

# Research: Fundamentals of Theme Writing Strategy

## Study 1 - Overview

This study focused on the instruction of four writing strategies within a resource room program by the regularly assigned special education teacher. The writing strategies were taught across the course of a full school year. General education English and social studies teachers were recruited to give writing assignments in their classes to provide measures of generalization. Seven participating high school students with LD who had not been enrolled in general education courses in the past were enrolled in these English and social studies classes at the beginning of the school year. The students were first taught the Sentence Writing Strategy (Schumaker & Sheldon, 1985). Next, the students learned the Paragraph Writing Strategy (Schumaker & Lyster, 1991). Subsequently, they learned how to detect and correct errors in their writing by learning the Error Monitoring Strategy (Schumaker, Nolan, & Deshler, 1985). Finally, they learned the Theme Writing Strategy (Schumaker, 2003). Throughout the instruction, the students' writing performance in both the resource room and in the targeted general education classes was monitored. That is, every time they wrote a paragraph or an essay in any of the targeted settings, the product was scored for the types of sentences used, the organization of the paragraph, the number of errors, and the organization of the essay. A multiple-probe across-strategies design was employed.

## Results

The seven students earned an average of 24% of the points available for a well-planned and organized theme during baseline and an average of 74% of the points after instruction in the resource room and in general education classes. The multiple-baseline across-strategies design demonstrated that each student made gains on pertinent measures only after instruction began for each strategy.

Five of the students made the same kinds of gains on their writing assignments in general education classes as they did in the resource room, even though they had not been taught to use the writing strategies in those settings. The two students who did not generalize their use of the strategies to other classes did so quickly after they had been taught to do so.

Before the study, the students' GPA was 2.1 in special English and social studies courses designed for low-achieving students and students with disabilities; after the study, their GPA was 2.7 in regular-track general education English and social studies courses.

On a standardized test of writing instruction, the Woodcock Johnson Psychoeducational Battery, the students' mean grade equivalent score increased by two grade levels from 6.2 to 8.2. On the district's minimal competency writing exam, the

# Research: Fundamentals of Theme Writing Strategy

students earned a mean overall score of 3.5 (out of 5.0), which compared favorably to the mean overall district average of 2.5. With regard to maintenance of strategy usage, the four students who returned to the school the following school year and who had learned all the strategies demonstrated that they could write organized themes in their general education classes at mastery levels.

## Conclusions

Thus, this study demonstrated that high school students with LD could learn the Theme Writing Strategy in a resource room program when instructed by their regularly assigned special education teacher. It also showed that they could generalize their use of the Theme Writing Strategy to assignments given in their required general education courses and that they could maintain their use of the strategy across several months. It also showed that strategy instruction was associated with growth in standardized writing test scores and produced favorable writing competency test scores.

## References

Schmidt, J. L. (1983). The effects of four generalization conditions on learning disabled adolescents' written language performance in the regular classroom. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Kansas, Lawrence.

Schmidt, J. L., Deshler, D. D., Schumaker, J. B., & Alley, G. R. (1989). Effects of generalization instruction on the written language performance of adolescents with learning disabilities in the mainstream classroom. *Reading, Writing, and Learning Disabilities*, 4(4), 291-309.

# Research: Fundamentals of Theme Writing Strategy

## Study 2 - Overview

This study investigated the effects of Theme Writing Strategy instruction on the writing performance of college students. The Theme Writing Strategy was taught by a former special education teacher to 28 freshman scholarship athletes enrolled in English 101, a required English course at a Midwestern university. Two of the students had learning disabilities, and one had ADHD. This group of students had earned an average score of 17.7 on the American College Test (ACT), a college-entrance exam, and a mean grade-point average of 2.8 in high school. Because of their academic deficits, these students were required to participate in academic tutoring for 6 to 10 hours per week because they were considered to be "under-prepared" for college.

Also participating in the study were 28 freshman scholarship athletes who had earned an average score of 23.2 on the ACT and a grade-point average of 3.3 in high school; they served as the comparison group. They did not receive instruction in the strategy, but they had free access to tutors for help with their assignments and also were enrolled in English 101. All students enrolled in English 101 were required to write six themes: three written out of class and three written in class. Their semester grade was based on their grades on the six themes. The themes were graded by their regularly assigned English professors.

## Results

The results at the end of the semester showed that the experimental (underprepared) students earned scores that were significantly higher than those of the comparison students on a test of theme writing knowledge (even though their pretest scores were significantly lower than those of comparison students). Also, the experimental students earned an average grade of 2.5 (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, D = 1, F = 0), and the comparison students earned an average grade of 2.6 in the English 101 course. For their first semester in college, the overall grade-point average was 2.5 for the experimental group and 2.54 for the comparison group. No significant differences were found between the two groups' grades in the English 101 course and between their overall grade-point averages. With regard to the students with disabilities in the experimental group, all three earned Cs in the English 101 course, and they earned overall GPAs of 2.50, 2.62, and 2.91 during their first semester of college.

## Conclusions

# Research: Fundamentals of Theme Writing Strategy

Instruction in the Theme Writing Strategy enabled underprepared college students to perform comparably to their prepared peers in an English 101 course. In addition, the two groups' overall grade-point averages were comparable. Both groups had unlimited access to tutoring; the only difference was the instruction the experimental group had in the Theme Writing Strategy.

## References

Hock, M. (1998). The effectiveness of an instructional tutoring model and tutor training on the academic performance of underprepared college student athletes. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, Lawrence.