Essay Test-Taking

Charles Hughes
*Professor of
Special Education
Penn State
University*

A number of years ago during a Strategic Instruction Model update meeting, Jean Schumaker, Don Deshler, and I decided that a "companion" to the *Test-Taking Strategy* focusing on essay questions was needed. We were aware that, based on Lewis Putnam's work on setting demands and our own analysis of test formats, many students were required to answer essay questions on their classroom tests and that when this type of question was present, it accounted for a sizable chunk of the grade. Thus, we developed a strategy and accompanying instructor's manual and gave it to a seasoned strategies teacher, Beverly Wilson, who taught at the local high school.

Using a multiple-probe across 12-student design, we found that all of Bev's students (10th- through 12th-graders) learned the steps of the strategy to mastery and that essays written after they learned the strategy were rated (holistically) higher than those they wrote before they learned the strategy. Armed with the data that the strategy was helpful for students when answering essay questions based on prior readings, we promptly sat on the strategy for the next four years.

After the four-year hiatus and during another meeting, Don and Jean prompted

Essays written after students learned the strategy were rated (holistically) higher than those they wrote before they learned the strategy

me that we really should do something with this strategy, especially given the increasing expectation for students to answer essay questions not only on classroom tests but in situations such as state-level exams, the SAT, and so on. During this "resurrection" discussion, we decided to change the format of the instructor's manual from the classic eight-stage format to the lesson format used in some of the newer strategies (such as *Fundamentals in Sentence Writing*). We also wanted to write it in a way that would allow general education teachers as well as resource teachers to teach it. To that end, after we wrote the first draft, we gave it to a focus group of general education teachers and asked them a series of questions about its usefulness in their setting. Not surprisingly, the most consistent message from them was "simplify it!" At the same time, we also understood that resource teachers would need more intensive instructional activities for their students to become fluent strategy users. Thus, we built in some different options for assessment, practice, and feedback that teachers could choose from based on the needs of their students and the realities of their instructional settings.

Because we had changed the strategy and instructional procedures somewhat and to

further validate the effectiveness of the strategy, we decided to run a second study, which we have just completed. Under the direction of a colleague of mine, Bill Therrien of the University of Iowa, we conducted a randomized, pretest-posttest control-group study with 40 seventh- and eighth-grade students with learning disabilities. Two of the measures used were a strategy-use measure (assessing such items as how well the students identified key parts of directions in an essay prompt, set up an outline, used the outline, etc.) and a holistic scoring measure that looked at two aspects of essay writing: ideas and organization. Students were asked to answer essay questions (that is, to respond to prompts from state assessments and the SAT) before and after instruction and in a delayed posttest. Analysis of the data shows significant differences between the experimental and control groups in favor of the students trained in the strategy for both measures. In short, students in the experimental group learned the strategy and used the strategy appropriately; in addition, multiple raters assigned their essays higher scores in terms of ideas and organization than students who did not learn the strategy.

Steps of the Strategy

The *Essay Test-Taking Strategy,* the main purpose of which is to help students construct well-organized, coherent, complete, and on-target responses to essay questions, is a six-step strategy with the acronym of *ANSWER* (see box above).

Step 1, *Analyze the Key Words,* is designed to help students under-

---

THE ESSAY TEST-TAKING STRATEGY

Step 1: **A**nalyze the Key Words

Step 2: **N**otice the Requirements

Step 3: **S**et Up an Outline

Step 4: **W**ork in Details

Step 5: **E**ngineer Your Answer

Step 6: **R**eview Your Answer

---

stand what the question is asking. It requires them to read the question carefully and underline key words (similar to the *Test-Taking Strategy*). Many of the following key words are often found in essay questions: "compare and contrast," "describe," "evaluate," "justify," and so on. The second step, *Notice the Requirements*, continues to direct student efforts toward ensuring they understand what is required in the response. They are taught to mark words or phrases that indicate specific requirements (for example, "list all five parts," "choose one reason and elaborate," "choose a position," etc.) as well as put the question in their own words (paraphrase).

The next two steps deal with helping the students (quickly!) create outlines for their responses. In Step 3, *Set up an Outline*, students write down some main ideas they want to include in their responses, making sure their ideas line up with the requirements of the question. Step 4, *Work in Details*, allows them to "flesh out"

their outlines by adding details, after which they indicate the order in which they will write the main ideas and details. Throughout this step, students are reminded to write things quickly and to use abbreviations so they will have sufficient time to construct their responses.

The final two steps deal with writing the essay answer. Step 5, *Engineer Your Answer*, guides students through a process (while referring to their outlines) of writing introductory and detail paragraphs as well as the use of topic and detail sentences. Finally, students check their responses against their outlines in the *Review Your Answer* step.

Instructional Methods

As I mentioned earlier, when developing the instructor's manual for the *Essay Test-Taking Strategy,* we used the lesson format and included a variety of assessment and instructional options based on teacher and student needs. The six lessons begin with *An Introduction to the Essay Test-Taking*

Strategy. This lesson contains activities to contextualize and personalize the need for having a strategy when answering essay questions as well as a number of options for pre-testing (including not pre-testing if it is already obvious students have problems in writing on-target, organized, and coherent responses to essay questions).

The second, third, and fourth lessons introduce the steps of the strategy to students. During these lessons, the teacher will describe, model, provide practice activities, and give corrective feedback. The second lesson, *Interacting with the Question,* covers steps one and two of the strategy, and the third lesson, which covers strategy steps three and four, is titled *Create an Outline*. The fourth lesson, *Writing the Answer,* involves teaching the students the final two steps of the strategy. It is important to note that the practice activities are cumulative in nature so that during the third lesson, which focuses on developing an outline, students not only practice outlining, they also practice what they learned in the previous lesson. All of the practice activities (most of which are called "Learning Sheets") are included in the manuals, although teachers also are given guidelines to make their own activities if they deem it useful to their students and situation.

The fifth lesson provides *Verbal Practice* and includes all of the typical SIM activities for ensuring that students understand the concepts and processes of the *Essay Test-Taking Strategy* as well as memorizing the steps and sub-steps. Finally, the sixth lesson, *Putting it all Together,* requires students to demonstrate all the steps of the strategy when answering essay questions.

Essay Test-Taking Errata & Tips

We recommend that you change the wording for Step 1 of the strategy on all cue cards to **Analyze the Key Words** (instead of Analyze the Action Words).

There was an error in the scoring procedures for Lesson 3 Learning Sheets. We suggest that teachers use the first half of the checklist on page 108 of the manual to verify use for Steps 1-4 instead of using the boxes on the scoring sheet.

A participant at the West Regional Update meeting made the following suggestions for use with this strategy:

- Use different colors of pens or highlighters when underlining key words (in Step 1) and when marking requirements in Step 2.
- Use the Frame from the Framing Routine when making an outline.

Carnegie launches literacy web site

Carnegie Corp. has just launched a new Advancing Literacy web site (www.carnegie.org/literacy).

The site contains information about intermediate and adolescent literacy and is home to many of the reports and work Carnegie's Advancing Literacy program has helped to support. Among the site's contents are sections about the state of adolescent literacy today (including why adolescent literacy matters and which adolescents are most at risk); educating the educators; family, communities, and peers; adolescent literacy and public policy (including the effect of literacy problems on policy problems); and standards and assessments (including state-by-state resources and National Assessment of Educational Progress information).

A picture is worth...

Many of the videos KU-CRL has produced over the past 20 years are now available as DVDs as well as in their original videotape format. See the order form below for more information.

CD/Video/Misc   Training not required for items on this page ***August 2006**

KU CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON LEARNING
The University of Kansas

Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 W. Campus Road – Room 517
Lawrence, Kansas 66045-3101
Order Desk (785) 864-0617   **FED ID No. 48-0680117**
FAX # (785) 864-5728

Date:

P. O. #

Quantity	CDs	Unit Price	Extension
	*Intro*duction to **SIM** - CD	$10.00	
	Videotapes		
	Concept Anchoring *Routine* **VT or DVD** (2002)	$25.00	
	Teaching with the **Concept Mastery** *Routine* **VT or DVD** (1998)	$25.00	
	Enhancing *Strategic Instruction: Critical Teaching Behaviors* **VT or DVD**	$25.00	
	The **Lesson Organizer** *for Trainers* Videotape (2001)	$25.00	
	Making a Difference: *From Those Who Know* Videotape (l988)	$10.00	
	Modeling the **First-Letter Mnemonic** *Strategy* **VT or DVD** (1989)	$25.00	
	Strategic Tutoring **VT or DVD** (2003)	$29.00	
	Teaching Younger Students *to Master Learning Strategies* **VT or DVD**	$25.00	
	The **Unit Organizer** **VT or DVD** (2002)	$25.00	
	Word identification *for Trainers Vid*eotape (2001)	$25.00	
	Stratellite Connection #1 #2 #3 #4 (circle one or more)	$15.00	
	Stratellite Connection #5 #6 #7 #8 (circle one or more)	$15.00	
	Stratellite Connection #9 #10 (circle one or more)	$15.00	
	Stratellite Connection #11 (Overview) #12 #13 #14 (circle one or more)	$15.00	
	SIM Overview for Administrators *(Stratellite #14)*	$15.00	
	Misc.		
	One-page **Brochure for Administrators** (Set of 20) Revised 2005	$5.00	
	READ – A Rubric for Educating Adolescents with Disabilities	**$10.00**	
	Tutoractive Session Organizer (25 triplicate sets)	$6.00	
	Tutoring Success Guide	$4.00	
		Subtotal	
	VISA/MasterCard #:		
	Expires: **Personal** ☐ **Business** ☐		
	Authorization:		

**Note: KS Sales Tax applies only to orders shipped within KS	**Kansas Sales Tax – 7.3%	
Federal Tax Identification Number	**Regula**r Shipping/Handling: **10%**	
Tax exempt Number	**Minimum** Shipping **$4.00**	
There will be <u>extra shipping charges</u>	Extra shipping Charges	
if expedited shipping is required.	**Total**	

Bill to:	Ship to:

*****Name/Phone number/**e-mail** of person placing the order:

Introducing the SIM Logo

Over the years, many pieces of artwork have been affiliated with the Strategic Instruction Model. Remember the butterfly? The series of Reach for the Stars graphics? The Content Enhancement prism?

Despite all of the great symbolism behind these images, we have never taken the next step: Declaring that we have adopted an official SIM logo. Until now, that is.

This summer, KU-CRL finalized a design and established standards for using the new SIM logo. Soon, you'll begin seeing the logo on many SIM-related publications, including brochures, web sites, and newsletters such as *Strategram*. For a glimpse of the new logo in color and information about the process that led to its adoption, visit www.kucrl.org/simlogo.

Deshler to serve on board of National Institute for Literacy

KU-CRL's director, Don Deshler, has been appointed to the advisory board of the National Institute for Literacy. The U.S. Senate confirmed his appointment on Sept. 15. Don will serve the remainder of a three-year term expiring January 30, 2008.

The National Institute for Literacy provides leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults.

In consultation with the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, the institute serves as a national resource on current, comprehensive literacy research, practice, and policy.

Don joins two other appointees confirmed by the Senate:
- M. Carmel Borders, president of the Tapestry Foundation, an organization that partners with literacy projects that emphasize family literacy and the early literacy environment for children
- Timothy Shanahan, a professor of urban education and director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

Rising Above the Gathering Storm

More than one presentation during the summer SIM conference mentioned a publication called *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. The report, an example of how attention is being focused on raising the bar for students in addition to closing the performance gap, was prepared by the National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine.

The report is available from the National Academies Press (http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11463.html). At this site, you may read the full report online for free or download the executive summary as a pdf file.

Are you a StrateReader?

http://stratereaders.kucrl.org/

What StrateReaders is an interactive, virtual book club focusing on the current literature addressing our changing world and the implications for education, professional development, leadership, educational reform, and the like. Featured books will be recommendations from KU-CRL and book club members.

Who Membership is open to SIM Professional Developers, SIM educators, and anyone interested in joining and contributing.

When We will read a new book every two months. See the StrateReaders Unit Organizer for current book list and reading schedule (www.kucrl.org/stratereaders). Members will have the opportunity to share reflections, thoughts, and ideas about the book on the StrateReaders blog, then join a conference call for a live discussion at the end of each reading period.

How Visit the StrateReaders blog at http://stratereaders.kucrl.org to get started. You will be able to respond to any posting by clicking on the "Comments" link below the post. When you click on this link, you will be able to read any comments that have been posted previously, and you will have the opportunity to add your own comments. If you have any questions, please e-mail the KU-CRL communications team (jtollefson@ku.edu or dgnojek@ku.edu). Note that all comments will be held until a blog administrator has approved them for posting. Our goal is *not* to inhibit discussion. We are hoping that by holding posts temporarily, we will keep unwanted posters (those who send spam or use inappropriate language, for example) from disrupting our thoughtful discussions.

Why Although we are all experts in SIM, this is no longer enough to be effective in today's educational world. We also must have a common base of knowledge from the larger educational and business world and the ability to interact with this information and each other.

Join the discussion at http://stratereaders.kucrl.org.

StrateReader Unit Schedule

September-October
The World is Flat
by Thomas L. Friedman
Conference call: Oct. 31

November-December
The New Division of Labor
by Frank Levy
and Richard J. Murnane
Conference call: Dec. 12

January-February
School Reform from the Inside Out
by Richard Elmore
Conference call: Feb. 27

March-April
Data Wise: Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning
By Kathryn Parker Boudett, Elizabeth A. City, and Richard J. Murnane
Conference call: April 24

May-June
Leadership and Sustainability
by Michael Fullan
Conference call: June 26

Announcements

• **Last issue!** The 2005-2006 *Strategram* publication year is at an end. If you have not renewed your subscription for 2006-2007, this is your last issue. Take a moment now to renew your subscription! See the subscription information form on the back of this newsletter. *SIM Professional Developers: Please note that Strategram is included in your Strateworks membership. Please do not subscribe separately.*

• **Photos** from the 2006 International SIM Conference are available at www.kucrl.org/conference.

• A new Instructional Coaching offering has been added to the KU-CRL line up. The workshop, called **Coaching Classroom Management**, is scheduled to be offered in January 2007 and August 2007. See the Instructional Coaching web site, www.instructional-coach.com, for the latest information.

• Two summer SIM institutes have been scheduled: **SIM Reading and Writing Strategies** and **More SIM Strategies** both will be offered June 19-22, 2007. Watch future issues of Strategram for more information.

KUCRL.ORG

Check our web site for information about the Strategic Instruction Model, the Center for Research on Learning, our current projects, and more.

E-mail your suggestions for improving this site to jtollefson@ku.edu.

Strategram Back Issue Form

Name:

Address:

City, State, ZIP:

Volume/issue # request:

*$15 per volume
or $3 per issue
Mail to KU-CRL Order Desk
Joseph R. Pearson Hall
1122 West Campus Road, Rm. 517
Lawrence, KS 66045-3101*

Strategram Subscription Form 2006-2007

To subscribe to *Strategram,* complete this form and send it with your check for $15 to KU-CRL Order Desk, Joseph R. Pearson Hall, 1122 West Campus Road Rm. 517, Lawrence, KS 66045-3101

Name:

Address:

City, State, ZIP:

Phone Number:

Your subscription entitles you to all six issues of the current volume. Use this form to renew for the 2006-2007 publication year.

www.kucrl.org
**The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning
on the World Wide Web**