

10-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Steele, J. L., & Steele, P. (1991). The Thinking-Writing Connection: Using Clustering to Help Students Write Persuasively. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 32 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol32/iss1/5

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The Thinking-Writing Connection: Using Clustering to Help Students Write Persuasively

**Jeannie L. Steele
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Understanding what you know, think or believe about a topic is essential if you are to write clearly about that topic. Yet it is often difficult for young writers to know what they think and, certainly, even more difficult for them to organize their thinking. Simply telling students to write more clearly or to make their point more effectively will not make them able to do so. They must be taught how to become aware of their thoughts and feelings and how to organize them to effectively communicate them through their writing.

The purpose of this article is to describe a thinking/pre-writing procedure which can be used to help writers clarify their thinking which, in turn, increases their ability to express their thoughts either orally or in writing. First, we present the procedure: clustering, as a thinking/pre-writing procedure. Second, we describe a classroom experience where clustering is used to teach students how to write a persuasive piece on a controversial topic, a type of writing required by both their local and state writing assessment

programs. Finally, we discuss other classroom applications of clustering.

The clustering process

Rico (1983) defined clustering as a “nonlinear brainstorming process akin to free association” (p. 28). It is a powerful technique which allows students to discover or “uncover” what they think about a subject; it provides organization to thought without slowing the flow of thoughts; it can help the thinker assess the quality of thought and serve as a guide for writing. Indeed, after clustering ideas, one can move directly to writing in paragraph form. Thus depending upon purpose, clustering may be used for thinking (cluster as an end product); or as a prewriting strategy (cluster as an organizational guide for writing). However it is used, clustering is a dynamic process best understood by experiencing it first hand.

The reader can gain first hand experience with clustering in a few minutes. These are the rules: 1) Begin with a blank sheet of paper. Write the nucleus word(s) in the middle of the page leaving the rest of the page for writing. Circle the word(s). 2) What comes to mind when you think of that word or words? Write whatever associations come to mind. Avoid judging or choosing. Let the words radiate outward from the nucleus word and draw a circle around each of them. Draw lines connecting the words or concepts that seem related. 3) Continue jotting down associations and ideas triggered by the nucleus word(s) for a minute or two. There is no correct way or one best way to do the activity. No one will be judging, so let yourself go — let the words and associations come without worrying about them. 4) If you get stuck, doodle until you are sure you have all the ideas out.

It is particularly important that you do certain things to make the process work. First, once you begin clustering, do not stop or put the pencil down until you feel you have got all your ideas out. Write quickly and, if you cannot think of anything to say just doodle in the margin of the paper. Second, make no judgments about the ideas as they come to you; just write them down. Do not say "I should not be thinking this" or "this is not on the topic." Third, do not worry about how to spell a word. Just let the ideas flow freely.

To get the best understanding of how this process works, try the process before you read on. Begin clustering and cluster for two or three minutes or until you have exhausted your ideas on the topic. Be sure to draw a circle around each idea before you move to the next idea.

As you examine your completed cluster you will notice that the ideas are arrayed on the page reflecting their association with one another. If you now wish to write about the topic or person, the cluster will serve as a guide for your writing. Usually a group of associated ideas forms a paragraph. As students write they mark off each idea as that idea is included in their writing. The finished writing tends to be organized and complete, because the process of clustering triggers awareness of thoughts and ideas and, since the process is nonlinear, allows the ideas to flow and be written down as they are associated one to the other.

Clustering for improved writing

Clustering as a prewriting activity for writing reports has proved extremely beneficial. If you have your students write expository reports and ask them to go to the library to do research before writing, what do they do? If your students are like mine, they typically look up their topic in the encyclopedia or other source book and copy. When

students are asked why they copy directly from the text they often respond with the belief that they cannot say it as well as the sources they are reading. To get around this problem, I have students go to the library to do research with only a 3x5 card upon which to write ideas. They can only write words or phrases to help them remember information; copying full sentences is not allowed. When they return to the room the students cluster on their particular topic. They then use the clusters to write their reports. The results are organized, interesting reports written in the students' own words.

Clustering gives students a way to organize thinking for writing. With practice, they also grow more confident and comfortable expressing their own thoughts in writing. These are important goals for young writers for two reasons. First, being able to express thoughts in writing clearly is an important life skill. Second, organizing thinking through clustering can enhance student performance on assessments which require organization and self-expression. Using clustering, both goals can be accomplished while students come to understand and enjoy the writing process.

In recent years writing assessment has changed from indirect measures, usually multiple-choice questions which assess declarative knowledge about writing, to direct measures, examining samples of student writing (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis, 1989; Illinois State Board of Education, 1989). Direct measures assess writers' procedural knowledge of writing; i.e., how they actually write as opposed to what they know about writing (Hillocks, 1987).

In Illinois, beginning in 1990, assessment of language arts included assessing student writing samples in grades 3, 6, 8, and 10. For this assessment, students write in

response to one of three different prompts. The three prompts require students to write in either persuasive, expository, or narrative modes. Many teachers in the Moline, Illinois school district, who are involved in Project M.I.L.E., the Moline Improvement in Literacy Education Program (Steele and Meredith, 1991), incorporate teaching strategies which result in improved writing for their students. What follows is an account of how one Moline teacher, Patty Steele, and her fourth-grade class responded to the testing initiative by mastering clustering. In the process they also took a stand on an important issue, communicated their beliefs clearly and concisely and brought school and community closer together.

Clustering in the classroom

We had an inservice in our building about the upcoming third- and sixth-grade Language Arts Assessment. When I heard what the testing involved I said to myself, "Patty, aren't you glad you teach fourth grade instead of third or sixth?" Yet, I knew I had a responsibility to prepare my students for these upcoming tests. I listened to the inservice and read through the information provided by the state, realizing that, even though we do a lot of writing in my classroom, we still needed to do more.

I decided to try one of the writing prompts from the state testing materials. Fourth graders seem to have difficulty taking a stand on a position. They tend to ride the fence, finding supporting arguments for both sides of an issue. We needed to work on the persuasive prompt. I read the following prompt to the students:

The mayor of your town recently made the following statement. 'It always strikes me as a terrible shame to see young people spending so much of their time staring at television. If we could unplug all of the TV sets in

America, our children would grow up to be healthier, better educated, and more independent human beings.' The newspaper wants to print the four best student responses to this statement.

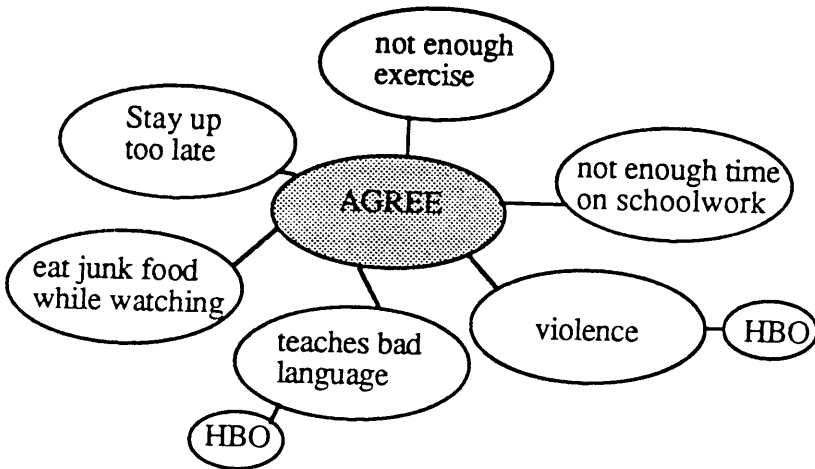
The students were then asked to think about this statement and decide whether they agreed or disagreed with the mayor. They were told to begin their paper by stating their position. They then were to explain fully the reasons for their point of view being sure to use examples of TV programs that supported their position.

They were overwhelmed! To calm their anxieties I reminded them of the fact that all year we have been writing using a technique called clustering. We would use that technique to guide their thinking and writing.

We began by facing the issue squarely. I told the students, "First, decide whether you agree or disagree with the mayor." As you can imagine, most of the students disagreed with the mayor's statement, but most thought the mayor had a few good points. It was difficult for them, but they each finally decided whether or not they agreed or disagreed with the mayor.

Next, they were told to write "I agree" or "I disagree" in the middle of their paper. They then clustered their ideas about why they agreed or disagreed. You should have seen those pencils fly! The few brave souls who decided to agree with the mayor came up with some great ideas.

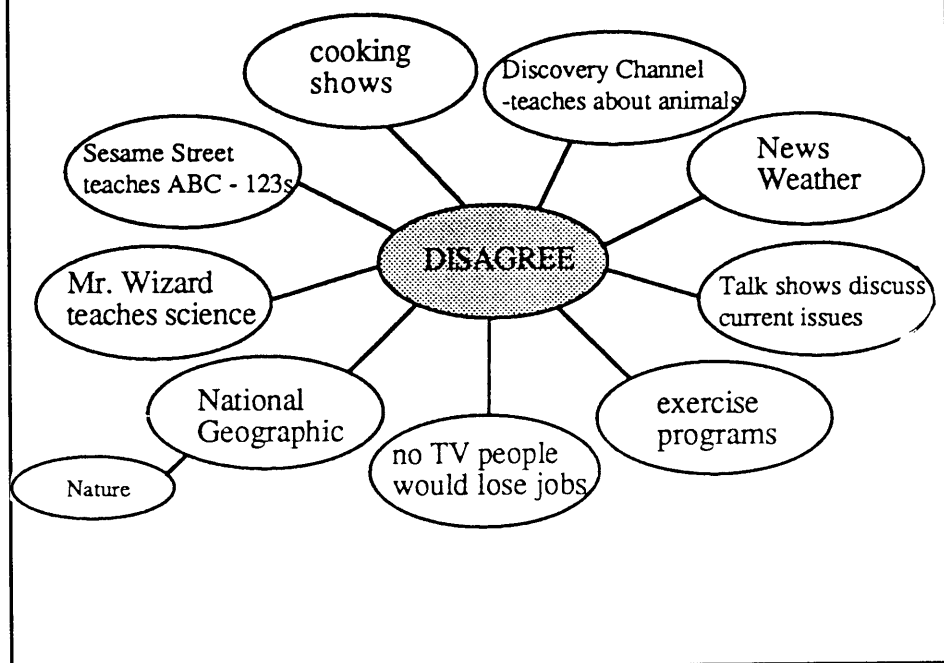
Figure 1 shows an example of a cluster written by Jason, who agreed with the mayor. Most of the students disagreed with the mayor. The cluster in Figure 2 shows ideas from students who disagreed.

Figure 1

Now they were organized! We needed a main idea sentence and then we would be ready for the next step in the writing process. Since they had used clustering before the students understood that the writing process had already begun. We came up with these main idea sentences: "I agree that all TV sets should be unplugged" or "I disagree with the idea that all TV sets should be unplugged." To have a fully focused paper, which included taking a definite stand and backing up the stand with specific details about why they felt as they did, the students were to announce their reaction to the prompt. Now my students used their cluster to present their arguments. They went on to write, without the moans and groans that traditionally accompany writing activities. The clustering had helped

them to organize their thoughts. Their finished papers were well-thought out and well-constructed.

Figure 2



Finally, the children did paired editing. They exchanged papers with a partner and helped each other find places where corrections or rewritings were needed. The final drafts were then prepared. It was time for lunch. This activity took up quite a bit of our morning. If we wished, we could have done this task over several days instead. The students, however, were too intensely involved in their work to interrupt so we continued. I had given up the normally scheduled reading and language activity, but I believe we

really spent all morning with reading, language, spelling, writing, and critical thinking.

When I saw our principal I asked if she would come to class after lunch and do some role playing. She was thrilled. At about one o'clock she walked in and said, "The mayor is here to listen to your views." I had informed the children she was coming (as our mayor) and that she would listen to their views. They could hardly wait.

We began by reading the mayor's statement. Then those students who agreed with the mayor were allowed to read their ideas. I put a big "AGREE" on the board and each time a new idea was brought up the child could add it to our group cluster. The children who disagreed with the mayor were then given their chance. They, too, made a group cluster on the board under "DISAGREE." The mayor then reviewed both clusters and made her decision. She proved herself to be a true diplomat, suggesting that both sides had come up with some outstanding arguments supporting their ideas. Therefore, she had decided not to unplug the TV sets. However, TV viewing time was to be carefully regulated. Both sides were happy with her decision. Later, our class received a letter from "the mayor," thanking us for the invitation to visit our classroom.

I believe the next time my students are asked to write a persuasive paper my students will be ready. They have experienced taking a stand and supporting their beliefs in writing. The issue was important to them and they found the power that comes from taking a stand and expressing their views in an organized presentation through written language. They are learning to love to write and to use their writing as another voice through which they can speak their mind and share their beliefs.

Clustering to connect new to known

As powerful as clustering is as a thinking or prewriting activity, it is equally powerful when used before or after reading. Having students cluster before reading brings knowledge, thoughts, and feelings to an awareness level. It is an effective method for activating prior knowledge. Knowing what they know about a topic allows readers to make connections between their existing knowledge and the new knowledge they will gain from reading or learning experiences.

Clustering after reading also helps students integrate new information into their knowledge base and provides teachers with observable evidence that students are making sound connections between themselves and their learning experiences. Clustering after content lessons can be particularly valuable for comparing “before learning” clusters with “after learning” clusters. It is informative to see how much has been learned but also to see if ideas, thoughts, and feelings on a topic have changed as a result of the learning experience. To document learning, we often place students' before and after clusters in learning portfolios.

Finally, clustering is a flexible strategy. It may be done individually or as a group activity. As a group activity, it can serve as a framework for the group's ideas, which provides students with exposure to the associations and relationships other students draw from the prompt. Whether done in groups or individually, it is important to remember the three rules: a) never stop writing during the specified time, b) do not make judgments about what you are thinking, and c) do not be concerned with spelling. We have found individual clustering to be a nice break from group brainstorming since it is quick and permits all students, not just the

ones who always put their hands up first, to engage actively in the thinking process. Experience has taught us, however, that when clustering individually the topic should be one students know a fair amount about since they will not have the shared experience of the group from which to draw information. After completion, individual clusters can be shared in pairs or with the entire group.

Clustering has worked for students in Moline, Illinois. We see young writers ready to write, confident that they have a story to tell, and possessing the skills to communicate their message effectively. They are positive about the writing process and show little reluctance to share their thinking with others in the nonjudgmental atmosphere of clustering.

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