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Advanced students often need writing foundation



Students in accelerated courses are expected to be excellent writers, but this expectation is a reflection of these students being well read rather than being well instructed in writing. The *SIM Writing Strategies* give our accelerated high school students the skills, knowledge, and vocabulary to truly understand their writing skills and develop more effectively as proficient writers.

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Larissa Bell and Katherine Green, SIM Learning Strategies Professional Developers from Minnesota working with students in accelerated courses made a discovery: Many students in these environments neither understand why their writing is good nor how to fix it when things go wrong.

In their classes each fall, students write an essay that is evaluated for grammar, ideas, and organization, and every year, the pre-test shows that discrepancies exist between what students are expected to know and what they do know. Creative word choice and interesting connections likely have carried their writing so far, but significant work needs to happen with organization and support. In many cases, the students do not understand how to properly support and prove their ideas. Even at the basic level of grammar, students struggle with ideas of sentence organization and how to fix incomplete sentences.

To address these issues, Bell and Green bring students back to the foundational level of each writing stage. Starting with the most basic level of sentence writing, students learn the academic vocabulary and knowledge needed to develop their overall writing skills. *Proficiency in the Sentence Writing Strategy* gives students a pathway towards advanced understanding of sentence structure and the tools to fix their own sentences when they go awry. Within a short time, Bell and Green's students are able to see how this understanding and skill can accelerate their own writing. "Just knowing how compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences work helps to support students in making their writing sound more mature," says Bell.

This foundation of sentence structure lends itself nicely to the next strategy that the teachers introduce to their students, the *Fundamentals in Paragraph Writing Strategy*. Says Green, "Many students entering our classes believe that three sentences are all that one needs when creating an effective paragraph. Organization usually includes a vague topic sentence and a brief summary of the point which does not

provide a fully developed structure for their ideas at an advanced level. The structure provided by the *Paragraph Writing Strategy* helps our students not only understand basic elements of structure, but also forces them to think more critically about the validity of their arguments and the effectiveness of the supports that they use. Indeed, the *Lead-off* and *Follow-Up* structure of the strategy allows them to visualize what strong supports looks like, and they are then more apt to apply support to their own points. In our classes, students include a minimum of three details in their paragraphs and at least two follow-ups. They check this during editing by highlighting their drafts to identify all of the organizational elements. Although this stage takes time, it is well worth it when considering theme writing."

With the support of these two prior strategies, Bell and Green's students are able to step into the *Theme Writing Strategy* to write essays. "It is organization that causes the most struggles for our students. This is somewhat cleared up by the *Paragraph Writing Strategy*, but students now need to further expand their thinking to encompass the larger connectivity of their ideas," says Bell.

She continues, "The organizational format of the TOWER planning diagram in the *Fundamentals in Theme Writing Strategy* guides students to see the bigger picture to their topic. It additionally supports students in understanding the circular structure of theme writing with the consistent reconnection of the main ideas to the thesis and the more broad connection of the theme introductory option to the provocative statement at the end of the written piece."

Advanced students become more accomplished and purposeful writers after learning how to use the *SIM Writing Strategies* for sentences, paragraphs and themes. Mastery of these strategies means students know the *why* and *how* of writing and know they can do it effectively.