

4-1-1986

Writing As a Study Skill in the Classroom Learning Spiral

Cynthia Gunston-Parks
California State University, Sacramento

Keith J. Thomas
Arizona State University at Tempe

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gunston-Parks, C., & Thomas, K. J. (1986). Writing As a Study Skill in the Classroom Learning Spiral. *Reading Horizons*, 26 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol26/iss3/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.





WRITING AS A STUDY SKILL IN THE CLASSROOM LEARNING SPIRAL

Cynthia Gunston-Parks
California State Univ., Sacramento
Keith J. Thomas, Arizona State Univ.
Phoenix

As a cognitive operation, writing is acknowledged to involve the generation of language through assimilation of the known in the form of prior knowledge (Sanacore, 1983). The process also incorporates organizational functions such as categorization in order to create a conceptual flow of information. Further, the act of writing involves a multisensory interaction with language, for it is written, seen and often heard as the writer's thoughts are given permanence in the form of print. Writing is a study skill that teachers can ill afford to neglect in the learning classroom.

The educational processes of anticipation, prediction, and setting of purpose and direction are often incorporated into the classroom learning environment. Writing is encouraged in this environment as the act can not only be subsumed within the preceding processes, but can also be the means through which the student organizes, synthesizes, and summarizes the information for efficient retrieval/recall. Four classroom writing activities which can be readily subsumed within the content area learning environment are anticipatory questioning, notetaking, graphic organizers and summary paragraph writing. These activities assist the teacher in providing the foundation for future anticipatory mind sets - creating a spiral of the learning cycle, a never-ending stream of awareness on the part of the student. Concurrently, students acquire an understanding of the logic inherent in this flow, of what they are doing (metacognition) and what they already know which serves as a basis for understanding new content.

Anticipatory questions, operationally an antecedent of the anticipation/reaction guide (Herber, 1978), are offered as an opening activity in the content area classroom. Not only do anticipatory questions provide the student with a mind set and motivation for the content to be covered during the session, but the activity itself provides the student with a physical behavior, resulting in thoughts being given a concreteness in the form of print.

In the format recommended here, the teacher simply has two to four open-ended questions related to the day's lesson content printed on the board or displayed on a screen with the overhead projector as the class session begins. The students are given five to ten minutes to copy and respond to the questions. The questions are not only open-ended, but they also have no wrong or right answers. They are designed to affectively as well as cognitively involve the student in the content being addressed during the lesson. For example, to provide anticipation and involvement in a U.S. History lesson on the Cold War, a question such as--

"Explain why you think it's right or wrong for a stronger person to defend a weaker person. Use examples from your own experience."

would be offered to the students. This question can be referred to later in the lesson when addressing the evolution of the Russian satellite organization and the creation of NATO. The teacher has provided the student with an analogy based upon a concrete situation: an older brother protecting a weaker sibling. Thus the student has a prior knowledge-affective "hook" on which to attach new information, accommodating new information into existing schemata.

A medial writing activity is the study skill of note-taking which can be taught during the actual transmission of content information. Lecture is an inherent part of many content area classrooms and care should be taken to organize the lecture with student notetaking in mind. For example, if three important points are going to be made, the teacher would state this, encouraging the students to enumerate them as s/he discusses the points and they are taking notes. If some point is particularly impor-

tant for the students to remember, the teacher would make this clear to the students, encouraging them to star, asterisk, capitalize, circle, or otherwise highlight the information on their papers.

When addressing the subject of format in notetaking, summary margin notetaking is recommended as it provides the students with a structure which they can utilize when writing down information. Although summary margin notepaper is commercially available, the students can also create their own by simply drawing a margin line on their notepaper approximately 2.5 inches from the left edge of the paper. The students then write their lecture notes to the right of this margin in any format they (or you) desire, leaving enough space as they write for answers to questions or elaborations when they review. The left column of the paper is reserved for summary writing of the content (or even more recommended) for study questions/key concept phrases addressing specifically the information found on the individual page. Thus, the notepages will have full text to the right and widely spaced questions or key/topic headings for study and review on the left of the margin line. When reviewing the lesson's notes, the pages are simply folded over, covering the text and leaving exposed the margin questions or major review points. If the content is recalled easily, the question/point is marked and the student continues with review. Thus, when quiz or test time arrives, the students are aware of that which is known and that which is not. This saves the students from devoting more than quick review time to what is already assimilated and allows them to devote intense study time to what is unknown. An example of this notetaking format is shown in Figure 1, next page.

A further aid to the active assimilation of information is the graphic organizer. This study aid can be helpful to the students not only because it forces them to evaluate, organize and synthesize a body of conceptual information into key words, but it also is an aid to the more visual-/spatial information processor who is at a disadvantage in our highly sequential, linear, verbal world of the content area classroom. The graphic organizer is a schematic/pictorial device which is utilized to summarize content information through key concept/vocabulary words. It is recommended that the students themselves eventually develop

Figure 1

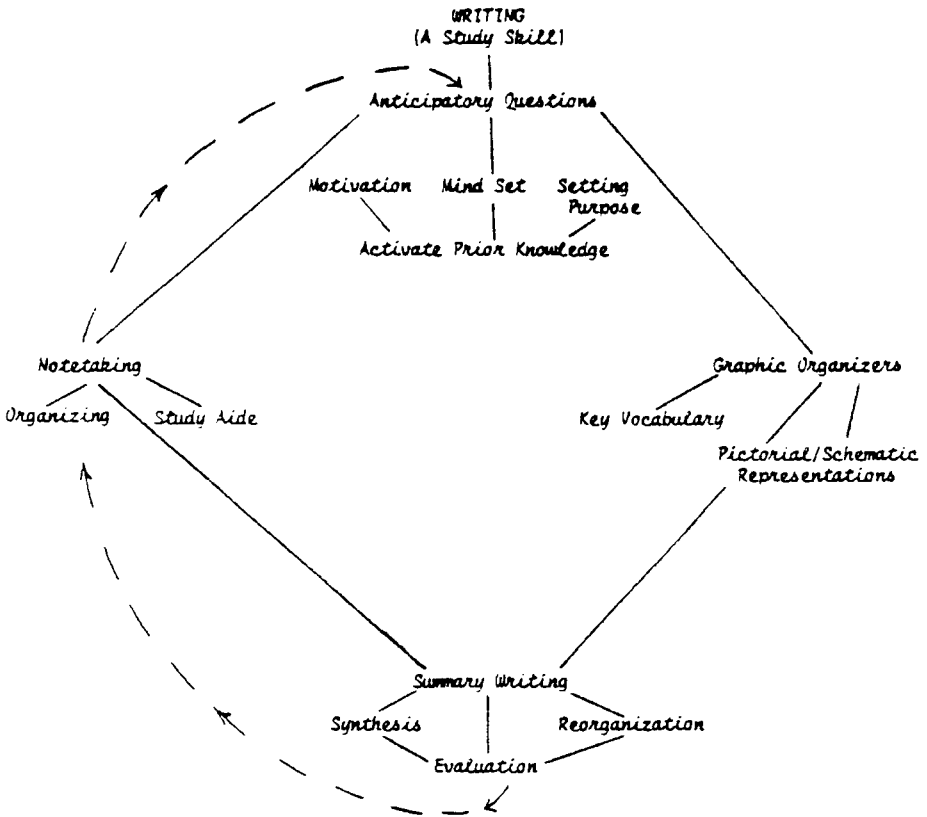
THE COLD WAR (continued)	Feb. 26th
	--
The Far East:	China - Civil War
What two groups fought for control of China after WWII?	Nat'l - Chiang Kai-shek Commun - Mao Tse-tung
	Communists won - Oct., 1949
	Formed People's Republic of China
	G.B., Fr., & USSR recognized
What 2 things did USA do after the Communists won?	USA would not recognize 1- recog'd the Nationalists who'd retreated to island of Taiwan off China's coast 2- Blocked Red China's entry to U.N.
What do "boycott" and "recognized" mean?	Russia THEN boycotted UN Security Council

individual graphic organizers after initially creating several examples through group activity.

The creation of the graphic organizer evolves out of a class or group discussion of key vocabulary and concept words which have come out of various class lectures, activities, and texts. The words are then organized by the class into a graphic structure or schematic which, through placement of the words on the paper, related the conceptual information. Whether a concept or vocabulary word is major, secondary or tertiary is represented by the placement of that word within the picture, graphic or schematic. A sample graphic organizer, utilizing the content of this article, is shown in Figure 2, next page.

Creating several graphic organizers as a class or group activity enables students to gain practice in organizing of concepts and supporting information first, and then in relaying the body of knowledge through placement of

Figure 2



the key concept/vocabulary words within the organizer itself. An examination of the graphic organizers enables the teacher to ascertain whether and to what extent each student has grasped the interrelatedness of the concepts and information which has been studied.

Finally, summary paragraph writing is proposed as not only a further practice in critical analysis, providing closure to a lesson(s) or unit, but also as a pivot point from which new anticipatory mind sets can be drawn, guiding the learner into a new turn in the spiral. A sophisticated cognitive process involving evaluation, synthesis and analysis, summary paragraph writing can evolve naturally from the notetaking and graphic organizer activities. When dealing with text, Brown and Day's (1980) procedure

Figure 3

Original Text

The educational processes of anticipation, prediction, and setting of purpose and direction are often incorporated into the classroom learning environment. Writing is encouraged in this environment as the act can not only be subsumed within the preceding processes, but can also be the means through which the student organizes, synthesizes, and summarizes the information for efficient retrieval/recall. Four classroom writing activities which can be readily subsumed within the content area learning environment are anticipatory questioning, notetaking, graphic organizers and summary paragraph writing. These activities assist the teacher in providing the foundation for future anticipatory mind sets — creating a spiral of the learning cycle, a neverending stream of awareness on the part of the student. Concurrently, students acquire an understanding of the logic inherent in this flow, of what they are doing (metacognition) and what they already know which serves as a basis for understanding new content.

Summary

Anticipation, prediction, and setting of purpose and direction are often incorporated into the classroom learning environments where writing is encouraged. Four writing activities which can be subsumed within content area learning are anticipatory questioning, notetaking, graphic organizers and summary paragraph writing. These activities assist the students in acquiring an understanding of what they already know, what they are doing (metacognition), and provide a foundation for future anticipatory mind sets.

of deleting repetitions and unimportant sentences, synthesizing and categorizing specifics in a series with a general word, and searching for or creating a main idea sentence is one which has been shown to be an effective learning procedure. The cumbersome text is whittled down through this process to the critical raw material of the content the author desired to be transmitted and can then be summarized in the students' own words more manageably. As an example of the procedure, we have Figure 3, above.

Summary paragraphs can be initially written in small groups of four or five, evolving through a process of peer group critiques to eventual independent summary paragraph writing. The length of the summary paragraphs can begin at one-hundred words and be gradually reduced to tightly knit summaries of sixty to eighty words. The summary paragraph process can be incorporated by the content area teacher at selected points within each unit to conceptually unify specific sections of text and/or to facilitate synthesizing daily notes taken from lecture/discussion sessions.

What is critical about each of the aforementioned writing study strategies is that they not be activities in and of themselves, but that they are subsumed within the teacher's lesson and are thus an intrinsic means to the ultimately desired end: effective and efficient learning. Through these writing activities, the learner is naturally a more involved, active participant in the educational process, dealing in a multisensory manner with the content; reading speaking and listening as well as writing. Finally, these writing activities assist the student in understanding the nature of the learning process itself. Involvement in anticipatory questioning, organization of information, and critical summarization generate specific outcomes, outcomes which in turn generate new questions to be answered, new twists and turns in the cyclical spiral of learning.

REFERENCES

- Brown, A., and Day, J. (1980). Knowledge and strategies for summarizing texts: The development of expertise. Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois.
- Herber, H. (1978). Teaching Content Area Reading. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Sanacore, J. (1983). Improving reading through prior knowledge and writing. Journal of Reading, 27(8), 714-720.