

Meeting Standards and Engaging All Learners Using an Evidence-based Practice in Writing

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Teachers in today's inclusive classrooms are expected to employ effective evidence-based practices when working with students to meet New Hampshire's Core Content State Standards (CCSS) in writing (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). As early as 1st grade and on into high school, students are required by CCSS to voice and support their opinion in writing in response to a literary or informational text. Students need to be able to organize their ideas when writing by using a text structure associated with expository writing (i.e., topic or introductory statement, supporting statements, and conclusion) and persuasive writing (i.e., arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence [New Hampshire Department of Education, 2006]). Fortunately, there are several evidence-based writing strategies that teachers can use with confidence when teaching students the skills they need to meet the CCSS in writing. Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) in writing is an explicit method of writing instruction with an impressive track record of helping students, both with and without disabilities, to understand the text structures necessary to write organized, high-quality, expository, and persuasive paragraphs and essays (Graham & Perin, 2007). SRSD in writing offers teachers, as well as faculty working with pre-service teachers, an evidence-based method of teaching writing instruction so students can effectively communicate their ideas when writing.

Evidence-based Components of SRSD in Writing

How do we know that SRSD is an evidence-based practice in writing? SRSD in writing has been investigated in over 50 studies, with a large number of students from elementary grades

through high school, and has produced positive effect sizes of 1.02 for struggling writers and 0.70 for typical students in general education classrooms (Graham & Harris, 2003; Graham & Perin, 2007). This is a medium-to-large intervention effect, as suggested by Cohen (Huck, 2000). Clearly, SRSD in writing has a strong evidence base.

Why is SRSD so effective? SRSD employs several evidence-based components: explicit instruction, strategy mnemonics, graphic organizers, and self-regulation (Division of Learning Disabilities, 2013).

First, SRSD in writing is explicit instruction. In other words, teachers using SRSD directly teach students the skills of planning and composing and then scaffold and support student practice (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Students learn writing strategies through six explicit instruction stages: The teacher will (1) develop and activate students' background knowledge, (2) discuss the strategies to be learned, (3) model effective writing using the strategy, (4) assess students' memorization of the strategy steps, (5) further support strategy use through guided practice and corrective feedback, and, finally, (6) monitor the independent use of

the strategy and fade prompts when students attain strategy mastery (Graham & Harris, 1999).

Second, SRSD instruction includes procedural prompts that provide visual cues to assist students with the writing process. For example, two SRSD procedural prompts are provided in Figures 1 and 2: the strategy mnemonic sheet and the strategy graphic organizer for the strategies POW + TREE. The mnemonics POW (**P**ick my idea, **O**rganize my ideas, **W**rite and say more) and TREE (**T**opic statement, **R**easons, **E**xplanations, **E**nding) provide students with a trick to remember the essential parts of expository or persuasive text during the planning and composing phases of writing (De La Paz, 1999; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). The use of a graphic organizer (Figure 2) is helpful to the writer in two ways. It breaks the task of writing a paragraph or essay into manageable chunks and then provides the writer with a structure that presents thoughts in a logical order. The graphic organizer also encourages students during the planning phase of the writing process to include required text elements as well as details and explanations, thus increasing the number of ideas contained in the writing. With a plan in hand, students can begin to draft their essays knowing their writing will be organized

Figure 1. POW + TREE mnemonics

POW
Pick my idea (for younger students) or
Pay attention to the prompt (for older students)
Underline in the text or question what you need to write about.
Organize my ideas — Using TREE
Write and say more — “What can I add?”

TREE
Topic — “What do I believe?”
 A trunk supporting the essay.
Reasons — “Why I believe it.”
 Roots nourishing the essay.
 3 or more reasons + a counter reason.
Explanations — Leaves, adding color and shape to the essay.
 Explain why you believe it by including facts, details, and examples.
 Use personal observations, experience, and knowledge.
 If you include a counter reason, explain why it did not change your belief.
Ending — Earth wrapping around the tree. Wrap it up right.



(Berry & Mason, 2011; Google Images, 2013)

Figure 2. POW + TREE graphic organizer

T **TOPIC** Sentence
 Tell what you believe!
 Yes _____
 or
 No _____

POW + TREE

R **REASONS** - 3 or More
 Why do I believe this?
 Will my readers believe this?

E **EXPLAIN** Reasons
 Say more about each reason.

E **ENDING**
 Wrap it up right! DID YOU? _____

(Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008)

PRACTITIONERS SPEAK

and include all the necessary parts (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008).

Research has shown that the use of these types of prompts doubles the amount of time students spend planning and writing and that the writing contains more thoughts and ideas (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003; Graham & Harris, 1999; Graham et al., 2005). Further, and perhaps most importantly, the strategies POW + TREE have been validated in research to improve the overall quality of student writing and to increase the number of text elements in essays by students who struggle with writing tasks (Graham et al., 2005).

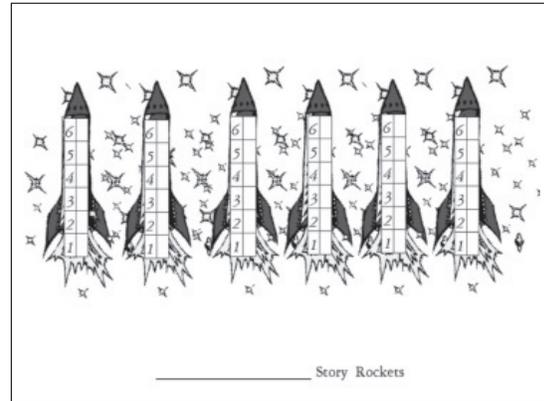
Third, SRSD in writing is so effective because students learn to employ four self-regulation procedures: self-instruction, goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcement (Sexton, Harris, & Graham, 1998). When students use these procedures, they direct their own learning growth. Students are taught to incorporate positive self-statements or instructions to talk themselves through the writing process. Self-instruction involves (a) problem definition (“What do I need to write about?”), (b) planning (“What are some things I know about this topic?”), (c) self-monitoring (“What other examples could I include?”), and (d) self-reinforcement (“I have some great ideas in this essay!”) (Chalk, Hagan-Burke, & Burke, 2005; Sexton et al., 1998). Each time students write, they set a realistic goal (e.g., number of text elements/essay parts). When students finish writing their paragraphs or essays, the number of essay parts is counted and recorded on a chart similar to the one in Figure 3. As students continue to practice using their writing strategies, they monitor their own progress toward their goals. This type of self-monitoring empowers students to continue using SRSD strategies and strengthens students’ confidence in their writing skills.

Writing Expository or Persuasive Paragraphs and Essays

Two useful SRSD strategies for writing expository or persuasive text are POW + TREE, mentioned above. POW is a general writing strategy. The first step in the POW strategy is cued by the letter “p.” Students are taught to begin the planning process by deciding which aspect of a topic they want to write about or **P**ick an idea. An optional step can be added when working with older students: **P**ay attention to the prompt (De La Paz, 1999). For this addition, students would focus their attention on the section of the question or informational text they are being asked to write about and underline that part.

The second step is cued by the letter “o” for **O**rganize my ideas. Students now need to develop a plan so their writing contains

Figure 3. Essay parts rockets for self-monitoring and self-reinforcement



(Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008)

all of their ideas and is structured in a logical order. To organize their ideas, students are taught a second strategy: TREE. TREE has several organizing parts: (a) **T**opic statement or sentence: Students discuss the main idea, or what they believe. (b) **R**easons: Students include three or more supporting ideas or reasons for their belief. (c) **E**xplanations: Students provide examples, facts, or details for at least two of their ideas or reasons. (d) **E**nding: Students wrap up the essay with a conclusion. Students are encouraged to include additional explanations or a counter argument in their paragraph or essay. The final step in POW is cued by the letter “w,” which prompts students to **W**rite and say more. Students will often add additional details and explanations to their writing if encouraged to do so (Berry & Mason, 2012).

How to Teach the Use of SRSD Strategies

When using SRSD strategies to teach writing, all sessions should start with the review and practice of the mnemonic for the strategy and end with the self-reinforcing task of graphing writing progress toward self-selected goals (Graham & Harris, 2003). Students learn to write with all the elements for specific text genres through six explicit instruction stages (Graham & Harris, 1999). The following stages provide teachers with an example of SRSD writing instruction for expository or persuasive essays using the strategies POW + TREE.

Stage 1: Develop and activate background knowledge. Initially, the teacher activates student background knowledge by discussing the basic steps involved in good writing. Students learn the steps for planning and writing using the strategies POW + TREE. A sheet with the mnemonics, POW + TREE (Figure 1), is provided to help students remember the essential essay components

and guide them through the writing process (Berry & Mason, 2012). Students keep the mnemonic sheet in their writing folder to refer to as necessary.

Students then practice identifying the parts of TREE by examining a quality essay with the teacher. As the teacher reads the essay aloud, students locate sentences that convey the essay's parts: (a) topic sentence (i.e., what the writer believed), (b) supporting sentences (i.e., the reasons for that belief), (c) explanations for those beliefs (e.g., examples, facts, details), and (d) the essay's ending. Students may also identify transition words that the writer used to support the organization of the essay and keep track of effective transition words (e.g., one example, first, in conclusion) on a list in their writing folders. Students then practice and memorize strategy steps and are informed they will be required to recite the steps from memory.

Stage 2: Discuss instructional goals and significance. The teacher and students together examine an essay written during baseline, prior to learning any writing strategies. The number of essay parts is counted and graphed. The students and teacher discuss how adding more reasons and explaining those reasons could improve their writing. Students rewrite the essay collaboratively with the teacher using the graphic organizer (Figure 2) and then count essay parts and graph them. The benefits of learning a writing strategy that includes planning, drafting, and revision are discussed. Students set personal goals for improving their writing skills and make a commitment to learn and use the writing strategy.

Stage 3: Model the strategy. The teacher models how and when to use POW + TREE writing strategies while writing. Depending on the developmental level of the student, the teacher models writing an essay with four to seven parts by including (a) an introduction or topic statement (one part); (b) up to three reasons or main points, including a counter reason if appropriate (three parts); (c) details or explanations for each reason or main point (two or more parts), and, if a counter reason is used, then an explanation of why that reason does not change the original opinion stated; and (d) a conclusion (one part). There is no limit, however, on the number of parts that can be included in the essay.

The teacher models the process of planning and composing an essay by thinking aloud with the use of the procedural prompts and strategies. Critical elements of SRSD instruction are the four self-regulation components of self-instruction, self-monitoring, goal setting, and self-reinforcement (Sexton et al., 1998). Students watch and listen as the teacher talks through each step of

the writing process. The teacher models how to approach a writing task, while acknowledging that writing is a difficult process (e.g., "I am not sure what to write. Wait, I know. I will use the trick I learned for writing an essay with POW + TREE!"). Self-monitoring statements used during writing are also modeled (e.g., "Okay, that was a good reason I just came up with. What is my next step? I know—I need to explain that reason more by backing it up with an example."). After writing the paragraph or essay, the teacher models self-reinforcement by counting the essay parts and graphing them (e.g., "I have written a paragraph with lots of great ideas and all seven parts!").

Stage 4: Memorize it. Students recite the steps of POW + TREE, and, if necessary, the strategy is reviewed. The teacher and students then collaboratively write an essay using all the procedural prompts. Students contribute ideas and the teacher takes notes on the graphic organizer. The students and teacher also create a list of self-instruction or positive self-statements to use when thinking of ideas ("Let my mind be free and I can think of good ideas."), while writing ("I know how to do this."), and while checking over the writing ("I've got three strong reasons supporting my opinion."). It is important for the teacher to listen to the students' articulated thinking of the writing process and to provide reinforcement and feedback. Negative self-statements ("This is a dumb assignment!" or "Writing is really hard for me.") are revised ("With all this practice, I will get better at this!"). Students maintain a positive self-statements list in their writing folders to reference throughout the writing task. Any positive self-statements that students generate spontaneously while writing are reinforced and added to the list.

Stage 5: Support it. During guided practice, the teacher and students continue to write collaboratively. Over time, the responsibility for planning and composing the essay begins to transfer to the student. The teacher monitors students' use of planning and writing strategies and provides corrective feedback as appropriate. Students are encouraged to use the strategy mnemonic and graphic organizer to monitor their inclusion of the required text elements (e.g., "I have one good reason why I believe kids should be allowed to chew gum in school. Now, let's see—I need two more reasons."). Students set goals for themselves that encourage growth in the number of essay parts in their writing as well as other curricular objectives (e.g., number of linking or transition words, number of descriptive or million-dollar words) (Berry & Mason, 2012). Students count and graph their progress toward these goals following each writing task. The teacher must monitor the attainment of these goals so new goals can be set when goal levels are achieved and consistently met.

Stage 6: Independent practice. While learning to write using SRSD, the teacher continually monitors students' progress and provides corrective feedback. Students demonstrate mastery in strategy use before the teacher fades support, the mnemonic sheet, and graphic organizer (Graham et al., 2005). In this stage, students begin to demonstrate mastery of the writing strategy and write independently.

Conclusion

SRSD in writing provides students of various grade levels and writing abilities with the tools and skills they need to meet CCSS in writing. SRSD is not meant to replace current writing programs in schools; rather, teachers can include SRSD within any writing curriculum. SRSD explicitly teaches students the necessary elements for paragraphs and essays by using mnemonics, which cues them to produce POWERful writing. SRSD also employs graphic organizers to encourage students to plan and organize their writing. The graphic organizer also reminds students to include additional ideas, details, and text genre elements. Teachers further scaffold students' skill development by modeling effective writing and guiding students as they practice. Students learn to use positive self-statements before writing, during writing, and following a writing task. Students monitor their own progress toward self-selected writing goals. They demonstrate mastery using the strategies and materials before writing independently. SRSD is an evidence-based instructional practice that teachers can use with confidence to assist all learners in improving their writing skills.

Author's Note

Additional teaching resources on SRSD can be found on Vanderbilt University's IRIS Center website. "Using Learning Strategies to Enhance Student Learning" (see <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/srs/>) features a teacher modeling SRSD using a strategy for story writing. "Improving Writing Performance" (see <http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/pow/>) provides interested teachers further details on the POW + TREE strategy for persuasive writing.

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