

So What's the Big Idea? Using Graphic Organizers to Guide Writing for Secondary Students With Learning and Behavioral Issues

TODD H. SUNDEEN, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Writing expressive essays is especially difficult for many students with learning and behavior difficulties. They struggle not only with basic writing skills such as spelling, sentence formation, capitalization, and handwriting, but also with the cognitive processes of writing such as planning, organizing, and writing (Schumaker & Deshler, 2003). In today's high-stakes educational environment, students must be provided with effective strategies with which to expand their skills. This article discusses an effective set of graphic organizers that aid in teaching the first two steps in the writing process: planning and drafting.

Accountability and Written Expression

The field of education has found itself immersed in an era of accountability. To improve student outcomes, schools have placed a greater emphasis on including students with learning and behavior difficulties (LD and BD) in general education classrooms. The effect has been to place appropriately high demands on students with disabilities. But the increased demands on all students in inclusive classrooms make it especially difficult for students with disabilities to keep pace with their normally achieving peers in such academic areas as mathematics, reading, and writing.

Students who struggle are less likely to receive strategy instruction in written expression than in most other academic areas. Proficiency in written expression, however, is essential to overall academic success

at the secondary level. In fact, writing effectively is now especially critical for students who must pass state and district assessments to advance in grade level. Specific emphasis now necessitates that students demonstrate a greater capacity for written expression. Thus, as the pendulum swings toward increasing the number of inclusive classrooms, teaching students the process of essay writing becomes more imperative.

The movement toward providing positive outcomes for students has led to advancements in the writing achievement test scores of normally achieving students. But without a firm grasp of the process of writing five-paragraph essays, students with LD and BD remain at risk. These students possess a limited set of strategies, which contributes to them struggling with the demands of the inclusive classroom. Students with LD and BD who are learning with their nondisabled peers require a cache of strategies that allow them to succeed. Though it is imperative that all students excel, it is especially encouraging to find that the performance of students who have learning and behavior difficulties can be positively affected through the use of well-designed instructional methods (Schumaker & Deshler, 2003).

Specialized Writing Instruction for Students With Learning and Behavior Difficulties

Expressive writing is a complex process that is compounded by the issues related to students with LD and BD. Compounding the problem are the technical demands of writing

such as spelling, sentence formation, capitalization, and handwriting, which often overshadow the writing process itself (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002). Students must master the technical aspects of writing before they can move on to the more complex task of writing expressive essays. Researchers in the 1990s, however, found that temporarily de-emphasizing the mechanical elements allows students to focus their efforts on the conceptual aspects of writing such as planning, organizing, and revising (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, & Stevens, 1991). Current research has built on the idea that completing a coherent, organized essay is more critical than mechanics (Baker, Gersten, & Graham, 2003; Baker et al., 2002; Deshler, Schumaker, & Bui, 2003). For the purposes of this article and the success of the writing strategies presented here, the mechanics of writing have been de-emphasized to allow a focus on the conceptual factors necessary to organize an effective paper.

This article highlights writing strategies that have been found to be valuable for teaching students with learning and behavior difficulties in the secondary grades. The strategies evolved through the development of a series of graphic organizers that were refined and gradually combined into two concise pages. They have been used successfully in both middle and high school settings with students of varying exceptionalities. The use of these strategic planners is founded on the premise that students have a firm grasp of sentence writing, but may struggle with the conceptual demands of expressive writing.

Big Ideas

So what's the big idea? Actually, there are Three Big Ideas that form the basis of this approach to essay writing. These graphic organizers are designed to help your students visualize both the process and their progress throughout the expressive writing experience. By emphasizing the organizational aspects of a five-paragraph essay, your students can better grasp this complex process. They will begin to see a pattern develop in which their brainstorming is distilled into Three Big Ideas. The big ideas can then become the building blocks for the introduction, the three body paragraphs, and the conclusion of their essays. Although some teachers may find this strategy to be too formulaic, students with learning and behavior difficulties have benefited significantly from this structured approach. These strategies also provide a foundation upon which students can build and find their own expressive voices.

Procedures

Use a series of lessons to introduce the concept. It is essential that you model each step of the process. Be sure to verbalize your metacognitive process as you demonstrate the development of the first essay. Let the students know what you are thinking as you work through the presentation. Initially, you should use an overhead projector and transparencies of the graphic organizers. Allow students to choose from a list of possible topics; the list must include topic ideas that are familiar to the students. By providing choices initially, your students will not experience the stress of having to create a topic on their own. *Figure 1* is an example of a topic list that may be handed out to students. Notice that the form provides explicit instructions, a list of the steps in the writing process, and several topics from which the students can choose.

Let the whole class choose the topic that will be used in the first modeled essay. This will increase

student engagement and encourage them to think of their own alternate topics that are related to the ones on the list. Using the first of the graphic organizers, the Pre-Writing Planner (see *Figure 2*), write the topic on the top line. Next, the class helps brainstorm ideas related to the topic. Emphasize to your students that there are no wrong answers during brainstorming. You can then help the class discover patterns in their thoughts by saying out loud, "It looks as if we can put this idea with these others" or "I feel like these ideas are similar." As the students brainstorm, guide them in grouping their thoughts into three columns of related ideas. At this point, there is no need to create names for the groups. By grouping brainstormed ideas, students can see that the concepts can be related

in some reasonable way around the topic.

After the ideas have been grouped into three columns of related ideas, guide the class toward naming the Three Big Ideas and writing them into the color-coded bubbles on the Pre-Writing Planner. This allows your students to visualize how the Three Big Ideas are separate ideas related to a common topic. The color-coding will flow throughout the remainder of their essay and link the ideas to the appropriate positions in the written work. Below each colored bubble is a series of four lines. Choose one or two words from each topic column. Write them below each big idea so your students see how the ideas can be grouped.

At this point, you must decide

Figure 1 DESCRIPTIVE WRITING TOPICS

Choose a topic from the following list. Write a five-paragraph essay. Each paragraph must contain at least 4–5 sentences. Be sure to use the steps of writing:

1. **Brainstorm**
2. **Organize your thoughts into Three Big Ideas**
3. **Rough Draft**
4. **Editing—reread and correct mistakes**
5. **Final Draft—no errors**

These are the topics to choose from:

- Describe your perfect world.
- Tell about an uplifting experience.
- Describe a vivid dream.
- Describe your ideal school.
- Tell about the person you most admire.
- Describe a beautiful or a terrible scene.
- Describe your ideal parent, friend, or teacher.
- Tell why love is wonderful or frustrating.

Figure 2 PRE-WRITING PLANNER

Pre-Writing Planner

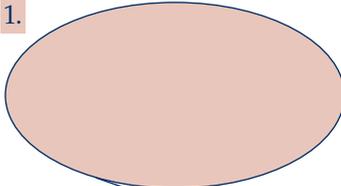
My Topic

Brainstorm

<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Three Big Ideas

1.

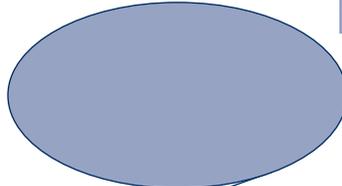


a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

My Topic

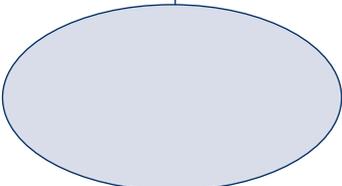


2.



a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

3.



a. _____ c. _____
b. _____ d. _____

whether to proceed to the next step of the writing process, drafting, or to reteach the pre-writing process. It is often productive to provide several sessions of guided and independent practice with each of the pre-writing tasks. Allow the class to experiment with their own topics while monitoring their progress. The most significant problems that students experience at this stage involve grouping their thoughts into common themes. Expect that some of your students will grasp the grouping concept immediately and that others will need additional assistance. Peer teaching is an effective strategy that encourages those students who have already grasped the concept of the Pre-Writing Planner to assist other students who are still struggling. Usually after several attempts with the Pre-Writing Planner, most learners grasp enough of the essential elements of the process to proceed to the Rough Draft Planner.

Smoothing the Rough Draft Process

A brief look at the Rough Draft Planner (see *Figure 3*) will reveal the elements that have made this graphic organizer so effective. Almost every element of this planner is grouped into threes. Notice that the colors of the Three Big Ideas are included in the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs. Plus, the numbers one, two, and three flow directly from the big ideas to the numbering of the introduction, body, and conclusion. Beginning writers often have trouble realizing that the introduction and conclusion are not only related to each other, but also that the body paragraphs are simply an extension of these main concepts. Visual cues such as those incorporated into this planner provide a map to their writing success.

Beneath each of the numbers for the body paragraph are lines for developing detail sentences. Notice that the detail sentences are drawn from the small lettered lines beneath the Three Big Ideas on the Pre-Writing Planner. Your students can simply

use the raw thoughts from the Pre-Writing Planner to expand them into a working rough draft. As you guide them through this planner, your students will begin to see the patterns and visualize the components of their essay. They will not only see the Three Big Ideas at the top of the page and how they relate to the topic, but also how they correspond to each detail on the Rough Draft Planner.

With practice and increased confidence, the scaffolding provided by the planners can be reduced. The first step in developing independent writing is removing the Pre-Writing Planner. When your students can visualize the organization of their brainstorming into Three Big Ideas, have them practice on regular notebook paper rather than the planner. Some students may require a reminder for the big ideas. This is easily accomplished by teaching them to separate the page into three sections by drawing vertical lines on their own paper or folding it into three vertical sections. Eventually, they will find the organization of their brainstorming to be a relatively easy task.

It Is Easier Than You Think

Young writers have expressed several “aha’s” as a result of using these guides. They are often surprised that by the time the Rough Draft Planner is filled in, they have nearly completed an essay. Comments such as “Wow, this is easy” and “That’s all there is to it?” are common. By providing a conceptual guide and de-emphasizing the mechanical elements of essay writing, your students gain confidence in themselves and their burgeoning skills. It is common for non-essay writers to actually immerse themselves in their writing and find topics to write about independently, for their own pleasure. They suddenly find enjoyment in creating expressive essays once they have a strong framework upon which to build. Once the hurdle of conceptualization is conquered, the next steps of the process are much easier to accomplish.

Figure 4 is the story of a student for whom this writing intervention was a great success. Juan significantly improved his skills in written expression organization. But more important, his enthusiasm for learning and confidence in his skills increased dramatically.

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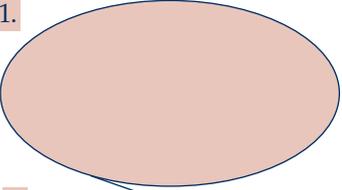
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Figure 3 ROUGH DRAFT PLANNER

Rough Draft Planner

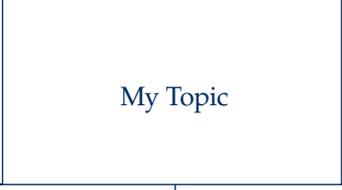
Three Big Ideas

1.

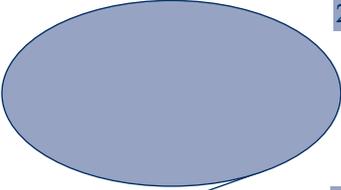


a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

My Topic

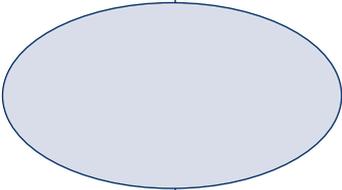


2.



a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

3.



a. _____ c. _____
b. _____ d. _____

Introduction (Include a topic sentence.) _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Body

1st Paragraph (Topic Sentence) _____

Details a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

2nd Paragraph (Topic Sentence) _____

Details a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

3rd Paragraph (Topic Sentence) _____

Details a. _____
b. _____
c. _____
d. _____

Conclusion (Include a topic sentence.) _____

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Figure 4 JUAN'S STORY

For Juan, sentences were not a problem. Language was not a barrier. His paragraphs were reasonably constructed. Even his handwriting was fairly neat. But when it came to organizing an essay, Juan just didn't get it. He was unable to make the conceptual leap to the abstractness of organizing a short, five-paragraph essay. I was afraid that after making so much progress with him in our class of eighth grade students, his frustration was giving way to complacency.

So, it was time to try something new. I had been working on an idea for a way to help the students visualize the process of organizing an essay. They needed a simple strategy for seeing each step and how the steps could lead them to a well organized final product. The Pre-Writing Planner had worked with other classes for the initial steps of organizing their papers. However, I needed a link—a bridge to the rest of the process that would be simple yet comprehensive. Thus, the Rough Draft Planner was developed. By color-coding and numbering the essential elements and creating a flow from one page to the next, I felt that the students would be able to see the process more clearly.

The connection between the Pre-Writing Planner and the Rough Draft planner worked wonderfully. Two vital steps in the process were now linked. But more than that, the Three Big Ideas were the biggest breakthrough: three columns of brainstorming ideas, three color-coded bubbles for main ideas, three concepts that must be discussed in the introduction and conclusion, and three body paragraphs. Everywhere they looked, the students found the pattern of three. Students began to see the Three Big Ideas as they assembled their essays. They now had a tool to help them navigate the steps of essay writing.

Juan and the other students in the class quickly became enthused about the process. Having a limited number of concepts to deal with and an organizer with which to visualize their plans had made a huge impact on their learning. Juan soon began contributing his ideas during brainstorming. He participated in the daily writing process with a new enthusiasm. It was amazing how quickly he became able to write a complete essay. Sometimes he would finish an entire rough draft in a single period. His hand would go up just as soon as he was finished so that he could share his work with me. A breakthrough had taken place in our classroom that could only be attributed to the use of the writing planners.

Soon after Juan was introduced to the writing of essays, he showed a renewed interest in his studies. He became determined to become successful in school. His grades improved in all subject areas. Although there were many other positive influences on his life at school, learning to write closer to grade level seemed to have a huge impact on his confidence, enthusiasm, and dedication. At the end of the semester we held a meeting to discuss his Individual Education Plan. The team decided that he should be placed into a general education social studies class. Without hesitation, Juan enthusiastically agreed to his schedule change. He was successful in the placement and remained enthusiastic about his learning for the remainder of the school year. Though I have not heard from Juan in some time, it is comforting to reflect upon the wonderful changes I saw in his attitude toward learning and impressive improvements in his writing skills during his time with me.

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