USING GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS TO INCREASE WRITING PERFORMANCE

by

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project USING GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS TO
INCREASE WRITING PERFORMANCE entitled by Stephanie A. Miller, Candidate for the
Degree of Master of Science in Education, Literacy Birth – Grade 6, is acceptable in form and
content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the effects of using graphic organizers as a pre-writing tool to increase student writing proficiency. Based on a review of the literature, I determined the key components of proficient writing as well as three research based graphic organizers to implement; outline, detail web, and compare and contrast. Qualitative data were collected through action research as two fourth grade students and one fifth grade student, in a small, rural, town in New York State, read a text and filled in a graphic organizer to organize their thoughts and ideas. Students then compiled a writing sample based upon the graphic organizer. Each graphic organizer was used three separate times and a follow up baseline was then conducted. The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubrics were used to assess students' writing. Anecdotal notes were taken and students were interviewed about their writing. Results from this action research determined that the incorporation of outline, detail web, and compare and contrast graphic organizers to guide and organize students' thoughts and ideas improved their overall writing in all seven trait areas up to three points on a six point, 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scale.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In the 2011 listing of "hot topics," literacy experts from the International Reading Association stated that writing was "hot". Each year, they develop a list of "hot topics" in the area of literacy which are not only of high interest, but of high impact and importance to literacy (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011). I, too, have noticed that writing is critical.

Based upon my personal classroom observations in the self-contained special education, English Language Arts (ELA), classes I teach, students write down their thoughts as they think of them rather than in the order they occurred or the order that makes the most sense. Therefore, when writing, students' work is often unorganized.   Their writing also has a tendency to be disorganized as sentences do not always follow one another in a narrative order rather, in a more listed form. Although most students in my classes can orally express good ideas, they write summaries without proper writing conventions, details, organization, sentence fluency, and word choice. The students have the ability to write well, but when they are not provided with guidance, they lack the self-monitoring strategies.

According to the National Report Card from the U.S. Department of Education (2008), most students in grades one through twelve underperform in writing.   The report states that writing scores in 2007 had increased from the prior assessment scores in 1998, however; scores had only increased by a few points. Although the scores increased, performance was still not as high as administrators would like as 88% of the students are at the basic (slightly below average) level and only 27% are performing at the proficient (average to above average) level.

The Common Core Standards, which will be implemented in 2014 in all grades (K – 12), state eleven reading and writing standards for fourth and fifth grade students. These key

standards declare that students should be able to proficiently write genres that include opinionated, informative, and narrative. Students' academic writing should also, according to the Common Core Standards, include a topic statement or introduction that is coherently supported by facts, details, and reasoning. A second attribute student writing should posses is an ability to, create an organizational structure in where related ideas are logically grouped to support the writers' purpose (New York State Education Department http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/, hereafter NYSED, 2011). Student writing needs to link ideas and topics through the use of linking words. Most samples of writing should provide an introduction, body, and concluding statement or paragraph as well. The NYS and Common Core Standards pay significant attention to the organization of student writing. Students' writing should be strong and organized, in paragraph format (NYSED, 2011). The more aware teachers are of the common core standards, and teach their lessons based upon these key standards, the more proficient readers' and writers' students will become.

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published several research briefs on the topic of writing. According to a 1998 brief, in order for students to write proficiently, teachers should carefully design their writing instruction by implementing numerous strategies. Repetition and routine as well as the process of writing, editing, and revising cyclically, are key components of proficient writing and the teaching of writing. NCTE also states that students should be guided through the writing process. They have explained that when students learn the process, routine, and steps of writing, they become more aware as writers (Beliefs About The Teaching of Writing, 1998).

Background

The New York State ELA, English Language Arts Assessment, from 2005 to 2011, demonstrated that students in the previously mentioned small, rural, district in western New York State performed below the regional average for New York State on writing. Section three of the NYS ELA exam assesses students on their skills in writing mechanics, comprehension of facts, and organization of thoughts. On the listening and writing cluster, reading and writing cluster, and writing mechanics cluster, both grade levels were between two and twenty-two percent below the other districts in their region in 2010. In 2011, the students in this particular school district scored on average, between fifteen and forty percent lower than the New York State average and between one and twenty-six percent lower than the regional average (Data Mentor, 2011).

Writing is a key component of every classroom across America and especially in the district mentioned above. Students need to be able to successfully read and write not only to succeed in school, but in life as well. Reading and writing share both rhetorical and communicative functions, knowledge, and cognitive processes. "Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers" (NCTE Beliefs About The Teaching of Writing, 1998, ¶ 2). A second NCTE position statement (2006) expresses that writing is a powerful instrument of thought and as a process should be guided by the teacher and frequently included in daily academic routines. The writing program must be carefully designed and oriented toward the acquiring of new strategies and skills.

Terminology

There are three key terms that are used frequently in this study and they include, academic writing, graphic organizers, and the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing.

Academic writing is divided into different stages and occurs throughout all school subject areas. First, writers must categorize their thoughts and extract the information they wish to use from the text. Next, they must integrate the information and draw a conclusion. Writers then write out their drafts, edit, proofread, revise, and repeat the process until they have written a coherent piece of writing meeting the intended goal (Lee, 2007). Academic writing is generally more developed than the casual writing someone might do in a journal or just for fun. In academic writing, the writer has a set purpose and composes in an organized and coherent manner related to the topic. According to Graham and Perin (2007), 60% of writing assignments in fourth grade are expository.

Graphic organizers, which are visual representations of ideas, help children organize their thoughts and apply thinking skills to the content in a more organized and orderly way. They often occur in the format of keywords and allow for students to focus more on the meaning rather than the format of complete sentences and sentence structure. Graphic organizers are open-ended, multi-layered, and differentiated as well. Different graphic organizers prompt students to respond to texts and topics of study in their own way without a hidden or set agenda. This tool allows teachers to set tasks that challenge students to think outside of the given texts and topics in a skills-based format. Through giving students a prompt to guide their thoughts, graphic organizers guide students to create and develop their own responses and summaries (Cochrane, 2010). They are the initial step or planning stage for the products students will create such as a written document (Higgins, Miller, & Webster, 2006). These differentiated and thought provoking tools can be categorized according to their function and the intended outcome of the piece (Lee, 2007).

6 + 1 Traits of Writing are six key characteristics of proficient writing with the addition of presentation. Ruth Culhams' book on the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing have become a well know curriculum base in writing programs across the country (2003). The Education Northwest states that ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation are the key characteristics of proficient writing (2011).

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive learning focuses on the processing, memory, transfer, and application of information (Morrow & Tracey, 2006). Writing is a cognitive process that illustrates connections among thinking, learning, and writing and is hierarchical with imbedded organization. It is an act of composing a goal-directed thinking process guided by the writer's personal thinking process (Higgins et al., 2006). When writing, the author is constantly making connections amongst their thinking, learning, and writing. Flower and Hayes (cited in Higgens et. al., 2006) assert, the cognitive process of writing, "…is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes that writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing. The process of writing organization is partially a goal-directed thinking process." (Higgins, et al., 2006, p.313). This means that graphic organizers require students to think in levels and organize and break down their idea.

Writing is also meta-cognitive in the fact that the writer must know the functions and purposes of reading, writing, phonological awareness, graphemic awareness, and procedural knowledge of the use of strategies (Gibson, 2008). The theory of cognitive flexibility supports using multiple representations to provide students and writers with situation-sensitive knowledge that prepares them for problem solving and the transfer of knowledge. Multiple representations, such as graphic organizers, prompt students and writers to compare and contrast the text and

situations presented to them. Several reviews and a fair amount of research have been conducted and written based upon the use of graphic organizers and the increase in accurate and complete writing. The way information is distributed among the sequential organizers also affects students' processing. Researchers continue to state that meta-cognitive instruction is important to help raise students' awareness of the processes of the writing stages (Bopry, Chien-Ching, & Lee 2007).

Brown, Green, and Lorenz (2009) identified three cognitive learning theories that support the use of graphic organizers in the writing and learning processes. The dual coding theory states that individuals code information in both verbal and nonverbal formats. In attending to both formats, information is easier to recall. Graphic organizers make this process relatively easy to do. The second theory they support is the schema theory which states that schemas exist within our memory. Through using graphic organizers, teachers can help student writers, link existing knowledge they have in their schema, to the new knowledge they have read or learned. The third and final theory developed by Brown, Green, and Lorenz (2009) is the cognitive load theory. This theory suggests that working memory has a maximum capacity of what it can process. If the capacity is met or exceeded, then learning cannot and often does not take place. When used appropriately, graphic organizers can reduce the cognitive load and allow for more resources to be devoted to learning new material. Therefore, not only do graphic organizers help our brain obtain and process more information, but they help or brain to better organize and use that information.

Rationale

Writing is a key component in everyday life and is used hand in hand with reading.   In the early years, the writing process begins with writing a few letters, to learning to write your

name. As students continue through the primary grades, writing skills and processes progress and become more in depth. According to Graham and Perin (2007), the school setting plays two complementary roles in writing development. First of all, it is a skill that draws on the use of strategies to accomplish a variety of goals. Secondly, writing, "is a means of extending and deepening the students' knowledge" (p. 9). Writing acts as a tool for learning subject matter (Graham & Perin, 2007). People have researched and shared their findings in regards to writing.

Nancie Atwell (1998), a prominent writing advocate, finds that writing is a way of life. She feels that through writing, she gains more satisfaction than almost any other aspect of her life. Atwell also believes that writing is one key way in which people acquire and attain language (Atwell, 1998).   Adults and students can use writing as a way of expressing themselves as well as a way of understanding others. Writing is an important mode of communication and through writing, life experiences and personal views can be shared. Those who are generally quiet verbally, often become talkative textually through writing. The ability to write proficiently is a skill that is needed to succeed and be successful in life (Atwell, 1998).   Reading is generally the bigger focus that is discussed, researched, and taught. Reading and writing however, are inseparable. In order to write, students need to read and know how to read in order to write. The reading and writing partnership however, is rarely looked at together as one whole. If students can read, then they need to know how to write as well as the texts they are reading. Students need to be taught the key components of proficient writing (Calkins, 1983).

Beginning in third grade and continuing through high school, New York State students are assessed annually in English Language Arts.   The state exam assesses reading ability, comprehension, understanding, ability to interpret information, compare and contrast information, listening skills, understanding and using graphic organizers, making inferences,

grammar, story structure, and writing skills in the form of synthesis and summarization of text as well as organization and coherence. Currently, students' writing is lacking organization of thoughts as well as the ability to transfer their ideas from the text into pen and paper format. Being unable to write is a high weakness to have throughout life. Students need to be strong readers and writers.

The Common Core State Standards (2011) have recently been developed and will be implemented mandatorily across the country in grades K – 12 by 2014, in all school districts in New York State. These standards provide a consistent, clear, understanding of what students are expected to learn in math and ELA. Common Core State Standards are designed to be relevant to the real world and reflect the knowledge and skills students need for success presently and in college and careers. A portion of the Common Core Standards relate specifically to students' writing. The standards state that fourth and fifth grade students should be involved in a variety of different types of writing and that their writing should be well organized (NYSED, 2011). Therefore, teachers need to find and know key strategies and tools that will help their students to become proficient academic writers.

In the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, ideas and organization are two of the key characteristics that are examined and assessed (Culham & Chin, 2003). Organization enhances and showcases the central idea or theme of the written piece. The order, structure, or presentation of information is compelling and moves the reader through the text (Culham & Chin, 2003). One way teachers can get their students to write and organize their writing with strong and coherent ideas in this way are through the use of graphic organizers. Using graphic organizers guides students as they brainstorm and begin their writing process. Certain graphic outlines can highly guide the writer to authoring an organized and coherent piece of writing which promotes thought

and idea development (Grabe & Jiang, 2007).   Cochrane (2010) asserted, "Knowledge is not something that can be learnt without the explicit teaching and scaffolding that supports emerging and developing writers to become competent writers." (p. 3).   Education Northwest (2011) strongly believes that by addressing the 6 + 1 Traits while teaching writing, students will emerge as strong writers. Through a literature review and research, this paper addresses and outlines the key components of creating a proficient writing curriculum, using graphic organizers to develop proficient writers.

Results from the New York State ELA from 2005 to 2011 indicated that fourth and fifth grade students in the small, rural school district in the western portion of New York State, which I work in, had performed below the regional average in the writing section of the assessment (Data Mentor, 2011). From 2010 to 2011, the students in this particular school district scored on average,   fifteen to forty percent lower than the New York State average (Data Mentor, 2011). According to Graham and Perin (2007), 70% of students in grades four through twelve across the United States are low achieving writers. This means that these students are scoring and performing below the average level of writing achievement.

With writing being such an important component of ELA, and the pressure upon both students and teachers to do well on the New York State tests, it is crucial that teachers focus on strengthening student writing skills. The Common Core Standards place a strong emphasis on writing as well. Through conducting research, I will gain a better understanding of the best components to a proficient writing program and whether or not graphic organizers help to improve student writing.

Research Questions

Therefore, through qualitative and quantitative action research, I researched whether or not the use of graphic organizers which would incorporate traits of organization and detail before writing would increase student writing quality. The questions that guided the study included:

- What are the characteristics of proficient, upper elementary, writing?

- Which type of instructional approaches lead to proficient student writing?

- Do graphic organizers help organize and improve student writing? If so, which ones?

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Assessment results reveal that student writing is lacking in organization and the transfer of ideas into textual format. Therefore, graphic organizers are tools used by many teachers to not only promote higher level thinking and give students direction, but to help organize their thoughts as well. There are also several writing programs that use graphic organizers and similar formats to help students writing process. There are three sections, each section is derived from one of the three research topic questions; What are the characteristics of proficient writing in upper elementary grades?, What type of instruction does research say, leads to proficient student writing?, and Do graphic organizers help organize and improve student writing? If so, which ones?

What Are the Characteristics of Proficient Writing in Upper Elementary Grades?

Researchers have different views on what exact characteristics make up a proficient piece of writing. Two distinct sets of proficient writing characteristics have been found, developed, used, and supported by others as well as a 1998 brief from NCTE.

According to the 1998 brief by NCTE, *Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing,* in order for students to write proficiently, teachers should carefully design their writing instruction by implementing numerous strategies. Repetition and routine as well as the process of writing, editing, and revising cyclically, are key components of proficient writing and teaching of writing. The same NCTE brief also states that students should be guided through the writing process. They have stated that when students learn the process, routine, and steps of writing, they become more aware as writers.

Culham and Romero (2003, 2008) have each developed their own set of proficient writing characteristics which were examined and compared. Romero (2008) stated eight proficient writing characteristics. Several of which, are overlapping characteristics with Education Northwest's 6 + 1 Traits of Writing (2011). According to Culham (2003), there are six key characteristics of proficient writing as well as the addition of presentation. Culhams' book on the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing has become a well know curriculum base in writing programs across the country. Culham (2003), states that ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation are the key characteristics of proficient writing. The following are proficient writing characteristics based upon Culham, Romero (2003, 2008), and the book *Reading and Writing with Understanding: Comprehension in Fourth and Fifth Grades* by Sally Hampton and Lauren Resnick (2009), as well as a few other researchers.

Planning and organization.

According to Romero (2008), every time proficient writers write, they begin by planning, organizing, varying word usage, and adapting writing based upon the purpose, form, and intended audience. Culham, (2003) shares this belief and expresses that the organization of writing should enhance and showcase the topic. The piece of writing should contain an inviting introduction with a strong body that gives all necessary support and information as well as a strong conclusion. Sequencing throughout the writing should be logical and effective.

Just as organization is important to writing, it is also important and beneficial to move the organization of information into memory. Frank Smith (1978) conducted an experiment research case study in which he gave fifty picture cards to two different groups of students (each group had twelve students). The first group was told to memorize the cards and the second group was told to organize the cards into categories. Smith's hypothesis stated that the second group of

students would remember more information from the cards because they would be categorizing

based upon their thoughts and ideas. After ten minutes, both groups of students were tested on

their memory of what was on the picture cards. The second group of students remembered far

more card content than the first group. Why? These students categorized and organized the cards

so that they made more sense to them and the cards were fluent with each other. This proved the

point Smith was trying to make sure readers and writers learn through organizing and building

categories.

Arthaud and Goracke (2006) conducted a case study of twenty fourth graders during the

first quarter of the school year. A majority of these students were not scoring proficiently on the

state standardized tests. Their study implemented the introduction of story webs and outlines.

Students were taught how to use them through different lessons, and teacher support was

gradually pulled away. By the fourth quarter when the students took the 2009 state assessment

test, results were exemplary. Every student had met and exceeded all the state standards by

using the organizational approaches.

Reread, reflect, and collaborate.

Romero (2008) believes rereading as you write and reflecting upon it, helps develop a

strong and coherent piece of writing. To summarize Romero's findings and beliefs of two

classrooms he observed, previous reading, rereading, and writing experiences as well as abilities

in semantics, syntax, and graphophonics are all necessary. Romero observed that making

changes to writing as writers revise helps the effort to increase meaning and clarity which leads

into the next key characteristic. Although Culham 2003) doesn't mention rereading and

reflecting as one set characteristic, it is implied in nearly every other characteristic she believes

in as the reader needs to constantly be rereading and revising their work. The International

Reading Association (2011) has found that using the writing process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and rewriting leads to proficient writing. When prewriting, students' are essentially brainstorming their ideas and "using graphic organizers to connect ideas and design a coherent structure for a writing piece." (Romero, 2008, p. 3). In the drafting stage, students work independently to put their ideas into paragraph form. Revising and editing entails students' rereading their work more than once and thinking about if their writing conveys their intended meaning. Rewriting is simply having the students adjust and "fix" what they have written after they revise and edit. The final step is to publish the final piece of writing (The International Reading Association, 2011).

Collaborating to provide support and encouragement for others as well as gaining feedback and revision ideas for their own writing is important for writers to do (Romero, 2008). The collaboration of ideas and concepts is key a component of writing. Teachers and students constantly collaborate through guided writing practice (Gibson, 2008). As will be discussed later in the paper, writers workshops are an important piece of teaching proficient writing. Through these writers' workshops, writers meet with both the teacher and their peers to collaborate and confer over their pieces of writing and develop confidence as well as greater awareness of the writing characteristics (Atwell, 1991).

In a research study conducted by Claire Aitchison (2009), doctoral college students were placed into two groups. Each group consisted of six students who participated in two different ten week writing curriculums. Students in the focus group met with each other on a weekly basis and critiqued each others' work. The students who were not in the focus group worked independently on their written work. These students in the focus group would make comparisons, give both written and oral feedback, and construct new knowledge around their

piece of writing. After the ten weeks, results showed that the students in the focus group learned to analyze and critique written work, deliver and synthesize feedback, and re-construct their writing for a better outcome based upon criticism and feedback received. The students working independently did not develop as strong critiquing skills and therefore had written work that was not as proficient and strong as the focus group students.

Content and ideas.

Content and ideas are a third key characteristic that a proficient reader and writer possesses according to both Romero and Culham (2003, 2008). In Romero's (2008) observations of two different writing workshops, using prior knowledge about the topic aided in the development of strong ideas and content in students' writing. He found that the writers in the workshop needed to show concern about content, ideas, and language style of the piece of writing. Romero discovered that by instructing students on how to express their ideas and incorporate the correct content, students' writing became more developed and proficient. Ruth Culham (2003) agrees and states that the ideas of a piece of writing should be clear and focused with a narrow and manageable topic. The ideas and content should also hold the readers' attention, be relevant to the topic, and posses accurate details that support the topic.   She mentions that prior knowledge can and should be incorporated into the content of the writing piece (Culham, 2003). When writing a summary, the writer condenses the textual information presented to them into a more concise format (Cochrane, 2010). Hampton and Resnick (2009) observed and researched a group of elementary students and found that a strong student writer picked out key information and ideas from a report of information (text). The writer then synthesized and analyzed their thoughts to construct supporting or contradicting arguments. Less proficient student writers failed to do so.

In one particular case study, two groups of students were created. The treatment group consisted of sixty-seven elementary students and the control group consisted of sixty-five elementary students. The treatment group received direct instruction in the areas of writing regarding voice, ideas, and organization. The control group only received instruction on prewriting. The treatment group showed a .55-.87 mean score improvement in the three areas taught by the end of the study. The control group only showed a 0.0 - .21 increase (Higgens et. al., 2006).

A third grade teacher conducted an informal study of her third grade class. She had a few struggling readers and decided to implement a writing workshop to address student writing deficits she had noticed. This teacher introduced pre-writing webs to help students develop their writing ideas. She instructed students to go back to the text to help them develop their ideas as well as look at other books. Students then participated in peer conferences when they finished with their webs to discuss their ideas and further develop them. A few days later when the teacher asked her students to write independently, they not only used webs to develop their ideas, but they wrote more, and displayed well developed writing (Romero, 2008).

Writing fluency and conventions.

Romero (2008) also found that writing frequently and independently increased students writing fluency. He piggy backs his prior characteristic of revising in mentioning that as the writer makes revisions, they should be increasing the meaning and clarity of the piece of writing. Writing fluency as defined by Culham (2003) is using appropriate word choice that catches the readers' attention. The words used in a piece of writing need to be precise, interesting, engaging, and natural. A proficient piece of writing is suggested to also be fluent among sentence structure. The written text itself should flow easily, hold rhythm and cadence as well as include

a variance in length and structure, purposeful beginnings and endings, and creative and appropriate connections throughout the writing.

Conventions are another one of the most important characteristics of a proficient piece of writing. Romero (2008) claims that proofreading for paragraph structure, spelling, grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and format are signs of a proficient writer. The sixth characteristic of writing in the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing model (Culham, 2003), is the conventions of writing. Culham (2003) states, that a proficient writer must demonstrate proper, standard, writing. This type of writing includes the proper use of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, and paragraphing. Lucy Calkins (1991) and Nancie Atwell (1998) have differing views when it comes to the conventions of writing. They differ in the fact that Calkins feels conventions should be addressed at the end of the writing process so that the other areas can be of greater focus during writing while Atwell however, believes that conventions should be addressed and focused upon throughout the entire writing process. Either way the writer monitors their conventions works and both Atwell and the Calkins find conventions to be a key characteristic of proficient writing (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1991).

A study of 780 students in grades three through eleven was conducted to determine improvement rates in their writing regarding sentence fluency and conventions. Students wrote a summary based upon a text they read. Their writing samples were assessed using the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubrics. These students were then modeled the traits of sentence fluency, conventions, and ideas. After being modeled, the groups of students read a second text and wrote a summary. In this second summary, students were reminded to think about their conventions, ideas, and sentence fluency as they wrote. Study administrators predicted that these students would pass their state assessment exams after being modeled the trait practice and use.

Once all students were finished and their writing samples were assessed using the rubrics, administrators determined that 75% of the students would pass the test and were proficiently writing with proper conventions, ideas, and fluency (Higgens, et. al., 2006).

Presentation and voice.

Collaborating through workshops is a mode for students to present their pieces of writing which is Culhams' (2003) final component and characteristic of proficient writing. Culham states that presentation is an optional piece that is often left out due to time or other reasons. The presentation of a particular piece of writing should enhance the content of the writing as well as provide and connect with the message conveyed in the writing (Culham, 2003). The voice of the writing piece also affects the fluency of the written piece and should peak the readers interest. Voice in writing must contain the appropriate purpose and audience. A strong commitment to the topic along with engaging tone throughout the written piece is suggested.

Higgens, et. al (2006) reviewed a research based case study conducted by Ms. Ruiz in her fourth grade classroom. Ms. Ruiz began her writing workshop with a mini-lesson on voice. She read a poem and story containing a strong voice. Ruiz then asked her students to discuss the texts, what they noticed, and what they felt about the voice throughout the text. She then further explained to her students, the concept of voice in writing and its importance as well as what a strong voice adds to a piece of writing. After completing a write aloud with her students where they all worked together to write a strong voiced story, Ms. Ruiz had each student write on their own. As students finished, Ruiz examined their work and noticed a much stronger voice in each piece in comparison to other pieces the same students wrote earlier in the year.

Assessment.

Romero (2008) found that using the writing process and strategies in a flexible manner by pausing to reread, elaborate, proofread, and reflect are all ways that writers can self-assess their writing. The strong believer in the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, Ruth Culham (2003) on the other hand, has developed a specific rubric for teachers and evaluators to use to guide their assessment of students' writing pieces. The rubric assesses each of the seven traits by scoring them on a scale of one to six and was developed by a group of teachers through Education Northwest who determined seven characteristics of proficient writing (2011).

NCTE (2006) states that writing assessment is useful primarily to improve both teaching and learning. They state that the purpose of assessment should "govern its design, its implementation, and the generation and dissemination of its results" (NCTE, 2006, ¶11). Assessment should also be created by the curricular goals the teacher wants to measure. There are numerous types and formats of assessment; formal and informal, qualitative and quantitative. NCTE's position statement on writing assessment states that learning to write entails learning to accomplish and reach a certain range of purposes. Those purposes should be determined by the teacher doing the assessment. Best assessment practice provides development opportunities not only for the assessor, but the assessed. A writers' ability is, "a sum of a variety of skills employed in a diversity of contexts" (NCTE, 2006, ¶13).   With this being said, assessments need to use multiple measures. The types of assessments used should also be assessed and adjusted as needed (NCTE, 2006). Allowing students writers to help develop and decide the assessments that will be used is also a strong writing tool. If the students are a part of the assessment development, they become even more aware of the expectations and can keep these in mind as they write. Students are then able to self-assess as they write (Higgens, et. al., 2006).

Research of proficient writing characteristics.

Fry and Griffin (2010) reviewed the effectiveness of the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing with a group of fourth graders. Students were taught the traits of writing and were later assessed based upon them. The results proved that proper writing instruction through the 6 + 1 Traits increases the proficiency in student writing. These students not only became better writers, but better editors of their writing as well as others writing. NCTE however, states, "Research cannot identify one single approach to writing instruction that will be effective with every learner because of the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students who respond differently to various approaches." (NCTE, Writing Now, 2008, p. 2). Therefore, it is best to teach all traits of writing.

Which Type of Instructional Approach Does Research Say, Leads to Proficient Student Writing?

NCTE (1998) states that, "Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers" (Beliefs About The Teaching of Writing, 1998, ¶2). A second NCTE (2006) position statement expresses that writing is a powerful instrument of thought and that the act of writing is accomplished through a process. Research suggests that this process be guided by the teacher and should also be frequent. The position statement continues in stating that the writing program needs to be carefully designed and oriented toward the acquiring of new strategies and skills that can be used both in and out of the school setting (NCTE, Writing Assessment: A Position Statement, 2006). In the same statement NCTE continues to say that writing should be taught by a variety of models, strategies, tools, formats, forms, and purposes. Although there are numerous approaches and techniques to writing instruction, Graham and Perin (2007) state that, "No single approach to writing instruction will

meet the needs of all the students." (p. 11). Teachers of writing need to develop a mixture and appropriate blend of techniques and approaches to writing in order to create proficient writers.

The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing are not the only way to promote proficient student writing. Writing can be taught in different formats in order to reach all types of learning styles and students. According to NCTE (Beliefs About The Teaching of Writing, 1998), in order for students to write proficiently, teachers should carefully design their writing instruction implementing numerous writing strategies. Research indicates that curriculums should be interpreted to include a wide range of writing activities and writing formats. Writing repetition and routine are key factors in proficient writing. When students learn the process and routine of writing, editing, revising, collaborating, and repeating those steps, they become more aware as writers (NCTE, 1998). In order to do that, writing programs could be set up as a workshop and include mini lessons, guided practice, conferences, and the implementation of graphic organizers.

Writers' workshop.

Nancie Atwell (1991) and Lucie Calkins (1986) use writing workshops to focus on and strengthen student writing. These two women have used this method along with others such as regularly scheduled writing blocks and mini lessons to obtain reputable results in their research and personal teaching experiences. Calkins states that, "The writing workshop provides beginning readers with a powerful context for developing their reading as well as their writing skills."(1986, p. 87). Through research, Atwell (1991) found that by setting aside a regular writing schedule, students are apt to think about their writing more often.

The main point of the workshop is to really and truly focus in on writing and block off sets of time that are specifically devoted only to writing. This time should be routine, focused,

and comfortable (Atwell, 1998). As Graves states (Atwell, 1998, p. 91), "Without at least three writing workshops a week, it will be hard for students to conceive topics, sustain projects of their own, and behave as writers, frequent time for writing helps students write well." Through the writers' workshop, are the three main components of mini lessons, guided practice, and conferences as well as the use of graphic organizers as a writing guide when needed.

Lucy Calkins (1983) discusses a single subject case study in which Mrs. Howard implemented a writers' workshop with her entire class of elementary students. Over the course of the week, three to four hours were spent in the writing workshop. In this workshop, Mrs. Howard began with a ten minute mini-lesson followed by a forty minute workshop in which conferences, sharing, and writing took place. Over the course of the school year, students became involved and more and more interested in writing as well as excited and very willing to write. Their writing became better developed and through the workshop students built a sense of writing independence as they grew. After a month, students no longer needed Mrs. Howards prompting.

In Nancie Atwell's book, *Side by Side* (1991), she discusses her own case study in which she implemented the writers' workshop with eighth grade special education students that were placed in her general education class. In this specific workshop, students were able to act upon their own intentions rather than Atwell's intentions for the entire group. During the writing workshop, conferences took place between Atwell and the students, models were given, and mini lessons on conventions, fluency, organization, and other important writing aspects were taught. In the four following years, all of the students had remained in the mainstreamed class and continued to succeed. Not one of the students returned to the resource room.

Mini lessons.

Mini lessons are intended to be taught at the beginning of each writer's workshop session. The purpose of the mini lessons is to be brief (five to ten minutes long) and cover one or two topics or components at a time (Atwell, 1998).   Atwell mentions that mini lessons establish the group dynamic and reach the entire class at one time. The mini lessons provide a frame of reference for conferences to be individually held after the mini lesson. Atwell (1998) uses mini lessons to, "introduce and highlight concepts, techniques, and information that will help writers and readers grow." (p. 149).   "Mini lessons are the ritual that brings us together as a community of writers and readers, at the start of each workshop." (p. 150). Lucy Calkins (1983) is another firm believer in the use of mini lessons. She shares many of the same views as Atwell and adds that mini lessons are devoted to specific concepts. The students often use the mini lessons as a springboard into their independent writing sessions as numerous topics are taught and discussed amongst the teacher and students.

Supporting research was found by Griffin (1995) and discussed by Lee, Bopry, and Hedberg (2007). In the dual subject case study conducted by Griffin, one group of intermediate students were explicitly taught writing instructions, strategies, and skills while another group of similar students were not. This second group was asked to use what they knew to write a summary based upon a read text. Griffin's findings were that the students who were not explicitly instructed in writing basically re-wrote what they had read in the text. These students had not developed the proficiency in writing skills that the group receiving explicit writing instruction had received.

Guided practice.

Guided practice and scaffolding are terms that coincide with each other and are used by nearly all teachers. As Calkins (2005) says, "Guided practice is the most prevalent teaching method in our primary writing conferences." (p. 76). Through guided practice, the teacher explicitly states and demonstrates what it is he or she expects the student to do. Over time as the student proceeds to do the explained work, the teacher supports the student with lean and efficient prompts. As the student demonstrates progress, it is the teacher's job to pull back on instruction and prompts, and let the intervals between the discussions grow longer (Calkins, 2005). Graphic organizers are tools that are often used to guide students in their thoughts and writing. This will be further discussed below.

Graham and Perin (2007) found that teaching students strategies leads them to be proficient writers. By helping students develop background knowledge about the writing process, modeling the process and strategies/techniques, supporting their practice, and backing off to allow their independent use of the strategies/techniques, students learn how to self-regulate when they write.

Randi Stone (2007) used a single subject case study to research the improvement in writing proficiency through the implementation of guided writing. Through Stone's research project, nineteen students were shown a pre-written descriptive summary. Students were then modeled and guided through writing a descriptive and informative summary as a class with his intermediate students. After modeling and guiding students through the steps of writing a proficient piece of writing for one week, he gave students a writing prompt and let them work on their own. After a few weeks, Stone noticed an improvement in the quality of his students writing.

Conferences.

As previously mentioned Nancie Atwell (1991) had several learning disabled students moved into her classroom for a period of four years (Atwell, 1991). During that time, every one of her students succeeded and none of them returned to resource room. This was possible through one on one writing conferences and mini lessons. Atwell (1998), like Calkins, used mini lessons to teach one or two specific writing components each day. She then let students work independently on their writing while she moved around the room holding short conferences with every student. These conferences were fairly short and one hundred percent individual (1998). Atwell (1998) focuses her individual conferences on what the student writer has written so far, what their overall goal is, questions Atwell or the students may have at that time (in regards to that specific piece of writing), and the conventions of the piece of writing. Students develop their own understanding and knowledge of what their writing should include and involve.

Conferences were also strongly used and advocated by Lucy Calkins to help her students develop as proficient writers. Calkins (1983) ran her conferences very similarly to Atwell's except, the biggest component according to Calkins is to begin each conference with a compliment. She found that by supporting what students had done at the very beginning made them feel good and students would look forward to the conferences as a positive experience. According to Calkins, the rhythm of every writing conference was, "A few minutes to appreciate what the writer had done, a few minutes to teach something new." (p. 34). Calkins found that when the writing skills were taught within the context of the specific piece of writing being written at the time, the skills were better learned and understood by the student. As a result of individual conferences, Calkins found her students not only became more proficient writers, but became more skillful at helping their classmates. The teacher-student conferences provided a

model to transition into peer conferences. Once students had developed a strong understanding

and concept of how the conferences worked, Calkins was able to have students hold their own

conferences with each other.

Rosemary Fryer (Graham and Perin, 2007) conducted a single subject case study with one of

her ninth grade special education students. This particular student had extreme anxiety about

writing and would often refuse to write, becoming very upset over the entire situation. With this,

she partnered each student up with a classmate. After modeling how the conferences should

work, Fryer let the students write and work on their own. Within a few days, students (including

the particular student conferencing was intended for) were effectively conferencing about their

writing. Not only did students show more confidence and comfort in writing, but over the course

of about four weeks, they began writing more proficiently than before the conferences were

implemented. Graham and Perin (2007) found an 82% increase in the level of proficient writing

produced when students collaborated with each other during the writing process.

In the writing research review by Romero (2008), he discussed a single subject case study

that was conducted by a teacher named Miss Andres. This teacher implemented teacher student

conferences to increase writing abilities for struggling writers in her class. During everyday's

writing block, Miss Andres would meet and conference with a few students. Throughout her

conferences she would ask students different questions regarding their writing as well as prompt

them to strengthen and deepen their writing. By the end of the school year, students writing

qualities had greatly increased along with their confidence and knowledge of the characteristics

of a proficient piece of writing.

Graphic organizers.

Graphic organizers help students organize their thoughts and apply thinking skills to the content in a more organized and ordered way. One key component of proficient writing is structure and organization. As stated above, the organization of a piece of writing can greatly affect its meaning.

Graham and Perin (2007) believe that pre-writing, "engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition" (p. 18). A first draft or written outline often improves the quality of the final written product. Based on their study, using pre-writing activities such as visual representations, graphic organizers, and prompts, had a moderate (32%) impact on the quality of students' writing.

The three researchers, Borthwick, Nauman, and Stirling (2011) conducted a research survey of seventy-five teachers who read and responded to thirty-one statements regarding writing skills. The results conveyed that a good piece of writing has a strong and logical organization that is clear to the reader. The flow and cohesiveness in the order of writing are also key elements in good writing.

Similarly, Donovan and Smolkins' (2011) conducted a case study research of kindergarten to grade five students' informational writing in a rural school district. They found that by using outline based formats to brainstorm and guide writing, students finished products were more developed and cohesive. Through using an outline to brainstorm facts for the writing, moving the facts into a couplet format, and then proceeding into the paragraph form, the outline guided the writers into the appropriate format.

A single study case study research of a class of fifth grade students was implemented by Braun, Rajewski, and Wiesendanger (2011). In this study, the researchers implemented the

Suggest-Plan-Choose strategy of writing. Through this implementation and study, the researchers found that using outlines and charts to help students plan their writing eased the tension of writing and allowed for students to write well developed pieces of writing. Graphic organizers such as outlines, webs, and lists proved to help students keep to the topic, organize information, and keep their writing in the correct sequential order.

Brown, Green, and Lorenz (2009), learned through their case study research of twenty-four fourth graders, using a graphic organizer during the prewriting phase in a writers' workshop environment caused significant improvement for both high and low performing students. This research study also found that students who used the graphic organizers to guide their pre-writing increased the quantity of their writing.

In the literature reviewed by Cochrane in 2010, she found that graphic organizers were more than just a worksheet as they generate more student benefits than answering general multiple choice questions. Cochrane found that graphic organizers guide skills based development and because they are multi-layered, allow children to write responses and thoughts in their own ways. She states that graphic organizers "allow students to clarify their thinking" (Cochrane, 2010, p. 36).

Grabe and Jiang (2007) conducted a case study of second language learning fourth graders. Using graphic organizers to pre-write, students who used the graphic organizers final writing piece was significantly better than those who did not use the organizer. The graphic organizers used prompted the students thinking. Grabe and Jiang noticed that the graphic organizers could train student writers to not only write more proficiently, but recognize more key components of the texts they read. Their research also found that graphic organizers allowed for a holistic understanding that words cannot convey. The organizational patterns of graphic

organizers provide a scaffolding device that is beneficial to beginning writers. Graphic organizers require students to think farther and deeper.

A single subject case study of twenty-four elementary students in grades three through six conducted by Higgins, Miller, and Wegman (2007) discovered that by combining the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, a writing workshop, and graphic organizers, students showed strong improvement over a nine week period. A baseline assessment was done before the first week and data were assessed throughout the nine weeks with the ninth week being the final data collection. Not only did classroom writing scores increase, but state test writing scores also improved for this group of students.

Which Graphic Organizers Can Help Organize Student Writing?

Although there are thousands of different graphic organizers that have been created for educational use, there are a select few that are proven to increase writing skills and guide writers to create proficient pieces of writing. As discussed prior, one of the key components to proficient writing instruction is guided writing. Graphic organizers are a great tool to help guide students when they write. Organizers such as outlines, webs, and compare and contrast guides, scaffold students' thoughts into writing a proficient piece. As Lucy Calkins (1991) once said, "The problem is that writing well has everything to do with giving sustained, focused attention to a project." (p. 101). Graphic organizers are one of the answers to this problem as they direct students and writers attention to the task, specific order, and details needed to write proficiently.

Outline of ideas.

Outlines are one of the most widely used graphic organizers. Baxendell (2003) conducted a multi-subject case study on his elementary special education students. He found that students often struggled most with the organization of their writing. Outlines are the perfect

graphic organizer to use for scaffolding students into properly organizing their writing. After consistently, coherently, and creatively implementing outlines, webs, and compare and contrast graphic organizers, Baxendell found that each one provided a framework of sequence. The student writers were guided by the organizers to write their information in a logical and sequential manner. When using an outline to sequence events, students used it as a type of timeline. The outlines flowed in one direction and were often numbered or connected with arrows. After implementing each strategy, Baxendell compared students' writing with writing they had previously written before using the organizers. He found a large increase in the proficiency of writing amongst the students as ideas were more developed, cohesive, and organized.

A case study was conducted by Arthaud and Goracke (2006) in which they implemented a traditional outline with twenty fourth grade students. They began this study during the first quarter of the school year so that the students could adapt and implement this organizing strategy across other academic areas. In this study all students were taught how to use a traditional text outline to organize basic information and details from a teacher chosen text. Throughout using the outline while reading the text, the teacher gradually reduced the amount of support she gave the students. This approach allowed for students to master the use of the outline in all areas. By the end of the school year, the majority of the students were able to independently use the outline and their writing proficiency increased. A second result of this research study was that all of the students met and exceeded all state standards in reading since they learned and began using the strategy regularly across all academic areas.

Detail webs.

The main goal of a graphic organizing web is the extraction of information. This could be character information, events, or other aspects of a text. A web generally has one large circle in the center with smaller circles branching off of it with connecting lines or arrows (Brovero, 2004). The middle larger web is designed to hold the main idea or the topic. This could be the character, main event, or topic of the later writing piece. The branches of the web are intended to hold the details about the main idea and topic. Webbing is essentially a visual display of interlinked concepts of story elements that are designed to assist the reader and writer in organizing and recalling important information and details from a text.

A single subject case study was conducted by Arthaud and Goracke (2006) in which a group of fourth grade students learned to use story webs to increase their reading comprehension, story recall, and organization of thoughts to guide their writing. These researchers found that not only did reading comprehension increase, but met the standard goals set by the researchers. Students increased their state test scores in the areas of writing by using graphic organizers. Students' writing, comprehension, and cohesiveness also improved in other academic areas.

Christine Chaney (2007) conducted a single subject case study with her third graders a few years ago. In this study she implemented the web with all twenty-two of her students. She modeled how students should use the web as a paragraph guide. Chaney further explained that the central circle was the main idea or topic and the branching circles were to develop into paragraphs with details supporting the topic. She modeled by using the web to write a paragraph for her students allowing them to see how it worked. After implementing this graphic organizer and strategy, Chaney found that the students were writing more effectively and proficiently.

In one of her many observations, Lucy Calkins (1986) noticed that most third graders and

higher grade level students she worked with could tell when a certain topic needed to be divided into subtopics. When this occurred, she had some of the students use web maps to outline their subtopics. Through this tool, students would outline section headings or brainstorm a variety of other related topics they would use. This was a beneficial tool to help students further develop and lengthen their writing.

Compare and contrast.

When told to compare and contrast two topics, most people think of a venn diagram. Although a venn diagram is one type of compare and contrast organizer, it is one of many. A compare and contrast graphic organizer can be any diagram, chart, or outlined figure that asks the writer to compare two different topics by finding what they have in common, and what differences they possess. Compare and contrast diagrams have become standard instructional tools in the education setting as they are a great visual display of the similarities and differences amongst two or three ideas or texts. These diagrams can also be used in many curricula areas. "In writing, this graphic organizer serves as a prewriting device for paragraphs of comparison" (Baxendell, 2003). Baxendell continued his directions to use compare and contrast diagrams in stating that they must include enough space for students to write. He claims that if students don't have enough room to write, their writing performance is stifled.

Baxendell (2003) has observed the use of numerous graphic organizers in his special education inclusive fourth grade classroom. Through his observations he has noticed that by using compare and contrast diagrams continuously throughout the school, students become very accustomed to the format and the expectations that come with the particular graphic organizer. His students use the organizers to get to know each other at the beginning of the year, review information after a lesson and before a test, and review textual information they recently read.

Baxendell continues by stating that his students comprehend difficult academic tasks more proficiently when using graphic organizers such as compare and contrast diagrams. He also feels through his personal experience that inclusive and special education classrooms are one of the best settings for using graphic organizers as they benefit all learners and are a great way to measure student comprehension and understanding.

When Marrian Brovero (2004) used a venn diagram in her third grade class, the diagram forced her students to dive more deeply into the story, *Now One Foot, Now the Other* by Tomie dePaola. After reading this story with her students, they used the venn diagram to explore the differences and similarities amongst the two main characters and themselves. When doing so, students gained deeper understandings of themselves as well as the characters. When her students were finished with their venn diagrams, many of them decided to write a whole new story all on their own. Brovero and her class grew to love venn diagrams as they were fun and interesting for the students and made them more active readers and writers.

In the research findings of Grabe and Jiang (2007), a single subject case study was found in which Balajthy and Weisberg (1990) investigated the effect of training college freshman to recognize the compare and contrast structure in a text and use it to write summaries. The experimental group of freshman students were trained on using the compare and contrast organizer through four forty minute session over a two week period and the control group was not. The results yielded were that the experimental group far outscored the control group. The two researchers concluded that the trained students were able to transfer their compare and contrast training to gather information from a text and summarize through compare and contrast without the use of the organizer.

The literary research I found helped me to further develop my research methodology and plan. Through the literature and research articles, I was able to determine the best practices and modes of conducting research as well as collecting data.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Overview of Methods and Final Project

The Master's Thesis Project I conducted was a single subject case study that inquired into the effectiveness of using graphic organizers as prewriting tools to organize thoughts, ideas, details, and sequencing with fourth and fifth graders. I also examined student writing samples to determine which specific graphic organizers were the most beneficial.

Participants

I included two fourth grade students, one male and one female and one fifth grade male. All students were from a small, rural, western, New York State school district and were in my current reading class. They were underperforming in writing and were in a self-contained special education reading class. All students in the class participated in the writing activities however, only data from the selected three students were used for data collection on this research project. The three students who participated in this project were selected by a baseline assessment that was conducted with the entire class. Written consent was obtained from both the students and their parents before conducting this research project.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to determine which students were underperforming in writing, I performed an initial assessment of the entire class of students' writing skills, abilities, and proficiency at the start of the research project. In addition, I reviewed the students' prior scores on the state assessment. This initial assessment was conducted on September nineteenth. I analyzed the traits of writing each student possessed and the level of proficiency. Based on the 6+1 Traits of Writing, I selected the bottom three students.

Baseline data – entire class.

Class sessions were set up in a writers' workshop format and ran from September nineteenth to November twenty-second. Writing instruction was given daily to the entire class. Within this workshop, students read a text aloud with me. There were also short, daily mini-lessons based upon the graphic organizer being implemented. All fourth and fifth graders read an informational text I selected. The fourth and fifth graders then discussed the text as well as the author's writing style for ways to sequence and organize information and to include detail aloud in a conferencing format. Each student wrote about the text they read. I assessed each student's writing samples using the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubric. The traits I was primarily interested in were those of organization, ideas, and presentation. The rubrics were used to assess all students in the classroom. Based on 6 + 1 Trait assessment results, and which students granted consent (along with parents/guardians), I determined the three students with the lowest scores. These two fourth grade and one fifth grade students were the participants for the study. The texts that were chosen for this research project were selected by myself. Each text selected was written in a format that echoed the graphic organizer being taught. The organizers focused upon three traits: organization of ideas, details, and presentation.

Graphic organizer and writing process

At each stage of the data collection process, all three students read an informational, academic text and then completed a graphic organizer that focused on organizing ideas, details, and presentation. Each student then authored a writing sample based on the text and graphic organizer. Students used their completed graphic organizer as a pre-writing tool to guide and organize their writing. I then assessed each student's written sample using the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubric that coincided with the graphic organizer. The outline graphic organizer and

writing sample were assessed with the organization rubric. The web graphic organizer and writing sample were assessed with the ideas rubric.   The compare and contrast graphic organizer and writing sample were assessed with the presentation rubric. I later used this data to track student progress. This data were compared and analyzed with all data and other data collections at the end of the project. The above process was conducted with a different text for each graphic organizer. Three data collections were completed with each type of graphic organizer and rubric as well as one baseline data collection without using the graphic organizer before moving on to the next graphic organizer.

Final data.

The above reading, graphic organizer, authoring process was repeated with a different text and without a graphic organizer provided to the students. The three participating students and I repeated the data collection steps with a different text. Students then decided which graphic organizer best matched the text they read and wrote down why they decided upon that organizer. Students proceeded to write about the text they read without using a graphic organizer. I took observational field notes to record student discussion as well as assessed each student's written sample using the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubric in the areas of ideas, details, and presentation.   Data were used as the baseline and to track student progress and the benefits of using the graphic organizers as well as the change in student's academic writing. Data collected were compared and analyzed with all data collection points at the end of the project after all data had been collected.

Process for analysis of data

The 6 + 1 Traits of Writing ideas, organization, and presentation rubrics were used to assess the key components I was looking for in students writing. Throughout the research

process, three different graphic organizers were introduced and implemented with the students.

The graphic organizers; organization outline, detail idea web, and compare and contrast had been

selected based upon supported research data mentioned prior. The outline and web were found

through Scholastics Read-180 research based program while the compare and contrast chart was

found through Read, Write, Think (Read, Write, Think, 2010). I hoped to use all three

organizers from Scholastic however, as I collected the data from the first two graphic organizers

I found that students needed to have more writing space on the graphic organizer. Therefore, I

choose the compare and contrast graphic organizer from Read, Write, Think (2010) as it better fit

students' needs. Throughout the research project, students used the three different organizers at

different intervals to respond to texts, and summarize information.

Data were collected regularly throughout the process in an A-B-A pattern to assess

student writing growth. I conducted a baseline assessment (A), had students write based upon

their graphic organizer (B), and then conducted a second baseline (A) before moving on to the

next organizer. Students were assessed three times using each graphic organizer. Following the

three writing sessions and data collections, I conducted a baseline assessment in which the three

students wrote a textual summary without the use of the graphic organizer. The data collected

were observational notes, graphic organizers students filled in, student interview responses, and

the written informational summaries the students had written based upon the graphic organizer

and text. The data collected from the baseline assessments was also used. Observational notes,

interview responses, and writing samples were coded for writing categories as well as tracking of

common trends. I was guided through the coding process by Biklen and Bogdans' (2003),

Qualitative Research for Education: An introduction to Theories and Methods. Copies were

made of each student's completed graphic organizers as well as their written samples so that I

could assess them properly and completely.

The first three writing samples and coinciding baseline sample were assessed with the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubrics for organization. The organization rubric was out of six points, ranging from the beginning to exceptional levels of writing. The organizer addressed seven different writing traits based upon organization of writing. These traits ranged from basic organization, topic and conclusion, transitions, sequencing, pacing, title, and structure. As the proficiency level increased, so did the criteria. As I scored each writing sample, I marked the most applicable level and number based upon the writing sample. I then averaged out the students score from the seven traits.

The second graphic organizer was assessed with the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing rubric for ideas. The ideas rubric was also out of six points, ranging from the beginning to exceptional levels of writing. This organizer addressed seven different writing traits based upon ideas in the writing sample. The traits ranged from main idea, topic, topic support, quality of details, authors voice, amount of questions the reader was left with after reading the sample, and level of connections the author was able to make throughout the sample. As the proficiency level increased, so did the criteria. As I scored each writing sample, I marked the most applicable level and number based upon the writing sample. I then averaged out the students score from the seven traits.

After each student finished each writing sample, I interviewed them with a series of questions. As Biklen and Bogdan (2003) stated, "Good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their points of view." (p. 112). With this in mind, I examined a few of their examples and developed the interview questions; What do you do before you start writing?, What do you think about while you are writing?, Do you change things

when/as you write?, Did the graphic organizer help you write?, How is writing the paragraph different from filling in the graphic organizer?, Do you follow the same steps every time you write?, Did you add anything to your paragraph/summary as you wrote it?, and Did you proofread while you wrote? For each follow up baseline assessment, I also asked the students; Did you think about the graphic organizer you used previously?, Did you write differently without the graphic organizer? How?, and Do you think the graphic organizer helps you more when you write? I then used students' responses to track common trends and differences that were occurring.

After I took observational notes and interviewed each of the three students, I coded them using Biklen and Bogden's (2003) ideas on highlighting and tallying. To begin the coding process, I went through both my notes and student responses to find common statements. I then highlighted the common statements and wrote them down in a table format. As I read through each set of notes and responses, I placed a tally mark next to each statement in the table as I read it in the notes and responses. I also added statements to the table if I had not already listed them. After reading through all of my observational field notes and student responses, I counted up the tally marks with each statement. I then examined which statements occurred most frequently.

At the end of this entire research project, I analyzed the numerical data calculated from the rubrics as well as trends and information that stemmed from my observational notes and student interviews to determine the results. I then conducted a final baseline data collection and assessed it to determine the level of writing growth from the first baseline data collection. This information that I gathered helped me to determine the effectiveness of using graphic organizers to guide student writing.

Chapter Four

Results and Interpretation

Reliability of Data Process

Baseline data determined which students scored the lowest on the initial writing sample and might benefit the most from participating in the research project. Once established, each section of research was conducted three times to increase the level of validity. As Biklen and Bogdan (2003, p. 112) stated, "… a most effective way to learn to write is by writing often." By having students write frequently, they were able to better grasp the graphic organizers and writing concepts.

By using each graphic organizer three times, student progress was able to be tracked more carefully. I conducted the initial baseline on September nineteenth to determine the three lowest performing students. Once established, students completed three different writing tasks using the outline graphic organizer and a follow up baseline writing without the use of the graphic organizer. This process was repeated with the detail web and compare and contrast organizer. A final baseline was conducted and assessed on November twenty-second to determine the overall progress made by students. I also increased the validity of the research by returning to the baseline after each of the three sessions with each graphic organizer. This allowed me to determine if students were transferring their new knowledge regarding the use of graphic organizers.

Student interviews and observational notes also aided in the reliability and validity of the research as they were first hand data collections from both the students and the instructor (myself). Once the processes were completed with the graphic organizers, I conducted one final

baseline assessment to determine the levels of progress students made from the beginning of this research project.

Interpretation of Data

At the completion of my research, I finalized and critiqued data I collected. The numerical data from the rubrics allowed me to use the quantitative data of how using graphic organizers effected student writing. I examined what each student scored on the initial baseline, the three data collections with each graphic organizer, the baseline for each graphic organizer, as well as the final baseline of the entire study. The interviews I conducted with the students and observation field notes I took, granted me the opportunity to understand how students write and what they think about and focus upon when they're writing as well as how helpful or detrimental the graphic organizers may be. I created codes based upon frequent responses and observations. See Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 below for code frequency. I was also able to spot trends in students' writing. The results are discussed below according to each graphic organizer and baseline in regards to the A-B-A research format.

The observations I made while students filled in their graphic organizers and wrote appear in table 4.1. While students worked on their written samples, I observed that one particular student folded her first graphic organizer (outline) as she transferred the information into paragraph form. She did so to help herself keep track of what she had already written and what she still needed to write, and only folded the first graphic organizer. I also noticed that about 25% of the time, the three students copied word for word from the outline to the written paragraph form, not making additions, revisions, or deletions. All three of the students generally had proficient capitalization and punctuation. About fifty percent of the time, the students had proficient and accurate spelling. Students A and C struggled most with spelling. The graphic

organizers helped all three students write in a logical sequence with a topic sentence that

introduced the writing and a conclusion that wrapped up the writing. All three students also

wrote with a body of six or more sentences 95% of the time. The instruction with presentation

and compare and contrast lead to an increase in students' spacing and organization proficiency as

well as the other two graphic organizers.

Table 4.1 – Coding of Researcher Observational Field Notes

Researcher observation codes on student writing sample	Frequency
proper punctuation	29
poor punctuation	9
proper capitalization	27
poor capitalization	9
accurate spelling	14
poor spelling	22
logical sequence	29
not in order	5
topic sentence that introduces story	29
topic sentence that doesn't introduce story	8
body of 6 or more sentences	28
conclusion that summarizes up the entire story	23
additions made from outline to text	23
deletions made from outline to text	5
revisions made from outline to text	23
spacing/organization of paragraph	
good	26
poor	11
word for word from outline	8
well developed ideas	23
proofread from outline to story	18
folds graphic organizer	3
topic sentence and conclusion separated from body	27

After students completed their written samples, I interviewed each of them with a series of six questions. As I read through responses, I noted trends and displayed them in Table 4.2 above. About 50% of the time, students checked their punctuation either as they wrote or after they wrote. One third of the time, students did so in regards to capitalization and spelling. Students generally were not concerned or focused upon their topic sentence, length of writing, character development, or spacing and organization when they were writing. Most of the time, students stated that they made additions to their writing between the graphic organizer and their written sample, although I only noticed this occurring about a quarter of the time. About 75% of the time, the students made additions and revisions to their written sample either while they wrote or after they wrote. The three students also proofread their final writing sample about 75% of the time. All of the students felt that the graphic organizer was extremely helpful to them when they went to write their paragraphs and made comments such as, "It helped me remember what to write." Student B made additions to his writing every single time he moved from the graphic organizer to the written sample.

Table 4.2 – Coding of Student Interview Responses

Student interview codes on writing sample	Frequency
checks punctuation	18
checks capitalization	14
checks spelling	13
topic sentence that introduces story	6
body of 6 or more sentences	8
conclusion that wraps up the entire story	6
additions made from outline to text	23
deletions made from outline to text	4
revisions made from outline to text	18
spacing/organization of paragraph	5
thoughts related directly from the story	21
inquiry about story when writing/summarizing	22
proofread from outline to story	22
thoughts about character development	5
graphic organizer helped	31
graphic organizer didn't help	5
what I will write	23
thought about graphic organizers (baseline)	6

Initial baseline.

For initial an initial baseline data assessment, all students wrote about their summer vacation. After reading their written samples, I was not only able to determine which three students conveyed the least proficient writing skills, but I was able to determine what specific writing skills were the strongest and weakest amongst the three students. The baseline data demonstrated that all three students were in the two to four point range in all seven of the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing categories. Although not every student scored the same in each category, I noticed that student's lowest scores were in the trait of organization with an average score of 2.5.

Students' average scores in the areas of word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation were 2.75 while they scored an average of 3 in voice and 3.25 for ideas. This information informed me that a graphic organizer focusing upon organization was a good place to start my research and writing workshop. The students writing samples demonstrated a weakness in idea and detail development. Thoughts were often basic with little detail and explanation. Organization was present however, limited and their writing was not ultimately appealing to the eye.

Table 4.3- Initial Baseline Data
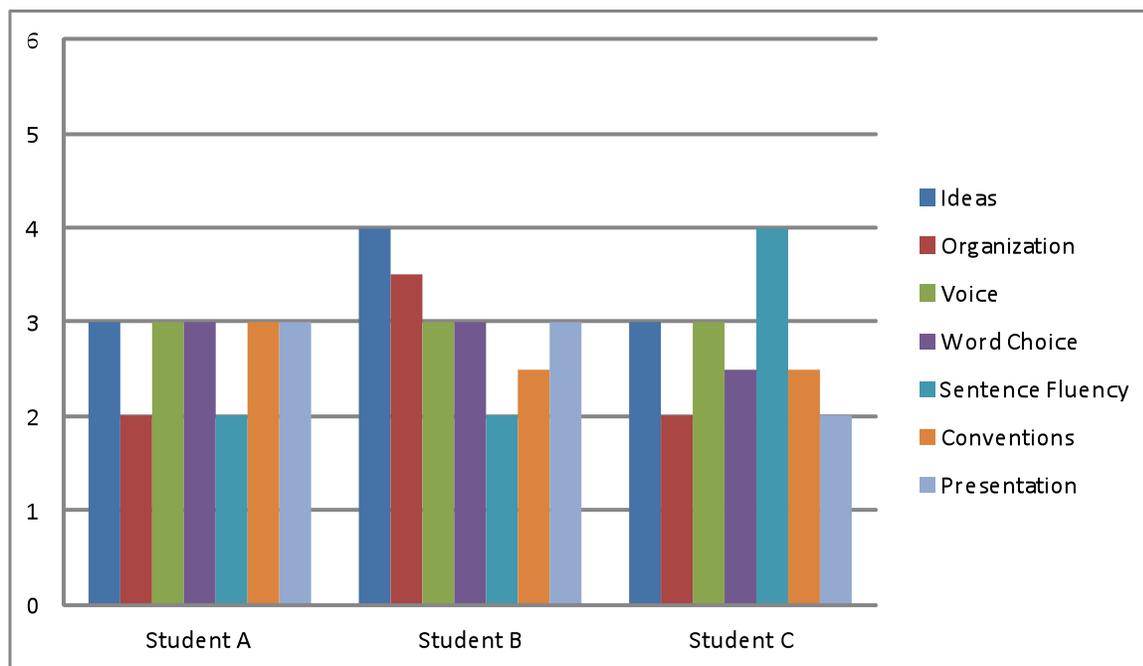
Graphic organizer one.

After instructing students on organization and familiarizing them with the outline graphic organizer, I noticed that they gradually improved their organizational writing skills the more they used the organizer. On average, each student improved by one point from the first data collection to the third data collection. After three writing sessions with the graphic organizer, in the baseline conducted without the organizer, Student A improved 1.5 points from data

collection one while Student B and Student C improved one point from data one. Student A increased his organizational writing by 3.5 points from baseline to baseline. Student B and C increased by 3 points. Through using the outline, students were guided and reminded of what to write and when and where to write it. Due to the use of the graphic organizer, each student's written sample flowed from the topic sentence through the main ideas and details and on to the conclusion. The more students used this organizer, the more familiar and aware they became with the organization of their writing. Students also began to remember and memorize the order they should write in as they demonstrated in the baseline assessment. Not only did students' scores increase through the implementation of the outline graphic organizer, but I also noted other important data. Student A found that, "The outline helped me keep track of what to write." After writing with the first graphic organizer, Student B stated, "It helped me remember the story and think more about what to write." Student C stated that, "The graphic organizer helped me because it has ideas and I could write and use those when I wrote my paragraphs." Both students found that the first outline graphic organizer provided them with helpful writing prompts that improved the quality of their writing. Students' writing with the outline was a great improvement from the baseline assessment because it forced them to think more about each component of their topic. The outline reminded students that they needed an introduction and conclusion and that they needed to be more than one sentence as well as separated from the rest of the text. The outline also guided students to write more than one main idea or concept. With the outline, students had three separate sections to write about three separate subtopics with details. This forced students to think more deeply about their topic. The topics students wrote about with this graphic organizer included: their weekend, Ancient Egypt, and summaries of stories and texts they read.

Table 4.4 – Graphic Organizer One
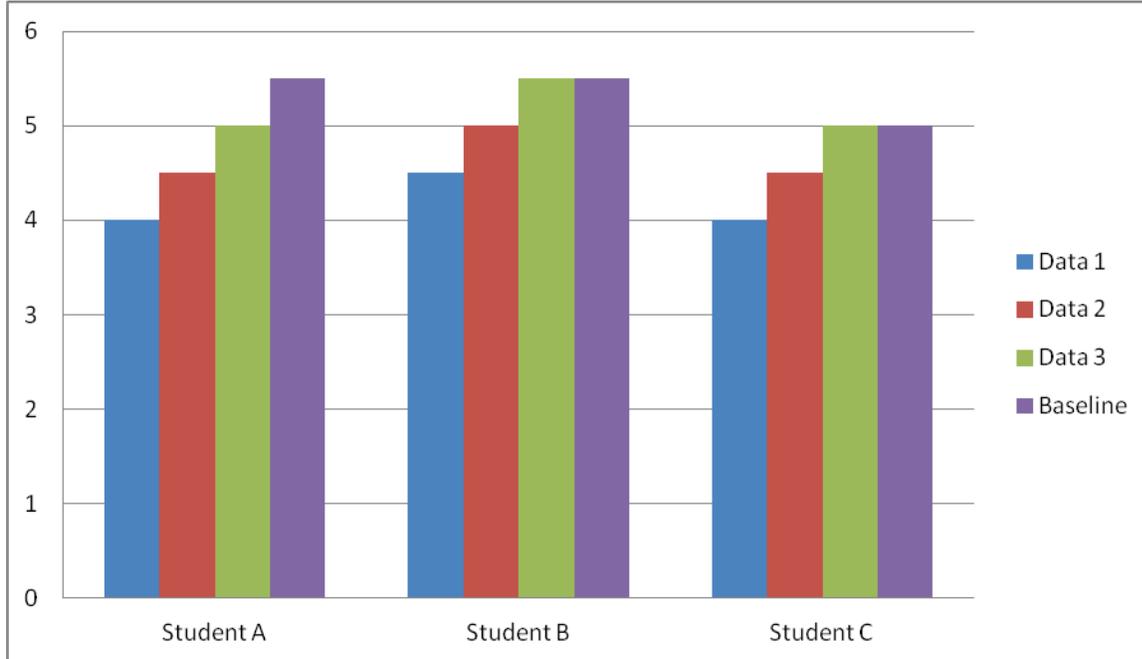
Graphic organizer two.

Following the process of using the first graphic organizer writing, I instructed students on

how to write well developed ideas and how to use a detail web graphic organizer to aid them in

the process. As with the organizational graphic organizer, students improved from both the

initial baseline and the first data collection with this organizer. On the very first baseline

assessment, students' scores averaged around 2.75 points. After proper instruction and

implementation of the graphic organizer, students increased their scores by up to 3 points. From

the initial baseline to the baseline coinciding with the web graphic organizer, Students A and C

improved by 2.5 points, while Student B improved by 1.5 points. The level of writing

improvement was very similar to that with the first graphic organizer implementation. At first,

students struggled to use the web in an orderly manner, as they had a tendency to write down

their details in a random order. With further instruction, I asked students to number their details

in the order they would occur in their writing. I also selected a different web with more bubbles

for the second and third data collection as the first one was limiting. The web forced students to find and write two more details. Not only did students fill in each detail bubble in the web, but they often added details as they transferred from the web graphic organizer to their written sample. I also learned through this graphic organizer, that when students completed the follow-up baseline assessment without the graphic organizer, Student A and B actually wrote more than they did when using the graphic organizer. I believe this was in part due to their higher level of interest in the writing prompt for the follow-up baseline assessment point as well as not being limited to the number or bubbles in the web. Student C however, wrote less than she did when using the graphic organizer web. The writing prompts and topics for the second graphic organizer, which focused on details, included continued story and text summaries, persuasive writing, and a follow-up baseline writing where they were given a sentence starter and had the freedom of creating their own fictional story around it. Based on interview responses, students really seemed to enjoy using the detail web. Students also stated that they enjoyed it partially because it looked visually easy. There were not a lot of lines to make them think they would need to write a lot, and they didn't need to write out an introduction or conclusion. The organizer only allowed for them to write a topic sentence in the middle and their details around it. In essence, the detail web only required them to write one third of what the outline organizer required them to write. Therefore, students' writing was generally shorter when using the detail web. Student A stated in reference to the detail web, "It was easy to use and I just went in order."

Table 4.5 – Graphic Organizer Two
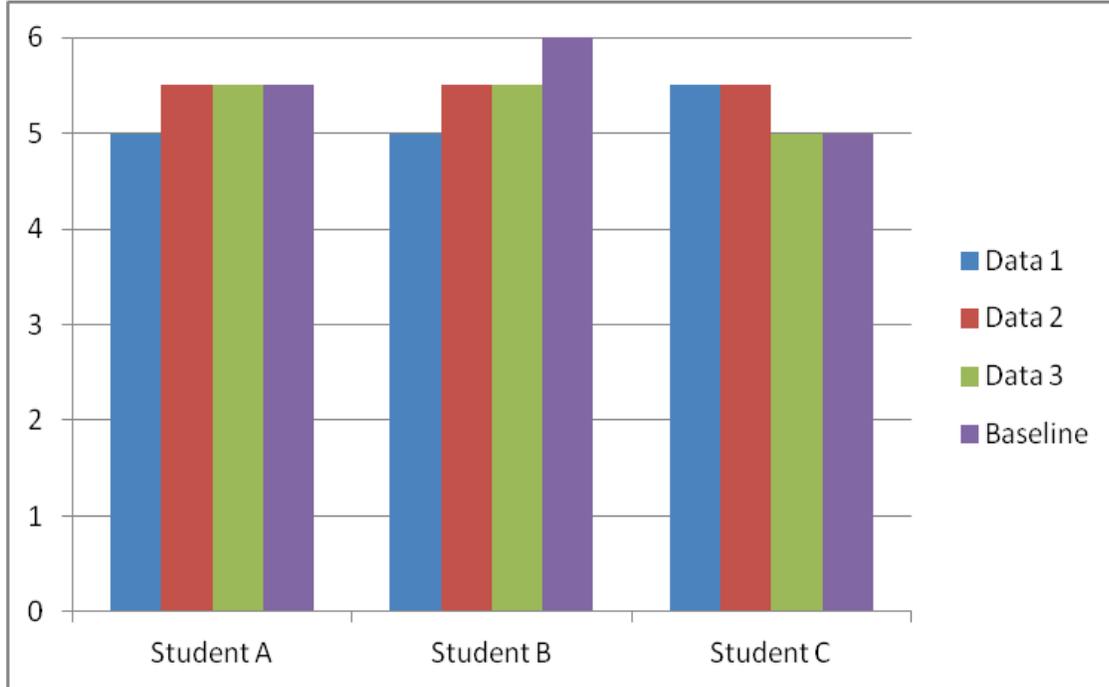
Graphic organizer three.

Following the implementation of the second graphic organizer, I instructed students on how to write compare and contrast summaries using a comparative graphic organizer. As with the organizational and idea graphic organizer, students improved from both the initial baseline and the first data collection with this organizer. On the follow up initial baseline assessment, students' scores averaged around 5.5. This organizer had a greater impact on student writing than in comparison to the prior organizers as it had ample extra space and lines for writing. Students were not limited in using and writing in this graphic organizer. By the time students wrote their second writing sample using the compare and contrast graphic organizer, all three students scored an average of 5.3 points. For the second writing sample, I allowed students to choose their comparison topics and did not give them as much support as on the first organizer. This may indicate the reason for the scores remaining the same as on the first data collection. In

the third data collection the Students B and C compared and contrasted blends and diagraphs while Student A compared and contrasted two chapters he had recently read. I also guided students through the alike portion of the organizer more than in data collection two. I found students' scores to increase and average out to a score just shy of 6 points.   Students also wrote more in the third data set than in the second and first because of the concepts of comparing and contrasting. More details were written from all three students. The baseline compare and contrast data averaged a score again, just shy of 6 points. Although there were not drastic improvements in students' scores with this graphic organizer, I noticed great improvements in their writing. The presentation rubric focused mostly upon the neatness of students' writing, their spacing on the page and between words and letters, and how they filled in the graphic organizer. They may not have developed the neatest and best spaced handwriting through using this graphic organizer, but the quality of their writing greatly improved. The students felt that the compare and contrast graphic organizer helped them to, "think about more details" and "remember all of the facts".
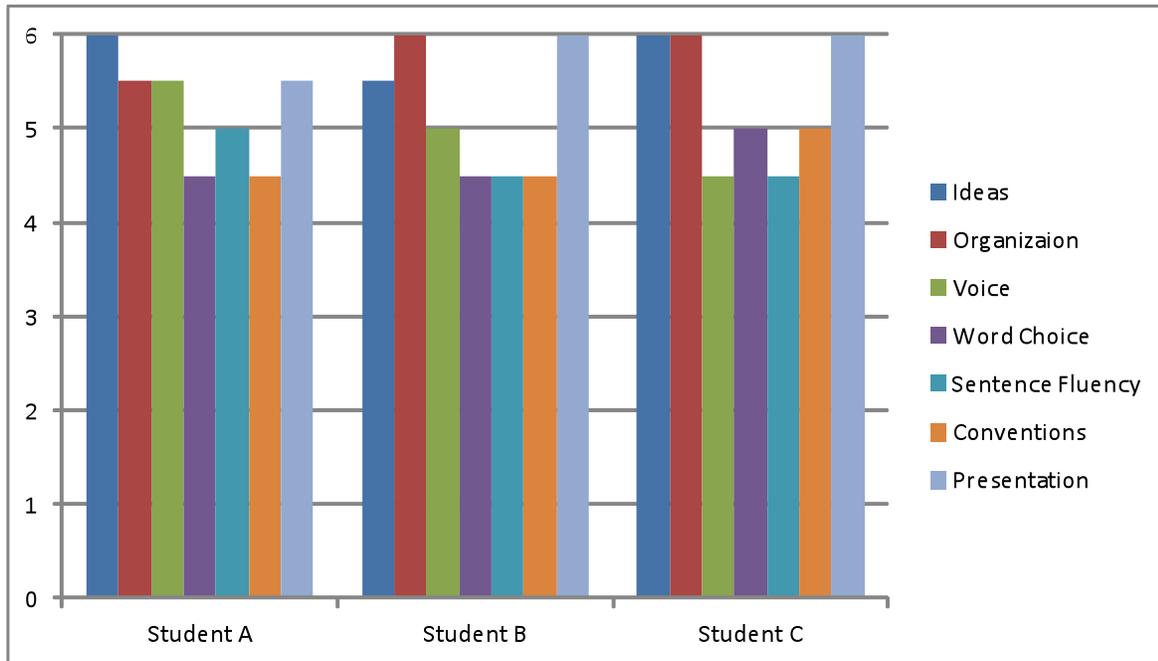
Table 4.6- Graphic Organizer Three
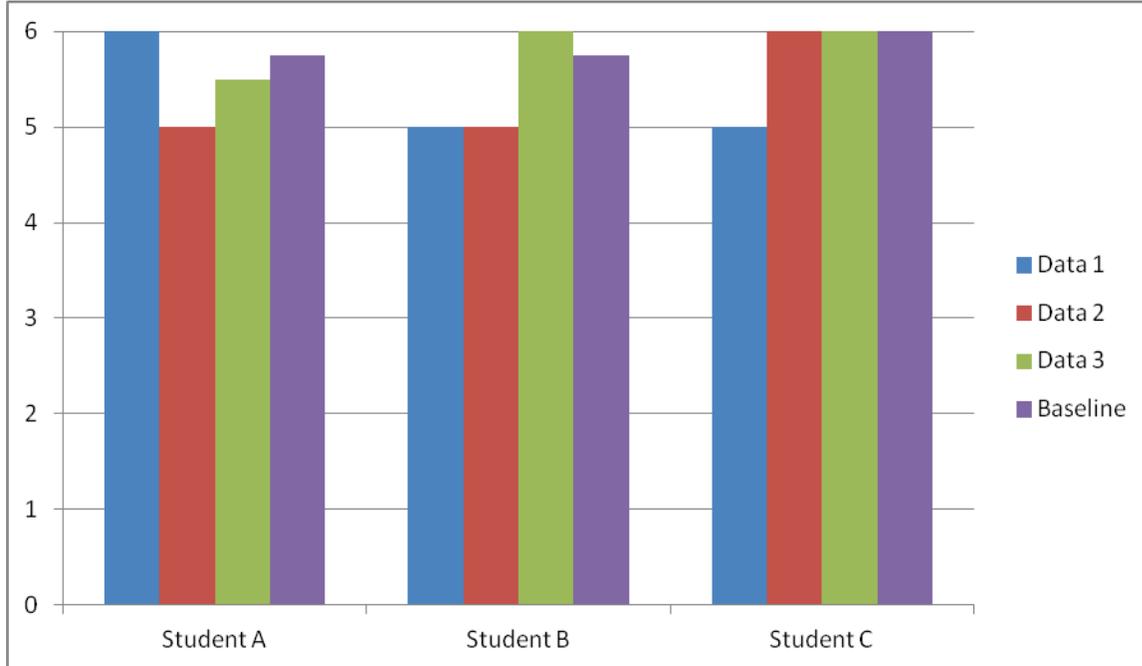
Final Baseline

As demonstrated in Table 4.7, all three of the students improved their 6 + 1 Traits of

Writing from the initial baseline I conducted in September. The initial baseline data

demonstrated that all three students were in the four or lower range in all seven of the 6 + 1

Traits of Writing categories. Students' average score for organization was 2.5. Students'

average scores in the areas of word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation were

2.75 while they scored an average of 3 in voice and 3.25 for ideas. After implementing the three

graphic organizers on organization, details, and compare and contrast, and implementing a

writing workshop format, all three students demonstrated improvement in all seven trait areas.

On average, the students scored 5.75 points in the areas of ideas, organization, and

presentation, an improvement of 2.50 – 3.25. This was the highest trait score obtained and these

were the three traits in which the graphic organizers were implemented with. Students averaged

a score of five points for voice which was a two point improvement. In the traits of word choice,

sentence fluency, and conventions, the students' averaged a score of 4.75, also a two point improvement. Therefore, all three students improved their writing by a minimum of 2.25 points.

Table 4.7 – Final Baseline Data

Conclusion

Overall, all three students demonstrated an improvement in their writing. I found that student interest had a large impact on their writing, and the format of the graphic organizers themselves also affected student writing. In general, students increased their writing proficiency as indicated by points on each of the rubrics from the initial baseline to the final baseline assessment. As I discussed above, with the implementation of each graphic organizer, every student's writing samples showed improvement. Trends were evident through observational field notes, student interviews, and rubric assessments.

The results provided information for fourth and fifth grade writing curricula. Students developed deeper, stronger, and more proficient writing skills. In three months, students

increased their writing abilities and are now writing much more proficient samples. It has become almost automatic for students to begin every writing sample with a topic sentence and introduction as well as end it with a conclusion of more than just one sentence. As the writing topic was of higher interest to the students, their writing was much stronger and more developed and included more details and facts. When Student A was told to write a summary about the book he choose to read, he wrote almost three times as much as he did when he was asked to write about ancient Egypt. Not only will students read more if the text is of higher interest to them, but they will also write more and their writing will contain a stronger voice. In one of the student interviews I conducted with Student A, he stated that, "It is going to be easy." This was his response when I asked what he thought about before he began writing a summary about the book he really enjoys reading. I also noted through this research, that the blank graphic organizers themselves yielded different writing sample results. The outline graphic organizer had limited space for writing. Students found it difficult to fit even a full sentence into each line and therefore could not write more if they wanted to as there was no room. Also, the first detail web graphic organizer only had four detail bubbles. After realizing the limitation this provided, I implemented a detail web with six bubbles to promote further detailed writing. Just implementing graphic organizers was not enough to highly increase the proficiency of student writing. The graphic organizers needed to be well developed as well.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

As I mentioned in the first chapter, results from the New York State ELA from 2005 to 2010 indicated that fourth and fifth grade students in the small, rural school district which I teach in, performed below the regional average in the writing section of the assessment (Data Mentor, 2011). From 2010 to 2011, the students in this particular school district scored on average, fifteen to forty percent lower than the New York State average (Data Mentor, 2011). According to Graham and Perin (2007), seventy percent of students in grades four through twelve across the United States are low achieving writers. This means that these students are scoring below the average level of writing achievement.

It is crucial that teachers focus on strengthening student writing skills. With writing being such an important component of ELA as well as a necessary life skill, the added pressure upon both students and teachers to do well on the New York State tests is strong. Not only is test competence important, but being able to write as a way for students to communicate and express themselves. The Common Core Standards place a strong emphasis on writing as well.

Through conducting research, I gained a better understanding of the best components to a proficient writing program and whether or not graphic organizers helped to improve student writing. Through implementing a writers' workshop formatted reading class, and graphic organizers to guide writing, I was able to determine that graphic organizers do improve student writing as well as which ones yielded the most improvement in student writing samples.

Importance of the Findings

Through my research, I obtained results which supported literature research I had found prior. Previously, I discussed Brown, Green, and Lorenz '(2009) three cognitive learning

theories that supported the use of graphic organizers in the writing and learning processes. The dual coding theory stated that individuals coded information in both verbal and nonverbal formats. In attending to both verbal discussions and nonverbal graphic organizer formats, information was easier to recall. Graphic organizers made this process relatively easy to do. During my research, students and I discussed the graphic organizers and the information that they would need to write on them. By transferring our verbal discussions to the graphic organizers and then into a more cohesive, written format, students writing proficiency grew. The more students discussed, wrote, and thought about their topics, the more they remembered, and the more details and information they ended up writing.

The second theory Brown, Green, and Lorenz (2009) supported was schema theory which stated that reading and writing schemas exist within our memory. Through using graphic organizers, students linked existing knowledge they had in their schema, to the new knowledge they read or learned. The more students discussed and wrote their information, the more they recalled. The graphic organizers provoked deeper thinking as well as text to self connections which improved their schemas. By the time I conducted the final baseline, all three students had improved not only in the three traits we focused on, but in all seven traits.

Cognitive load theory was the third and final theory mentioned by Brown, Green, and Lorenz (2009). This theory suggested that working memory has a maximum capacity of what it can process. If the capacity is met or exceeded, then learning cannot and often does not take place. When used appropriately in my research, the graphic organizers reduced the cognitive load and allowed for more resources to be devoted to learning new material. Therefore, not only did the graphic organizers help students obtain and process more information, but they helped to better organize and use that information.

Data from this study enabled me to personally see the benefits of graphic organizers: students were able to write more proficient writing samples. The students writing skills became automatic. For example, in the final baseline assessment (at the end of the study), students did not use graphic organizers. All three students wrote without using a graphic organizer and wrote a complete writing sample that included a topic sentence and introduction as well as a strong conclusion. The body of each writing sample included numerous concepts and details that explained their topics. Students' writing was also more proficient as they became more aware of what to look for, check, and adjust in their writing. They are now proofreading on their own as they write and transferring their information from graphic organizers to written samples.

Through this research project, I found that prior to writing, students generally improved their writing skills when they used a graphic organizer to organize their thoughts. Based on assessment results in the three 6 + 1 Traits of Writing areas of ideas, organization, and presentation, students improved their writing score in the three specific trait areas on average by 2.5 to 3.25 points. When using the graphic organizers, students were encouraged and guided to write all the components needed in the coinciding writing piece. With simple graphic organizers, students were better able to turn their writing samples into logical, sequential, organized, well-developed, pieces of writing.

As a teacher, we don't always know the best tools to use or what practices will be most effective. Through reading and developing literature reviews and engaging in active research, we are better able to determine the best approaches. That is why the results of my data research are so important. They confirm my hypothesis that allowing students to use graphic organizers as a pre-writing strategy improves their overall writing.

Limitations

As I conducted this research project, I noticed three limitations: limited number of graphic organizers used, scheduling, and inability to generalize results. The first limitation I found through my observations (field notes) and assessments of student writing samples was that because I only had about eight weeks to conduct my research, I was only able to use three out of hundreds of graphic organizers. Although the graphic organizers I used proved to be beneficial, I was not able to implement and assess the benefits of using other graphic organizers.

The second limitation correlated with this research project was scheduling. Due to only seeing the three students I worked with for ninety minutes a day, they are taught and instructed by another teacher for the majority of the day. The limitation set by this is that not every teacher in the school uses the same guidelines and instructions for writing. Student's primary teacher as well as teachers they have previously had, have taught them to write in different ways which, made it more difficult for me to teach them all in the same format. This time limitation also made it impossible to determine if the students carried over their proficient writing skills into other subject areas and writing tasks. Not having the students in my room to work with all day proved to be a strong limitation.

Third, because I conducted this research project with three special education students whom I work with in a small group setting of four to six total students for ninety minutes a day, it is hard to fully generalize the data and results. I am able to teach in such small groups because the students are special education classified. The "average" general education classroom teacher often has between fifteen and twenty-five students in his or her classroom. Therefore, a teacher instructing graphic organizer implementation to develop proficient writing may have different

results as he or she would have three to four times the amount of students to instruct at the same time.

Conclusion

Characteristics of proficient writing

Through my research, I found that my findings confirm the literature I read previously. By regularly assessing students' writing and progress after every graphic organizer writing session, I was able to determine if students understood the concept or needed further instruction. Students' presentation improved by the end of the research study because the more they wrote, the more aware they became of how their writing should look, sound, and feel. The graphic organizers guided them and demonstrated how to write. Depending upon the topic of writing, students demonstrated a stronger voice. Student choice of writing topics, along with graphic organizers caused their writing to be more developed and proficient, therefore conveying a stronger voice in the written sample. Writing fluency and conventions also improved. As I interviewed students, they stated that while they were writing they, "thought about if what I wrote made sense", "if I used capitals and periods", and "if I spelled everything right" These comments reflect metacognitive thinking that enabled them to become more proficient and fluent writers. The content of students writing samples greatly improved when using the graphic organizers.

My research proved that the graphic organizers guided students to not only write more, but write more proficiently which entailed strong and coherent content. Students' ideas were more developed as the graphic organizers prompted their thoughts. As students used the graphic organizers, not only were they synthesizing their ideas and thoughts, but they were planning out their final writing sample at the same time. This planning stage led students to write more

proficiently and become more aware of what they needed to include in all of their writing. Through using the organization graphic organizer outline, students understood the order in which they need to organize their ideas and writing as well as how to plan it. Planning and organization went hand in hand throughout this writing process.

Every time students finished writing, I asked them to re-read their writing sample. As they did this, students generally noticed a few errors and corrections to make. Students then reflected upon these errors, their writing process, and writing sample in general when I interviewed them. The interview process prompted students to really reflect and think not only about what they wrote, but the process they went through to write it. When interviewing students I would ask them what they thought about before, during, and after writing which yielded responses such as, "I thought about what I would write and how I would write it", or "I think about more stuff I can write", and "I thought about how I would write."

Instructional approaches.

A NCTE (2006) position statement, *Writing Assessment,* expressed that writing is a powerful instrument of thought and that the act of writing is accomplished through a process. Research suggests that this process be guided by the teacher, occur frequently, and be carefully designed and oriented toward the acquiring of new strategies and skills that can be used both in and out of the school setting. The position statement continues to say that writing should be taught by a variety of models, strategies, tools, formats, forms, and purposes.

Additional research indicated that proficient student writing could be linked to the use of a writer's workshop, mini lessons, guided practice, writing conferences, and the use of graphic organizers. I used each of these formats and tools when conducting my research. The writer's workshop I implemented began with a daily mini lesson on graphic organizers and writing traits.

During this mini lesson, instruction focused upon the graphic organizer being implemented and how it would be used to guide students. I would then guide them into filling in the graphic organizer. For the first data collection with each graphic organizer, I would give more guidance, and then allow the students to use the organizer more independently. After students finished their graphic organizer and written sample, I would hold a one-on-one writing conference with them. During this conference we would discuss the graphic organizer and determine if there were any additions or revisions that should be made before writing the final sample. The second conference allowed for students to reflect upon their writing process and final writing sample as well as think about how the graphic organizer guided their thinking and assisted their writing process.

Graphic organizers.

In every research study I read relating to the implementation of graphic organizers, the researchers found that graphic organizers increased students understanding of the given topics and concepts as well as improved their writing proficiency in many areas.

As Lucy Calkins once stated, "The problem is that writing well has everything to do with giving sustained, focused attention to a project." (1991, p. 101**).** Graphic organizers provide students with the focus many of them need to begin writing. After implementing the detail web graphic organizer, the three students I observed and researched increased their 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scores in the area of organization by three points from the initial baseline to the organization baseline. Students' writing was much more organized from their initial writing sample as well as more developed.

Just as Arthaud and Goracke (2006) discovered, I, too, realized that the use of detail webs improved students reading comprehension as well as writing effectiveness and proficiency.

Students writing included more details and deeper meaning. After implementing the outline graphic organizer, the three students I observed and researched increased their 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scores in the area of ideas by 1.75 points from the initial baseline. Students' writing contained well developed ideas as well that supported their topic sentence and introduction.

In addition, my research findings included that the use of compare and contrast organizers was supported by the work of Baxendell (2003) and Marrian Brovero (2004). After implementing the compare and contrast graphic organizer, the three students I observed increased their 6 + 1 Traits of Writing scores in the area of presentation by three points from the initial baseline assessment. Students' writing had become very well developed. Their writing was orderly with a topic sentence and introduction that led to the body of the writing and then their conclusion. Writing was also neater and properly indented and spaced. The three graphic organizers I implemented; outline, detail web, and compare and contrast, proved to help organize and improve students' writing over a three month period.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have three recommendations for future research. I was very pleased to find that the use of graphic organizers and writing instruction did improve student writing and students transferred what they learned to their writing without the graphic organizers. First, it would be beneficial to find which specific graphic organizers yield the best results and have the most beneficial impact on student writing. I choose three frequently used graphic organizers but there are many more graphic organizers that can be used. I also noted that a few of the graphic organizers limited students' writing rather than promoted more writing. I would like to also find better outline graphic organizers that leave more space for students to write as well as space to encourage rather than limit their amount of writing.

I am also curious to know if using a simple writing convention check list would benefit and improve students writing conventions. As I read and took notes on the three students writing, I noticed that their conventions in regards to capitals, punctuation, spacing, and spelling were rather poor. It would be very beneficial if a simple checklist would be enough to help students monitor their writing conventions, or if deeper instruction and more in depth graphic organizers would be needed.

Thirdly, further research should be conducted at the school wide level. Results would be beneficial for curriculum mapping of the use of graphic organizers. As I mentioned in the second limitation, students came into my class from another classroom and previous teachers who had taught them different methods of writing. After finding out what methods and "rules" of writing students have previously been taught, graphic organizer implementation and writing instruction could be taught differently and adjusted based upon their writing development. It would also benefit general education teachers to conduct the same or similar research with his or her entire general education class of fifteen to twenty-five students. Not only would it be beneficial to learn whether or not this research and implementation is as beneficial for general education students, but whether the instruction could be as beneficial when taught to a larger group at once. The comparison of results between my small group of special education students and the results of a much larger group of general education students could provide great insight not only into writing with graphic organizers, but in education in general.

Final Thoughts

In the 2011 listing of "hot topics," literacy experts from the International Reading Association stated that writing was a "hot topic" (Cassidy, Ortlieb, & Shettel, 2011). Likewise, the recent Common Core Standards stated that student writing should be able to, "create an

organizational structure in which related ideas are logically grouped to support the writers'

purpose." The standards also state that most samples of writing should provide an introduction,

body, and concluding statement or paragraph as well (New York State Education Department

http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/, hereafter NYSED, 2011). The New

York State ELA, from 2005 to 2011, demonstrated that students in the previously mentioned

district, where I conducted my research, performed below the regional average for New York

State on writing which assessed students on their skills in writing mechanics, comprehension of

facts, and organization of thoughts. On the listening and writing cluster, reading and writing

cluster, and writing mechanics cluster, both grade levels were between two and twenty-two

percent below the other districts in their region (Data Mentor, 2011).

Therefore, I conducted my research on the implementation of graphic organizers as a pre-

writing tool. After teaching writing in a writers' workshop, through guided writing, mini

lessons, and conferences, students learned how to properly fill in graphic organizers addressing

organization, ideas and details, and compare and contrast formats. The graphic organizers

became "metacognitive tools" that enabled students to think about their writing. By the end of

my research, assessment data determined that all three students who participated in the study

improved their writing. The students improved in all seven trait areas, with the biggest

improvement in the trait of presentation. Scores increased between one and three points in a

given trait. I found that by implementing each graphic organizer three times, I was able to

collect more reliable and consistent data. Each baseline after the three time graphic organizer

implementation demonstrated that students were able to transfer the skills they used on the

graphic organizers and proficiently write without using the graphic organizers.

Even though in 2012 writing was not listed as a "hot topic" by the International Reading Association, I still feel that it is a crucial component of education and everyday life. Writing is a basic form of communication that is a necessary life skill. If students can become proficient writers, than they can in turn become more successful in their future.

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Appendices

Graphic Organizers

- Outline

- Main Idea and Details Web A

- Main Idea and Details Web B

- Compare & Contrast

6 + 1 Traits of Writing Rubrics for:

- Organization

- Voice

- Word Choice

- Sentence Fluency

- Conventions

- Ideas

Name _____

(Lesson 28) *Research Report*

Student Outline

Fill in the outline after you have organized your index cards.

I. Introduction

   Topic Sentence:

   _____

   _____

II. Main Idea: _____

   A. Supporting Detail: _____

   B. Supporting Detail: _____

III. Main Idea: _____

   A. Supporting Detail: _____

   B. Supporting Detail: _____

IV. Main Idea: _____

   A. Supporting Detail: _____

   B. Supporting Detail: _____

V. Conclusion

   Summary Statement:

   _____

   _____

   _____

Resource Links
RDI Book 2: p. 146
SAM Keyword: Student Outline

Name _____
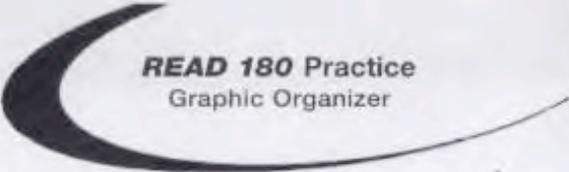
Main Idea and Details

The **main idea** is the most important idea in a text. **Details** give more information to support the main idea.

Use the organizer below to write the main idea of the passage and the details that support it.

Passage: _____
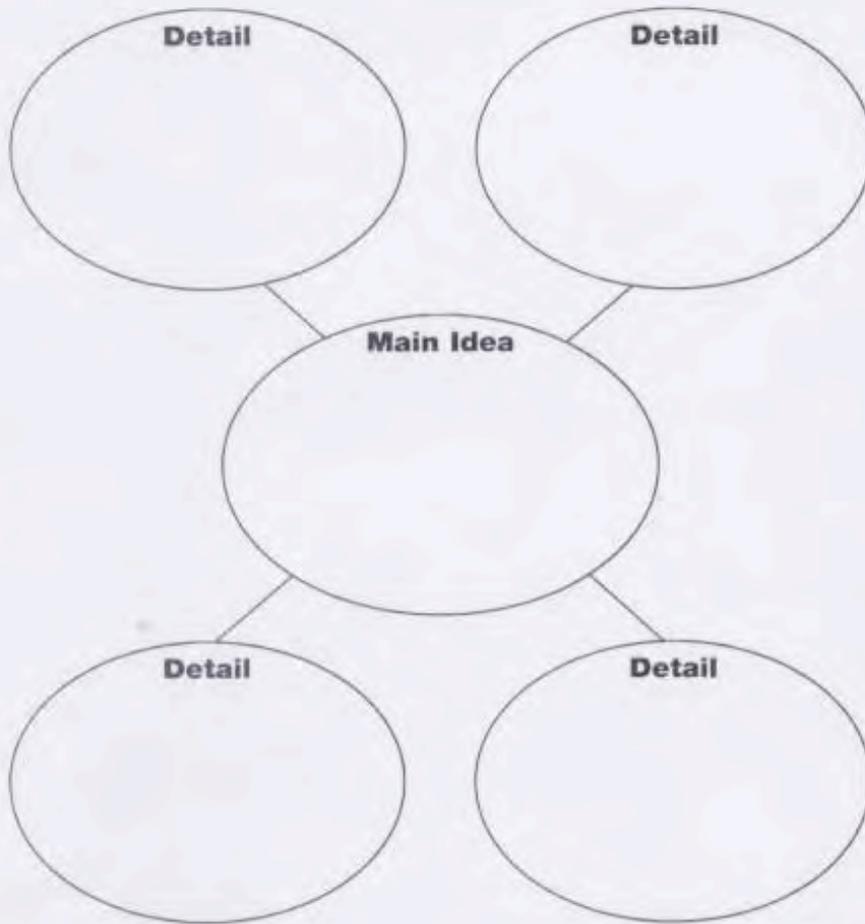
Detail

Detail

Main Idea

Detail

Detail

Use with page 293.

Name _____

Main Idea and Details

Use this web to organize the main idea and details.

Passage: _____
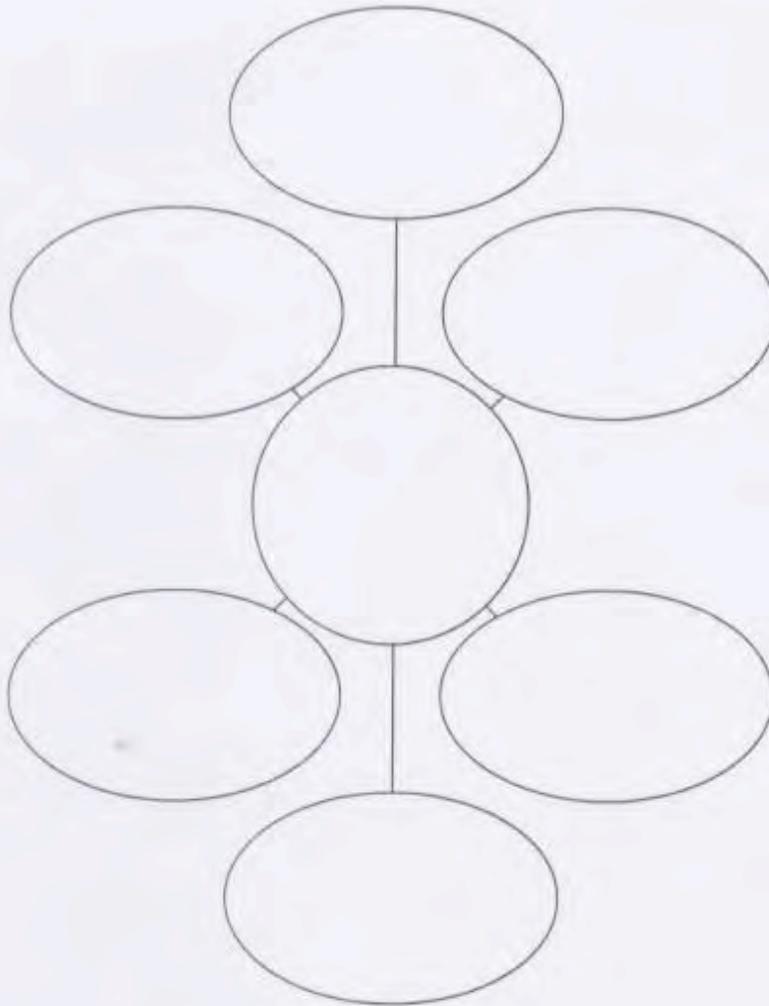
Use with pages 292 and 325.

Resource Links
1 RDI Book 1: p. 396
SAM Keyword: Main Idea

Compare and Contrast Chart

Item #1 _____

Item #2 _____

How are they alike?

How are they different?

6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

6-POINT WRITER'S RUBRIC

IDEAS

| | Not proficient | | Proficient | | |
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	No main idea, purpose, or central theme exists; reader must infer this based on sketchy or missing details	Main idea is still missing, though possible topic/theme is emerging	Main idea is present; may be broad or simplistic	Topic or theme is identified as main idea; development remains basic or general	Main idea is well-marked by detail but could benefit from additional information	Main idea is clear, supported, and enriched by relevant anecdotes and details
A	No topic emerges	Several topics emerge; any might become central theme or main idea	Topic becomes clear, though still too broad, lacking focus; reader must infer message	Topic is fairly broad, yet author's direction is clear	Topic is focused yet still needs additional narrowing	Topic is narrow, manageable, and focused
B	Support for topic is not evident	Support for topic is limited, unclear; length is not adequate for development	Support for topic is incidental or confusing, not focused	Support for topic is starting to work, still does not quite flesh out key issues	Support for topic is clear and relevant except for a moment or two	Support is strong and credible, and uses resources that are relevant and accurate
C	There are no details	Few details are present; piece simply restates topic and main idea or merely answers a question	Additional details are present but lack specificity; main idea or topic emerges but remains weak	Some details begin to define main idea or topic, yet are limited in number or clarity	Accurate, precise details support one main idea	Details are relevant, telling; quality details go beyond obvious and are not predictable
D	Author is not writing from own knowledge/experience; ideas are not author's	Author generalizes about topic without personal knowledge/experience	Author "tells" based on others' experiences rather than "showing" by own experience	Author uses few examples to "show" own experience, yet still relies on generic experiences of others	Author presents new ways of thinking about topic based on personal knowledge/experience	Author writes from own knowledge/experience; ideas are fresh, original, and uniquely the author's
E	No reader's questions have been answered	Reader has many questions due to lack of specifics; it is hard to "fill in the blanks"	Reader begins to recognize focus with specifics, through questions remain	Reader generally understands content and has only a few questions	Reader's questions are usually anticipated and answered by author	Reader's questions are all answered
F	Author doesn't help reader make any connections	Author does not yet connect topic with reader in any way although attempts are made	Author provides glimmers into topic; casual connections are made by reader	Author stays on topic and begins to connect reader through self, text, world, or other resources	Author connects reader to topic with a few anecdotes, text, or other resources	Author helps reader make many connections by sharing significant insights into life

Key question: Does the writer stay focused and share original and fresh information or perspective on the topic?

6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

ORGANIZATION

	Not proficient			Proficient		
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Organization can't be identified; writing lacks sense of direction; content is strung together in loose, random fashion	Organization is mostly ineffective; only moments here and there direct reader	Organization is still problematic though structure begins to emerge; ability to follow text is slowed	Organization moves reader through text without too much confusion	Organization is smooth; only a few small bumps here and there exist	Organization enhances and showcases central idea; order of information is compelling, moving reader through text
A	There is no lead to set up what follows; no conclusion to wrap things up	The lead and/or conclusion are ineffective or do not work	Either lead or conclusion or both may be present but are clichés or leave reader wanting more	A recognizable lead and conclusion are present; lead may not create a strong sense of anticipation; conclusion may not tie up all loose ends	While lead and/or conclusion go beyond obvious, either could go even further	An inviting lead draws reader in; satisfying conclusion leaves reader with sense of closure and resolution
B	Transitions between paragraphs are confusing or nonexistent	Weak transitions emerge yet offer little help to get from one paragraph to next and not often enough to eliminate confusion	Some transitions are used but they repeat or mislead resulting in weak chunking of paragraphs	Transitions often work yet are predictable and formulaic; paragraphs are coming together with topic sentence and support	Transitions are logical, though may lack originality; ideas are chunked in proper paragraphs and topic sentences are properly used	Thoughtful transitions clearly show how ideas (paragraphs) connect throughout entire piece, helping to showcase content of each paragraph
C	Sequencing doesn't work	Little useful sequencing is present; it's hard to see how piece fits together as a whole	Sequencing has taken over so completely, it dominates ideas; is painfully obvious and formulaic	Sequencing shows some logic, but is not controlled enough to consistently showcase ideas	Sequencing makes sense and moves a bit beyond obvious, helping move reader through piece	Sequencing is logical and effective; moves reader through piece with ease from start to finish
D	Pacing is not evident	Pacing is awkward; it slows to a crawl when reader wants to get on with it, and vice versa	Pacing is dominated by one part of piece and is not controlled in remainder	Pacing is fairly well controlled; sometimes lunges ahead too quickly or hangs up on details that do not matter	Pacing is controlled; there are still places author needs to highlight or move through more effectively	Pacing is well controlled; author knows when to slow down to elaborate, and when to move on
E	Title (if required) is absent	Title (if required) doesn't match content	Title (if required) hints at weak connection to content; is unclear	Uninspired title (if required) only restates prompt or topic	Title (if required) settles for minor idea about content rather than capturing deeper theme	Title (if required) is original, reflecting content and capturing central theme
F	Lack of structure makes it almost impossible for reader to understand purpose	Structure fails to fit purpose of writing, leaving reader struggling to discover purpose	Structure begins to clarify purpose	Structure sometimes supports purpose, at other times reader wants to rearrange pieces	Structure generally works well for purpose and for reader	Structure flows so smoothly reader hardly thinks about it; choice of structure matches and highlights purpose

Key question: Does the organizational structure enhance the ideas and make the piece easier to understand?

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6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

VOICE

| | Not proficient | | | | Proficient | |
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
A	Author seems ambivalent, uninvolved, or distanced from topic, purpose, and/or audience	Author relies on reader's good faith to hear or feel any voice in phrases such as "I like it" or "it was fun"	Author's voice is hard to recognize; even it reader is trying desperately to "hear" it	Author seems sincere, yet not fully engaged or involved; result is pleasant or even personable, though topic and purpose are still not compelling	Author attempts to address topic, purpose, and audience in sincere and engaging way; piece still skips a beat here and there	Author speaks directly to reader in individual, compelling, and engaging way that delivers purpose and topic; although passionate, author is respectful of audience and purpose
B	Author does not interact with reader in any fashion; writing is flat resulting in a disengaged reader	Author uses only clichés, resulting in continued lack of interaction with reader	Author seems aware of reader yet discloses personal insights in favor of safe generalities	Author attempts to reach audience and has some moments of successful interaction	Author communicates with reader in earnest, pleasing, authentic matter	Author interacts with and engages reader in ways that are personally revealing
C	Author takes no risks; reveals nothing; lulls reader to sleep	Author reveals little yet doesn't risk enough to engage reader	Author surprises reader with random "aha" and minimal risk-taking	Author surprises, delights, or moves reader in more than one or two places	Author's moments of insight and risk-taking enliven piece	Author risks revealing self and shows individual thinking
D	Tone is not evident	Tone does not support writing	Tone is flat; author does not commit to own writing	Tone begins to support and enrich writing	Tone leans in right direction most of the time	Tone gives flavor and texture to message and is appropriate
E	Commitment to topic is missing; writing is lifeless or mechanical; it may be overly technical, formulaic, or jargonistic	Commitment to topic "might be present; author does not help reader feel anything	Commitment to topic begins to emerge; reader wonders if author cares about topic	Commitment to topic is present; author's own point of view may emerge in a place or two but is obscured behind vague generalities	Commitment to topic is clear and focused; author's enthusiasm starts to catch on	Commitment to topic is strong; author's passion about topic is clear, compelling, and energizing; reader wants to know more
	Voice is inappropriate for purpose/mode	Voice does not support purpose/mode; narrative is only an outline; expository or persuasive writing lacks conviction or authority to set it apart from mere list of facts	Voice is starting to support purpose/mode though remains weak in many places	Voice lacks spark for purpose/mode; narrative is sincere, if not passionate; expository or persuasive lacks consistent engagement with topic to build credibility	Voice supports author's purpose/mode; narrative entertains; engages reader; expository or persuasive reveals why author chose ideas	Voice is appropriate for purpose/mode; voice is engaging, passionate, and enthusiastic

Key question: Would you keep reading this piece if it was longer?

6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

WORD CHOICE

	Not proficient		3 Developing	4 Capable	Proficient	
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Vocabulary is limited; author searches for words to convey meaning; no mental imagery exists	Vocabulary is flawed, resulting in impaired meaning; wrong words are used, and reader can't picture message or content	Vocabulary is understandable yet lacks energy; some interpretation is needed to understand parts of piece	Vocabulary is functional yet still lacks energy; author's message is easy to understand in general	Vocabulary is more precise and appropriate; mental imagery emerges	Vocabulary is powerful and engaging, creating mental imagery; words convey intended message in precise, interesting, and natural way
A	Words are overly broad and so generic no message is evident	Words are so vague and mundane that message is limited and unclear	Words are adequate and correct in a general sense; message starts to emerge	Words work and begin to shape unique, individual piece; message is easy to identify	In most cases words are "just right" and clearly communicate message	Words are precise and accurate; author's message is easy to understand
B	Vocabulary confuses reader and is contradictory; words create no mental imagery; no lingering memory	Vocabulary has no variety or spice; even simple words are used incorrectly; no mental images exist	Vocabulary is very basic; simple words rule; variety starts to "show" rather than "tell"; mental images are still missing	Vocabulary includes familiar words and phrases that communicate, yet rarely capture reader's imagination; perhaps a moment or two of sparkle or imagery emerges	Vocabulary is strong; it's easy to "see" what author says because of figurative language—similes, metaphors, and poetic devices; mental imagery lingers	Vocabulary is striking, powerful, and engaging; it catches reader's eye and lingers in mind; recall of handful of phrases or mental images is easy and automatic
C	Words are incorrectly used, making message secondary to word mistakes	Words are either so plain as to put reader to sleep or so over the top they make no sense	Original, natural word choices start to emerge so piece sounds authentic	Attempts at colorful word choice show willingness to stretch and grow, yet sometimes go too far	New words and phrases are usually correct	Word choice is natural yet original and never overdone; both words and phrases are unique and effective
D	Misuse of parts of speech litters piece, confusing reader; no message emerges	Redundant parts of speech and/or jargon or clichés distract from message	Rote parts of speech reflect a lack of craftsmanship; passive verbs, overused nouns, and lack of modifiers and variety create fuzzy message	Accurate and occasionally refined parts of speech are functional and start to shape message	Correct and varied parts of speech are chosen carefully to communicate message, and clarity and enrich writing	Parts of speech are crafted to best convey message; lively verbs energize, precise nouns/modifiers add depth, color and specificity

Key question: Do the words and phrases create vivid pictures and linger in your mind?

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6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

SENTENCE FLUENCY

| | Not proficient | | Proficient | |
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Sentences are incorrectly structured; reader has to practice to give paper a fair interpretive reading. It's nearly impossible to read aloud	Sentences vary little, even easy sentence structures cause reader to stop and decide what is being said and how. It's challenging to read aloud	Sentences are technically correct but not varied, creating a sing-song pattern or lulling reader to sleep; it sounds mechanical when read aloud	Sentences are varied and hum along, tending to be pleasant or businesslike though may still be more mechanical than musical or fluid. It's easy to read aloud	Some sentences are rhythmic and flowing; a variety of sentence types are structured correctly; it flows well when read aloud	Sentences have flow, rhythm, and cadence; are well built with strong, varied structure that invites expressive oral reading
A	Sentence structure is choppy, incomplete, run-on, rambling, or awkward	Sentence structure works but has phrasing that sounds unnatural	Sentence structure is usually correct; yet sentences do not flow	Sentence structure is correct and begins to flow but is not artfully crafted or musical	Sentence structure flows well and moves reader fluidly through piece	Sentence structure is strong, underscoring and enhancing meaning while engaging and moving reader from beginning to end in fluid fashion
B	No sentence sense—type, beginning, connective, rhythm—is evident, determining where sentences begin and end is nearly impossible	There is little evidence of sentence sense; to make sentences flow correctly, most have to be totally reconstructed	Sentence sense starts to emerge; reader can read through problems and see where sentences begin and end; sentences vary little	Sentence sense is moderate; sentences are constructed correctly with some variety, hang together, and are sound	Sentence sense is strong; correct construction and variety is used; few examples of dialogue or fragments are used	Sentence sense is strong and contributes to meaning; dialogue, if present, sounds natural; fragments, if used, add style; sentences are nicely balanced in type, beginnings, connectives, and rhythm
C	Incomplete sentences make it hard to judge quality of language; beginnings or sanity type of sentence	Many sentences begin in same way and are simple (subject-verb-object) and monotonous	Simple and compound sentence types and variant beginnings help strengthen piece	Sentence beginnings vary yet are routine, generic; types include simple, compound, and perhaps even complex	Sentence beginnings are varied and unique; four sentence types (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex) create balance and variety	Varied sentence beginnings, add interest and energy; four sentence types are balanced
D	Weak or no connectives create massive jumble of language; disconnected sentences leave piece chaotic	"Stab" connectives (and, so, but, then, and hereupon) lead reader nowhere	Few simple connectives lead reader from sentence to sentence though piece remains weak	Connectives are original and hold piece together but are not always refined	Thoughtful and varied connectives move reader easily through piece	Creative and appropriate connectives show how each sentence relates to prevent one and pulls pieces together
E	Rhythm is chaotic, not fluid; piece cannot be read aloud without author's help; even with practice	Rhythm is random and may still be chaotic; writing does not invite expressive oral reading	Rhythm emerges; reader can read aloud after a few tries	Rhythm is inconsistent; some sentences invite oral reading; others remain stiff, awkward or choppy	Rhythm is consistent; reader can read aloud quite easily	Rhythm flows; writing has cadence; text reading aloud is expressive, pleasurable, and fun

Key question: Can you feel the words and phrases flow together as you read it aloud?

6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

CONVENTIONS

	Not proficient		Proficient		
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Errors in conventions are the norm and repeatedly distract reader, making text unreadable	Many errors of various types of conventions are scattered throughout text	Author continues to stumble in conventions, even on simple tasks and almost always on anything trickier	Author has reasonable control over standard conventions for grade level; conventions are sometimes handled well at other times, errors distract and impair readability	Author stretches, trying more complex tasks in conventions; several mistakes still exist; for secondary students, all basic conventions have been mastered	Author uses standard writing conventions effectively to enhance readability; errors are few and only minor editing is needed to publish
A	Spelling errors are frequent, even on common words	Spelling is phonetic, with many errors	Spelling on simple words is correct, although reader can understand	Spelling is usually correct or reasonably phonetic on common grade-level words, but not on more difficult words	Spelling on common grade-level words is correct but sometimes incorrect on more difficult words	Spelling is usually correct, even on more difficult words
B	Punctuation is often missing or incorrect	Simple end (. ? !) punctuation is correct; internal (, — ...) punctuation is usually wrong or missing	Punctuation is inconsistent	End punctuation is usually correct; internal punctuation is sometimes correct; for secondary students, all punctuation is usually correct	Punctuation is correct and enhances readability in all but few places	Punctuation is correct, creative and guides reader through entire piece
C	Capitalization is random, inconsistent, and sometimes nonexistent	Only the easiest capitalization rules are correctly applied	Capitalization is applied inconsistently except for proper nouns and sentence beginnings	Capitalization is mostly correct	Capitalization is correct; more sophisticated capitalization is used	Capitalization is thoroughly understood and consistently correct
D	Errors in grammar/usage are frequent and noticeable, making writing incomprehensible	Serious grammar/usage problems of every kind make comprehension difficult	Inappropriate grammar/usage results from heavy reliance on conversational oral language; meaning is confusing	Proper grammar/usage remains inconsistent and noticeable though problems are not serious enough to distort meaning	Grammar/usage is usually correct; there are a few grammar mistakes, yet meaning is clear	Grammar/usage is correct and contributes to clarity and style; meaning is more than clear; piece is engaging and inviting to read
E	Extensive editing (on virtually every line) is required to polish text for publication; reader must read once to decode, then again for meaning	There is still a lot of editing required for publication; meaning is uncertain	Too much editing is still needed to publish although piece begins to communicate meaning	Moderate editing (a little of this a little of that) is required to publish; meaning is clear	Several things still need editing before publishing; conventions are more correct than not; meaning is easily communicated	Hardly any editing is needed to publish; author may successfully manipulate conventions for stylistic effect; meaning is crystal clear

Key question: How much editing would have to be done to be ready to share with an outside source?

Note: For the trait of conventions, grade level matters. Expectations should be based on grade level and include only skills that have been taught. Expectations for secondary students are obviously much higher than those of the elementary grade levels.)

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6-Point 3-12 Writer's Rubric

PRESENTATION

| | Not proficient | | | Proficient | | |
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing	4 Capable	5 Experienced	6 Exceptional
	Presentation/formatting of piece confuses message	Presentation/formatting delivers a message clear in places and confusing in others	Presentation/formatting of piece delivers clear message yet lacks a finished, polished appearance	Presentation/formatting of piece works in standard, predictable fashion; delivering a clear message that appears finished	Presentation/formatting enhances understanding of message; piece appears finished and is pleasing to eye	Presentation/formatting exceeds best of finished pieces; formatting extends understanding of message; finished appearance is of superior quality
A	Handwritten letters are ...	Handwritten letters and words are readable with limited problems in letter shape and form, spacing is inconsistent	Handwriting creates little or no stumbling in readability; spacing is consistent	Handwriting is correct and readable, spacing is consistent and neat	Handwriting is neat, readable and consistent; spacing is uniform between letters and words, text is easy to read	Handwriting borders on calligraphy, is easy to read and uniformly spaced; print of writer is clear
B	Many fonts/sizes make piece nearly unreadable	Few fonts/sizes make piece hard to read or understand	Fonts/sizes are limited in number; piece starts to come together visually	Fonts/sizes are consistent and appropriate; piece is easy to understand	Fonts/sizes invite reader into text; understanding is a breeze	Fonts/sizes enhance readability and enrich overall appearance; understanding is crystal clear
C	No thought is given to white space—it is random and confusing; identifying beginning and ending of text is difficult	Understanding of white space begins to emerge though piece seems "plopped" on paper without margins or boundaries	White space begins to frame and balance piece; margins may be present though some text may crowd edges; usage is inconsistent; paragraphs begin to emerge	White space frames text by creating margins; usage is still inconsistent on the whole, some paragraphs are selected, some are blocked	White space helps reader focus on text; margins frame piece; other white space frames markers and graphics; usage is consistent and purposeful, most paragraphs are either indented or blocked	White space is used to optimally frame and balance text, with markers and graphics; all paragraphs are either indented or blocked
D	Visuals/graphics/charts are nonexistent, incomprehensible and/or unrelated to text	Visuals/graphics/charts "might" be related to text	Visuals, graphics/charts match and integrate with text at times	Visuals/graphics/charts support and consistently clarify text	Visuals/graphics/charts enrich meaning of text and add layer of understanding	Visuals/graphics/charts help enrich and extend meaning by focusing reader's attention upon message
F	No markers (title, bullets, page numbers, subheads, etc.) are present	Perhaps one marker (a title, a single bullet or page number) is used	Markers are used but do not organize or clarify piece	Markers are used to organize, clarify, and present whole piece	Markers serve to integrate graphics and articulate meaning of piece	Markers help make completed message and extend or enrich piece

Key question: Is the finished piece easy to read, polished in presentation, and pleasing to the eye?

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