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The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning

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Featured Articles

Our featured articles are authored by presenters at the upcoming Fall Virtual Conference. Read more about what they will be doing in the SIM News section below and register today!

When HOTR Meets CCLR

Dawn Schlick, Wisconsin Heights MS

During my SIM Professional Developer recertification, I shared a thought that has stayed with me: as education evolves, we should continue examining emerging trends and asking how HOTR routines might help us meet new instructional needs. In Wisconsin, one major focus is College, Career, and Life Readiness (CCLR), with an emphasis on durable skills such as collaboration, communication, critical thinking, self-direction, and problem-solving.

This year, our district launched a middle school Academic Lab course built around design sprints in which students collaborate to solve authentic, real-world problems. As I helped develop the curriculum, I began asking an important question: **How do we help teachers bring durable skill instruction into academic classrooms in a way that feels meaningful and manageable?**

As interest in this work spread across our 6–12 staff, that question became even more relevant. Teachers appreciated the engagement and real-world application of design sprint learning, but like many educators, they did not want it to feel like "one more thing."

That is where the Question Exploration Routine (QER) came to mind.

Our staff is already trained in QER, and it has been an important part of our academic success. Because teachers already understand its thinking structure, I began adapting it for design sprint instruction. Rather than replacing the core structure, the adaptation reframes QER to support authentic problem-solving and durable skill development. Students still identify the problem, define key concepts, break the challenge into supporting questions, synthesize the main idea, and apply their learning. In many ways, the problem-based nature of Academic Lab aligns naturally with Step 5 of QER. The biggest shift is in the real-world application, where the final product must connect to a CCLR standard.

What has been especially encouraging is how naturally my sixth graders transition between the formal academic version of QER in Reading/Language Arts and this adapted version in Academic Lab—and at times, even back into ELA instruction. The thinking remains familiar, even as the application shifts.

Link to Lab Adaptation of QER
Link to CCLR version of the QER used in my Reading Class

This experience has made me wonder whether adapting familiar HOTR routines may offer schools a practical bridge between rigorous academic instruction and durable skill development. For SIM Professional Developers, that may be an **important takeaway: when schools are asked to address emerging priorities, the most sustainable path may not be creating something entirely new but helping educators see how strong existing instructional routines can evolve to meet new needs.**

What's in a Paragraph

Jean Schumaker, SIM Author & President Edge Enterprises, Inc.

"A paragraph has a beginning, middle, and end. What else is there to teach?"

This is a question Professional Developers sometimes hear when introducing paragraph-writing instruction. At first glance, writing a paragraph may seem simple. However, strong paragraphs depend on a collection of skills that students must learn and practice. Understanding these skills and how to teach them can help teachers move students beyond simply filling a page with sentences and toward writing that is clear, cohesive, and engaging.

Consistency Creates Clarity

Verb tense. When a paragraph is written, the author needs to write all the sentences in the same verb tense, either past tense, present tense, or future tense. The focus here is on the verbs in the sentences. If the student is writing about something that happened in the past, all of the verbs need to be past tense verbs (e.g., painted, had, was). If the student is writing about something that is currently ongoing, all of the verbs need to be present tense verbs (e.g., paints, has, is). If the student is writing about something that will happen in the future, all of the verbs need to be future tense verbs (e.g., will paint, will have, will be). Students who have not learned the concept of consistent verbs will use a variety of verb tenses in their paragraphs and may jump back and forth between verb tenses without reason. This inconsistency creates confusion for the reader of the paragraph. There are surely exceptions to this rule of using a consistent verb tense across sentences , for example, when the writer is using the present tense in most sentences but has to refer to something that happened in the past to provide clarity. However, the writer has to be fairly skilled to make all the sentences flow together if different tenses are to be used.

Point of View. Likewise, the author of a paragraph needs to write all the sentences from the same point of view, either in first-person, second-person, or third-person point of view. The focus here is on the subjects in the sentences. Sentences written in the **first-person point of view** utilize subjects such as "I" and "we." Such sentences are usually recounting something that happened to the author of the paragraph (e.g., "I went to the store.") or a group in which the author has membership (e.g., "We are planning a picnic."). Sentences written in the **second-person point of view** are usually providing instructions or commands to the reader of the paragraph. The subjects of these sentences are "You" (e.g., "You should be careful!") or the understood "you" (e.g., "Take care of yourself."). Sentences written in the **third-person point of view** are focusing on others beside the author and the reader. The subjects of these sentences will be names (e.g., "Arturo," "Hallie," "the soccer team"), nouns (boy, friends) or pronouns like "He," "She," and "They." Students who have not learned the concept of using consistent point of view across sentences in a paragraph will jump from one point of view to another, and that can also cause confusion for the reader.

Often, the type of paragraph that is being written dictates what point of view (and tense) should be used. For example, if the student has been assigned to write a paragraph telling a story about something that happened to the student, the story should be written in the first-person point of view (using "I" or "We" as the subject of sentences) and in the past tense. If the student has been assigned to write an instructional paragraph about how someone should get ready for a party, the paragraph should be written in the second-person point of view (using "You" or the understood "you" for the subjects) and the future tense.

Transitions Create Flow

For any paragraph to flow from beginning to end, the writer needs to include transitions between the major details in the paragraph. Transitions can include single words (e.g., "First," "Consequently," "Often,"), phrases (e.g., "In the morning," "On top of"), and clauses (e.g., "If you are early," "When the rooster crows"). To use transitions appropriately, students need to be taught to discriminate between major and minor details in the paragraph. Major details are those that are contained in the **Lead-off Sentences** in the paragraph (i.e., those that introduce a new detail). Minor details are those that provide more information about a major detail. They are covered in one or more **Follow-up Sentences** directly after a Lead-off Sentence. That is, they do not repeat the major detail; instead, they expand upon the major detail and provide more substance to the paragraph. Importantly, transitions are to be used only in the sentences introducing a major detail (e.g., the Lead-off Sentences).

Another important point related to transitions is that, when they are used, transitions are to be used in a coordinated way. That is, students need to learn that transitions are related to five groups, called "sequences." The sequences are "Linking," "Importance," "Space," "Time," and "Size." The FIRST-Letter mnemonic device "LISTS" can be used by students to remember the sequences.

The effective use of transitions does more than connect sentences—they help readers follow the writer's thinking. Students can improve paragraph flow by using related transitions that follow a logical sequence of time, space, importance, size, or linking relationships. For example, to use the time sequence, a writer might use "In the morning," as the first transition, "Around noon," as the second transition, and "In the evening" as the third transition in relation to three major details (e.g., events) that happened across a whole day. For another example, to use the space sequence, a writer might use "On the left side of the room," as the first transition, "In the middle of the room," as the second

transition, and “On the right side of the room,” as the third transition. Choosing transitions related to one sequence in a logical order sets up the flow from the beginning of a paragraph to the end of the paragraph. Using transitions in this way creates a cohesive paragraph.

Beginnings and Endings Matter

The Title. The title of a paragraph is important for a few reasons. First, it is typically used to convey the main idea of the paragraph. This communicates to the reader whether the writer is responding to the assignment and what the paragraph is about. Second, the title can be used to interest the reader in spending time reading the paragraph. It is a motivational tool, and the more creative the title, the more likely the reader will be interested in reading the paragraph. The title is written above the paragraph and is set aside from the paragraph in some way. For example, it might be underlined, written in all capital letters, or centered above the paragraph.

The Topic Sentence. The Topic Sentence is typically the first or second sentence in the paragraph. In addition to the title of the paragraph, it conveys the main idea of the paragraph in some way. It shows that the writer is responding to the assignment and typically signals the reader about the type of paragraph that has been written. That is, it indicates that something might be described, or that a claim might be made, or that a story will be told. A very good Topic Sentence interests the reader in reading the paragraph and draws the reader into the rest of the paragraph.

An important consideration is that the structure of a Topic Sentence can be varied across several paragraphs. This comes in handy when a writer is writing several paragraphs so that the document is not repetitive or boring. Thus, writers need to learn to write all varieties of Topic Sentences when they are learning to write the basic paragraph. These types of sentences will come in handy when students are writing essays and themes. Three types of Topic Sentences can be easily taught: the General Topic Sentence, the Clueing Topic Sentence, and the Specific Topic Sentence:

- The **General Topic Sentence** names the main idea of the paragraph and interests the reader in investing time to read it. The more creative this sentence is, the more likely the reader will become interested. An example General Topic Sentence might be “Rosie, the Wonder Dog!”
- The **Clueing Topic Sentence** clues the reader about the major details to be covered in the paragraph using a “Clue Word” that encompasses the meaning of the main details. For example, the writer can clue the reader about the details to be covered by stating something like, “Rosie is a remarkable dog in four ways.” “Four” and “ways” are clue words indicating that there will be four details, and the details will be “ways.”
- The **Specific Topic Sentence** names the details to be covered in the paragraph. For example, a Specific Topic Sentence might state, “Rosie is a wonder dog because she can find a hidden toy, dance around in circles, and bring you your slippers.” The three major details to be covered in this paragraph are “finding a hidden toy,” “dancing around in circles,” and “bringing slippers.”

The Clincher Sentence. The Clincher Sentence is typically the last sentence in the paragraph. It provides the ending or conclusion for the paragraph. To clue the reader that the paragraph is ending, a Concluding Transition (e.g., “In conclusion,” “All in all,” “In summary”) is used at the beginning of the Clincher Sentence. An important idea is that although a Clincher Sentence is used at the end of a single paragraph, it is not to be used at the end of every paragraph in a group of paragraphs. It might be used at the end of each section of a long essay and at the end of the essay. However, elementary students

can learn to use a Clincher Sentence at the end of every paragraph to give them practice writing this type of sentence.

Students also need practice varying the structure of the sentences in a paragraph to avoid repetitious structuring of sentences. Thus, they are taught to write different kinds of Clincher Sentences as well as different kinds of Topic Sentences. Writers can provide interest and variety by writing different types of Clincher Sentences. They are encouraged to choose a type of Clincher Sentence that is *differen*t from the type of Topic Sentence written for the beginning of the paragraph. For example, if they write a General Topic Sentence, they should choose to write either a Clueing or Specific Clincher Sentence.

- The **General Clincher Sentence** names the main idea of the paragraph and prompts the reader to think more about the meaning of the paragraph. The more creative this sentence is, the more likely the reader will continue to think about the meaning of the paragraph. An example General Clincher Sentence might be "To conclude, Rosie is truly a trickster."
- The **Clueing Clincher Sentence** clues the reader about the major details that were covered in the paragraph. It includes one or more "Clue Words" that encompass the meaning of the main details. For example, the writer might remind the reader that the details that were covered were "four ways" supporting the claim that "Rosie is a Wonder Dog." For example, the Clincher Sentence might be "To conclude, because of the three tricks that Rosie does, she is very different from other dogs.
- The **Specific Clincher Sentence** names the details that were covered in the paragraph. For example, a Specific Clincher Sentence might state, "In summary, Rosie's tricks of finding things, dancing, and bringing slippers make her a very remarkable dog."

The Devil is in the Details

Detail Sentences. As mentioned above, two types of Detail Sentences are used in paragraphs. The Detail Sentences that cover a major detail are called Lead-off Sentences, and those that cover minor details (which add information to the Lead-off Sentences) are called Follow-up Sentences. These Follow-up Sentences provide the substance of a paragraph, or the in-depth meaning of the paragraph.

- A **Lead-off Sentence** is the sentence that introduces a new major detail in a paragraph. There can be many Lead-off Sentences in a paragraph, but for elementary and secondary students, three or four Lead-off Sentences in a paragraph are usually sufficient. Each Lead-off Sentence contains a transition to provide a connection between and among the major details in the paragraph. The transitions that are chosen for use across the Lead-off Sentences are related to the same sequence of transitions that work together across the paragraph.
- A **Follow-up Sentence** is a sentence that provides more information about a major detail than what was provided in the Lead-off Sentence. It does not contain a transition. Each Lead-off Sentence can be followed by one or more Follow-up Sentences.

Summary

In conclusion, a well-written paragraph contains several complexities that are not immediately obvious. First, it has several parts, comprising a beginning, middle, and end. Within each of the parts are some important elements that contribute to the "whole package." The beginning, comprised of the Title and the Topic Sentence, introduces the reader to what type of paragraph is being written and the main idea of the paragraph. They entice the reader to continue reading. The end of the paragraph reminds the

reader about the details that have been covered and encourages the reader to think more about the topic. Thus, the beginning and end of a paragraph are motivational as well as informative. The middle of the paragraph contains the real substance and meaning of the paragraph. It should be rich with information for the reader. The meaning should flow gracefully from the first detail sentence to the last, using coordinated transitions that are logically related to the same sequence. When these elements work together, students produce writing that is clear, cohesive, and effective. Helping students master these skills lays the foundation for success in essays, reports, stories, and other forms of writing.

SIM News



Register today for the 2026 Fall SIM Virtual Update Conference, beginning Oct. 6, and join colleagues from across the SIM community for a month of new learning, collaboration, and live engagement.

Here are some conference session highlights:

- **Introducing the New Fundamentals of Paragraph Writing Strategy** - Jean Schumaker, Whitney Miller -- A deep-dive into the new Fundamentals of Paragraph Writing Strategy for elementary students with the authors.
- **Introducing the New SMARTER 360** - Keith B. Lenz, Jan Bulgren -- A deep-dive into the new SMARTER 360 with the authors.
- **All It Takes Is One: Driving Deep Student Thinking and Lasting Instructional Change** - Dawn Schlick -- Dawn will share how a shift from teaching SIM CERs as individual tools to intentionally connecting them across a unit transformed student learning by focusing on the thinking behind the routines, using a sixth-grade unit to illustrate how purposeful connections can deepen understanding and spark lasting instructional change.
- **Teaching Essay Writing with Technology to College Students in an Inclusive Postsecondary Education Program** - Suzanne Woods-Groves -- Suzanne will highlight the outcomes of a hybrid virtual essay-writing intervention for college students with developmental disabilities, with students achieving mastery through a structured writing process.
- **Writing with Purpose and PBS Journalism in Action Project** - Suzy Myers, Jocelyn Washburn with Luke Gerwe and Victoria Pasquantonio from PBS Newshour Classroom -- In this session, we'll introduce the newly available Writing with Purpose Routine, share about PBS NewsHour's Classroom's Journalism in Action website, and how WWP can be used with primary source exploration.

Click here to view the full conference schedule
Click here to see a sample letter to request funding for your participation

SIM in the Field

- The UCA Mashburn Center for Learning was awarded a $300,000 contract from the Arkansas Division of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide professional development and support to schools across the state through the Arkansas Co-Teaching with the Strategic Instruction Model Project. We're very excited to be partnering with them!

- CRL researchers Jocelyn Washburn, Suzy Myers, and Bonnie Palasak presented at the 2026 OSEP Conference in Arlington in August.



- We are proud to share that Jocelyn Washburn was a featured premier speaker at the 2026 Arizona Department of Education IDEA Conference held in August.

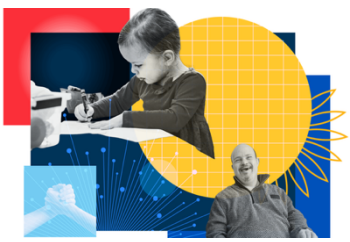


Recent Publications by KU CRL Staff and SIM Network Members:

- **Rowland, Amber** & Mosher, Maggie & **Smith, Sean** & Lowrey, K. & Carreon, Adam. (2026). Mastering Social Skills With VOISS and VOISS Advisor: From Assessment to Real-World Application. TEACHING Exceptional Children. 10.1177/00400599261464915.
- **Boyle, Joseph**. (2026). Using a Cognitive Mapping Strategy to Increase Reading Comprehension for Students with Learning Problems. Illinois Reading Council Journal. 23. 23-34.
- Martínez-Álvarez, Patricia & Sullivan, A. & Thorius, K. & **Lindo, Endia**. (2026). Research and Advocacy for Rightful Education. Exceptional Children. 93. 5-10. 10.1177/00144029261478736.

More Resources and Media Picks:

- We've created a slide for you to include at the end of your PD presentations for participants to learn more about SIM or join the SIM Educator Newsletter
- **Check out all of the Featured News from our Parent Organization, KU Life Span Institute.** There is some great research happening to improve lives!



Reminders and Support:

- **We've made the PD Reporting Form quicker (only 1-2 min.) - Don't forget to report your PD Work** - we don't care if it isn't recent!
- **We'd love to see more SIM in action!** Tag us in your posts or email your photos to simpd@ku.edu for a chance to be featured.
- Do you or your teachers **need ideas on how to help get your professional learning funded**?

Events for SIM Professional Developers and Specialists:

- ***2026 Fall SIM Virtual Update Conference - October 2026***

FREE SIM Resources:

- **SLANT (2nd Edition) Manual**
- **Teaching Content to All Manual**
- **Professional Learning Micro-credentials for teachers**
- **SIM CROSSWALKS**
- **2025 SIM One-Page Flyer**
- **Handout with quick links to SIM resources (crosswalks and websites)**

SIM Courses for Educators:

- **Course First!** - Learn 4 SIM Content Enhancement Routines with this new online class designed to strategically integrate CERs across an entire course to support the full learning journey.
- **Supporting Adolescent Literacy for Successful School Change** - A Six-Part Course Designed to Support School Teams in Implementing a Systematic Approach to Adolescent Literacy to Dramatically Impact Teacher and Student Performance

SIM Online Classes for Educators:

- **Content Enhancement Routines:**
  - **Concept Comparison Routine**
  - **Concept Mastery Routine**
  - **Cross-Curricular Argumentation Routine**
  - **Framing Routine**
  - **Unit Organizer Routine**
- **Learning Strategies**
  - **Fundamentals of Paraphrasing and Summarizing Strategy**
  - **The Inference Strategy**
  - **The Paragraph Writing Strategy**
  - **Possible Selves Strategy (1st or 2nd edition)**
  - **Sentence Writing Strategies (Fundamentals and Proficiency)**
  - **Understanding Academic Language**
  - **NEW Apr 2026 - Word Mapping Strategy**