparison-group design was employed. The groups were shown to be equivalent at pretesting on all but one measure. Results showed that the experimental students earned substantially higher scores on the posttest than the pretest on the majority of the writing measures. Additionally, their posttest scores were significantly higher than the posttest scores of the comparison group. Students in one of the experimental classes earned a mean score on the statewide writing exam at the satisfactory level (between 3 and 4 on a 6-point scale), and their scores on this exam were significantly higher than the scores of students in the other classes.

Conclusion

These results show that *Theme Writing Strategy* instruction can produce positive improvements in the writing performance of students with learning disabilities and other students. Students with learning disabilities not only can master the strategy, they also can generalize their use of the strategy to novel tasks and settings, including general education classes at the high school and college level. The overall picture that has emerged is that students with learning disabilities and other at-risk students can become competent theme writers, even at the high school and college levels, as long as educators provide the appropriate kinds of instruction for them.

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Fundamentals in the Theme Writing Strategy is available only through workshops conducted by certified SIM Professional Developers. For information about professional development opportunities, visit the CRL web site: www.kucrl.org/iei/sim/prof_dev.html.

Getting organized

Cynthia Alexander, a SIM Professional Developer from Fairfax, Virginia, shared the following ideas for organizing student materials.

Manila Envelopes

Use manila envelopes for student materials instead of pocket folders with brads.

1. As you conference with students after the pretest, attach the strategy's progress chart to the front of a 9" by 12" manila envelope. Tape works fine—better than glue for holding purposes.
2. Place all cue cards in the envelope.
3. Place all tests in the envelope with any cards necessary.
4. Chart student progress on the front of the envelope.
5. Use the back of the envelope as an assignment sheet to tell the student what she or he needs to complete during the class period.

Tips:

- This technique works particularly well for LINCS since each student has many sets of index cards.
- Since the metal clamps sometimes break, other teachers have used more expensive envelopes with tie closers.

Using Bound Cue Cards

Bind cue cards using a binding machine.

1. Bind the cards before giving them to students. Funds for the machine at Cynthia's school came from a grant provided by the school system and corporate sponsors. In other schools, PTA monies have provided machines.
2. Before starting, have students number the cards for easy reference.
3. Begin the Describe stage as usual referring to the card numbers as students create cue cards.

Tips:

- Use the smallest card possible for the strategy. This saves coil (the plastic strip used to hold the cards together).
- Bind the sides of the cards. You may be able to use one coil for two sets of cards.
- This technique works best with strategies that go in a constant order (such as LINCS or RAP), not back and forth through the steps (PIRATES, for example).

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