



# How Adam Became a Writer

## Winning Writing Strategies for Low-Achieving Students

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**A**dam is a 9-year-old fourth-grade boy from a low-income, two-parent home who receives special education services in the areas of speech/language and learning disabilities. He is withdrawn and quiet, typically speaking only when asked a question. Adam had little confidence in his overall academic ability and was leery of writing. At the beginning of his fourth-grade year, Adam scored at first grade, fifth month on the Individual Reading Inventory (Aoki et al., 1997); and his writing pretest was only five words long (see Figure 1).

During the writing workshop described in this article, Adam's instructional group wrote every day, participated in small-group instruction, received personal attention during conferences,

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**THIS COLLABORATIVE EFFORT WAS  
RESEARCH BASED, TEACHER  
FRIENDLY, STUDENT LEARNING  
DRIVEN, AND EFFECTIVE.**

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**Figure 1. Adam's Pretest Writing Sample**

Adam is the baest name

**D**

**A**

**M**

and Adam was given plenty of encouragement as a student and an author. Adam made substantial gains in all areas of the writing assessment. His posttest writing contained 54 words and showed marked improvement in content and form (Figure 2). His learning was no longer stagnant, but progressive and enthusiastic. In addition, the teacher and other staff members noticed a change in Adam's demeanor. He initiated conversations; took a more active role in the larger classroom setting; and, for the first time, even made jokes. Adam continued to prosper academical-

**Figure 2. Adam's Posttest Writing Sample**

***My Cat***  
**By Adam**

I have a cat that is fat. His name is Randy. He is old and he is yellow. He eat a lot he lays on toys. He catches mice and he has very sharp teeth. I like my cat. I think cats used to be like us. Randy is a good cat.

ly and socially the following year. The writing workshop and its combination of strategies seemed to be the most beneficial of a number of alternatives the teachers had tried to facilitate Adam's academic and social growth.

**RESULTS WERE IMPRESSIVE:  
ALTHOUGH THE LOW GROUP'S  
PRETEST SCORES WERE LOWER  
THAN THE HIGH GROUP'S, BY THE  
END OF THE INTERVENTION THE  
TWO GROUPS' SCORES WERE  
SIMILAR.**

### Finding Effective Writing Instructional Strategies

The frustrations expressed by Adam's teacher are far too common (see box, "Reflections of a Fourth-Grade Teacher"). Unfortunately, for students with learning disabilities, many writing environments provide even greater frustration. Factors such as poor spelling and handwriting skills and the inability to organize the needed materials slow the rate of word production, making the task of writing even more difficult (Graham, 1997). In addition, students with learning disabilities typically experience less writing instruction and less time to compose than do their peers without disabilities (Berninger et al., 1998). Helping classroom teachers acquire research-validated strategies for teaching composition and monitoring students' progress and satisfaction is increasingly feasible, yet it remains a challenging process (Abbott, Walton, Tapia, & Greenwood, 1999).

In the context of implementing a schoolwide model designed to bridge the gap between research and practice (Abbott et al., 1999), a fourth-grade elementary schoolteacher and a researcher designed and evaluated an instructional model for writing that was supportive of a state- and district-mandated writing curriculum (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?"). Their collaborative effort was research based, teacher friendly, student learning driven, and effective. This project took place in an elementary school serving a predominantly low-income Euro-American stu-

### Reflections of a Fourth-Grade Teacher

As an instructor of writing, I recall the early days of my schooling and the painful array of grammatical lessons that provided little connection to actual authorship. As an author, I remember the feelings of intimidation, ineptness—that nauseous wave that swept over me every time I was required to write. During my first several years of teaching, I repeated many of those very same strategies, this time with my own students. Justifiably, they complained about the grueling and time-consuming tasks of composing an essay and compared their experiences to more dreaded ones like cleaning their bedrooms. My inadequate feelings as a composition teacher and the looming fifth-grade state assessment compounded the pressure to find a better way to mold my fourth graders into competent and enthusiastic young authors.

—Leigh Ann James,  
classroom teacher

### What Does the Literature Say About Effective Writing Instruction?

We based our writing strategies on the following findings:

- Teachers who routinely assess student progress and modify instruction as a result of assessment outcomes produce higher-achieving students (Bangert-Drown, Kulik, & Kulik, 1991). Thus, the teacher used a six-trait assessment model to monitor individual student progress.
- Researchers have demonstrated that the writer's workshop format can improve students' performance in the areas of organization of main ideas and conventions (Adams et al., 1996). Graham and Harris (1994), however, reported both benefits and concerns about the writer's workshop format for students with learning disabilities.
  - The *benefits* included frequent and meaningful writing, support of self-regulated learning, and an emphasis on the integrative nature of learning.
  - The *drawbacks* included an assumption on the part of teachers that the use of an *implicit form of instruction* like writer's workshop would fully promote the basic skills that are essential for effective writing. With implicit instruction, the teacher organizes an activity and explains and teaches as the need arises. In contrast, with *explicit instruction* the teacher organizes instruction around a sequence of skills that are directly taught to each student. Without explicit instruction, students with learning disabilities often fail to acquire such skills (e.g., Gersten, 1998).
- Meyer (1995) reported that students using graphic organizers for prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing outperformed control-group students on posttest writing scores. By adding graphic organizers, we sought to make writer's workshop instruction more explicit without increasing the teacher's already heavy workload.

dent body in the Midwestern United States.

### Components of the Model

The model we designed included a process-writing model, writer's workshop (e.g., Adams, Power, Reed, Reiss, & Romaniak, 1996), graphic organizers (e.g., Robinson & Keiwa, 1995), and

the six-trait assessment model for diagnostic and progress monitoring purposes (Spandel, 1996).

- In *writer's workshop*, the students' responsibilities included prewriting, drafting, editing, peer conferencing, revision, and publishing. Throughout the process, the teacher facilitated and monitored classroom activity and

**Table 1. Six-Trait Writing Assessment Rubric**

**Ideas and Content**

5 Clearly conveys one main idea, theme, or topic with relevant supporting details. Written from experience showing insight. Holds reader's attention.

3 Conveys one main idea, theme, or topic with little or no supporting details. Little or no insight from writer. Does not hold reader's attention.

1 Unrecognizable main idea, theme, or topic.

0 No attempt

**Organization**

5 Introduction grabs reader. Satisfying conclusion. Well-sequenced details. Smooth transitions. Easy to read.

3 Identifiable introduction. Identifiable conclusion. Lacks smoothly sequenced details. Attempts to use transitions. Difficult to follow at times.

1 Unrecognizable introduction. Unrecognizable conclusion. Confusing details.

0 No attempt

**Voice**

5 Written from the heart. Written with a reader in mind. Reader can feel the person behind the words. Expressive.

3 Written sincerely. Written to please the reader. Pleasant, but not engaging. Inconsistent style.

1 Functionally correct. Completely lifeless.

0 No attempt.

**Word Choice**

5 Vocabulary is strong, but not overdone. Words sound natural. Verbs are powerful. Nouns are specific. Strong visual imagery.

3 Vocabulary correct, but common. Uses clichés and slang. Clear but imprecise. "Generic."

1 Incorrect vocabulary. Repetitive. Weak verbs (is, are, was, were).

0 No attempt.

**Sentence Fluency**

5 Clearly written. Easy to read aloud. Varies length and structure. Rhythmic and natural.

3 Clearly written. Somewhat awkward to read aloud. Little variation in sentence structure. Efficient, but not rhythmic.

1 Incomplete sentences. Impossible to read aloud. Makes no sense.

0 No attempt.

**Conventions**

5 Uses correct grammar. Uses needed punctuation. Uses correct spelling. Uses correct paragraphing. Writing is easy to read and ready for publication.

3 Grammar errors do not distort meaning. Ending punctuation is correct. Spelling is correct or phonetic. Paragraphing inconsistent. Writing reads less smoothly and needs moderate editing.

1 Numerous errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling—writing nearly impossible to read for meaning.

0 No attempt.

*Note:* Abbreviated definitions of rubrics (5, 3, and 1) for the six-trait rating for written compositions. The actual rubric rating used ranged from 0 (no attempt) to 5 (The Best).

**THE WRITING INSTRUCTION MODEL INCLUDED A PROCESS-WRITING MODEL, WRITER'S WORKSHOP, GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS, AND A SIX-TRAIT ASSESSMENT MODEL FOR DIAGNOSING AND MONITORING OF STUDENT PROGRESS IN WRITING.**

then, prior to publishing, held individual conferences with students to suggest revisions in both content and form.

- Using *graphic organizers*, the teacher was able to provide explicit instruction in the often-abstract writing concepts of a writer's workshop (e.g., Meyer, 1995).
- The *six-trait model* (Spandel, 1996) identified and defined six traits that are important for the teaching and evaluation of student writing (Hargrove, 1995). The six traits of "good writers" (see Table 1) are as follows:
  - Ideas and content.
  - Organization.
  - Voice.
  - Word choice.
  - Sentence fluency.
  - Conventions.

In addition to assessment, teachers can use the six-trait model as a diagnostic/prescriptive tool for modifying instruction to fit students' writing needs.

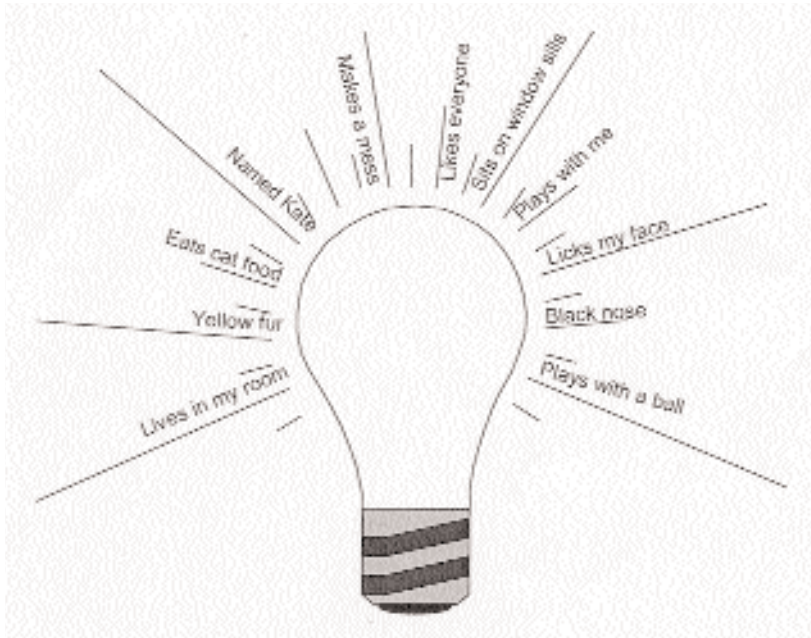
### How Does the Model Work?

#### High- and Low-Ability Groups

Based on performance on the Individual Reading Inventory (Aoki et al., 1997), students were divided into two groups for writing instruction. Instruction began during the first 9 weeks of the intervention with only the 13 high-group students, who had scored at or above the fourth-grade level on the reading inventory.

The second 9 weeks of instruction included only the seven low-group stu-

**Figure 3. Idea Light Bulb**



**Figure 4. High Group's Five-Paragraph Outline**

- I. Introduction
  - A. General: Our family has a cat.
  - B. Narrowed focus: Her name is Kate.
  - C. Specific: She has yellow fur.
- II. Topic: Her looks:
  - A. Long yellow tail.
  - B. Furry pointed ears.
  - C. Short yellow and brown fur.
  - D. Transition: Kate looks so cute.
- III. Topic: She likes to play with.
  - A. A round red ball.
  - B. A long rope.
  - C. Everyone in our family.
  - D. Transition: She likes to play with me.
- IV. Topic: I know she loves me because.
  - A. She licks my face.
  - B. She waits on the window sill.
  - C. She sleeps on my bed.
- V. Conclusion
  - A. Introduction topic: Now you know my cat.
  - B. Feelings: I love my cat so much.
  - C. Ending sentence: I'm glad Kate is my cat.

dents, who had scored 1 or more years below grade level. Five of these students were identified as learning disabled and had individualized education programs (IEPs).

During the 9-week quarters, students were instructed in writing for 30 min-

utes a day. Students chose their own topics to write about, were instructed in the use of graphic organizers, and were encouraged to incorporate the six-traits used by good writers in their writing projects (see Table 1).

**Figure 5. Low Group's One-Paragraph Outline**

- I. Topic: My cat
- II. Topic sentence (green): My cat, Kate, is cute and lives in my room.
- III. Supporting detail (yellow): She has yellow fur and a long yellow tail.
- IV. Supporting detail (yellow): Her favorite toy is a ball.
- V. Supporting detail (yellow): Kate sleeps on a pillow in my room.
- VI. Concluding sentence (red): I am so glad she is my cat.

#### Outline Feedback

From reading your paragraph, I feel that your topic was: about your pet  
I liked the part: when you told me where she sleeps.

I think that there could be improvements: if you added more details about the other things your cat does.

I see that you have included:

1. A topic sentence: yes
2. Three supporting details: yes
3. A concluding sentence: yes

### Conducting Whole-Class and Individual Mini-lessons

During a typical writing session, students were instructed in composition using a combination of whole-class and individual mini-lessons. After students gathered materials and shared published work, the teacher gave a 7-10-minute

whole class mini-lesson. The teacher formulated topics for the minilessons around the six-traits assessment tailored to specific needs through teacher observation and conferencing. For the remainder of the session, individual students could be observed working at different stages of the process-writing model: prewriting, drafting, editing, conferencing, or publishing.

Melding of the six-trait writing and writer's workshop models allowed students at different developmental levels the freedom to work at their own pace

on individual selections. At the close of the session, students stored their "work in progress" in their writer's workshop folders. Students were encouraged to continue writing at home.

### Using Graphic Organizers

To promote student accountability and efficient teacher monitoring, the teacher made the writers' workshop instruction more explicit by including graphic organizers for each individual writing project (see Figures 3-5). After the students chose a topic, they jotted down their brainstormed ideas about the topic on the idea "light bulb" (Figure 3).

The students then used the "outline organizer" (see Figure 4) to narrow down and organize main topics and sequence the details in their "light bulb." The high group's outline organizer helped students plan five paragraphs, including an introductory paragraph, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. The low-group students began with a simplified form designed to plan the writing of a single paragraph (see Figure 5). Their organizer was color coded for developing components of a single paragraph: green for topic sentence, yellow for supporting details, and red for concluding sentence. In addition, the low group's outline organizer provided space for teacher feedback, allowing student and teacher a formal opportunity to check and clarify the composition's format prior to its initial writing.

The smaller student/teacher ratio (7:1) in the low group allowed more frequent one-to-one conferencing and instructional guidance. By the end of the quarter, two students in the low group were successfully using the high-group outline.

### Writing Drafts

In addition to using their graphic organizers during initial drafting, students were encouraged to make an effort to create well-written paragraphs by writing a precise topic sentence, varying the length of sentences, focusing on creative word usage, and concentrating on a recognizable ending. Spelling and other conventions were a secondary focus during first drafts.

**AS WITH OTHER STUDENTS IN THE LOW-ACHIEVING GROUP, ADAM MADE MORE PROGRESS THAN DID THE STUDENTS IN THE HIGH-ACHIEVING GROUP.**



**The students began to view themselves as in charge of their own progress and as empowered authors capable of telling their story to the reader.**

During the second draft, students worked in pairs to edit for conventions and paragraph expansion. Using a peer-conferencing worksheet as a guide (not shown), the student editor asked the writer questions such as, "What did you like best about this paper?" "What is confusing or unclear to you?" "What needs more detail?" and "What do you think would make the story better?" In the subsequent teacher conference, the instructor limited revision suggestions to only one concept that she considered the most urgent. For example, even if spelling was less than perfect, another area such as word choice may have been emphasized, if content could be improved. When needed, she provided explicit instructional strategies to students with spelling difficulties.

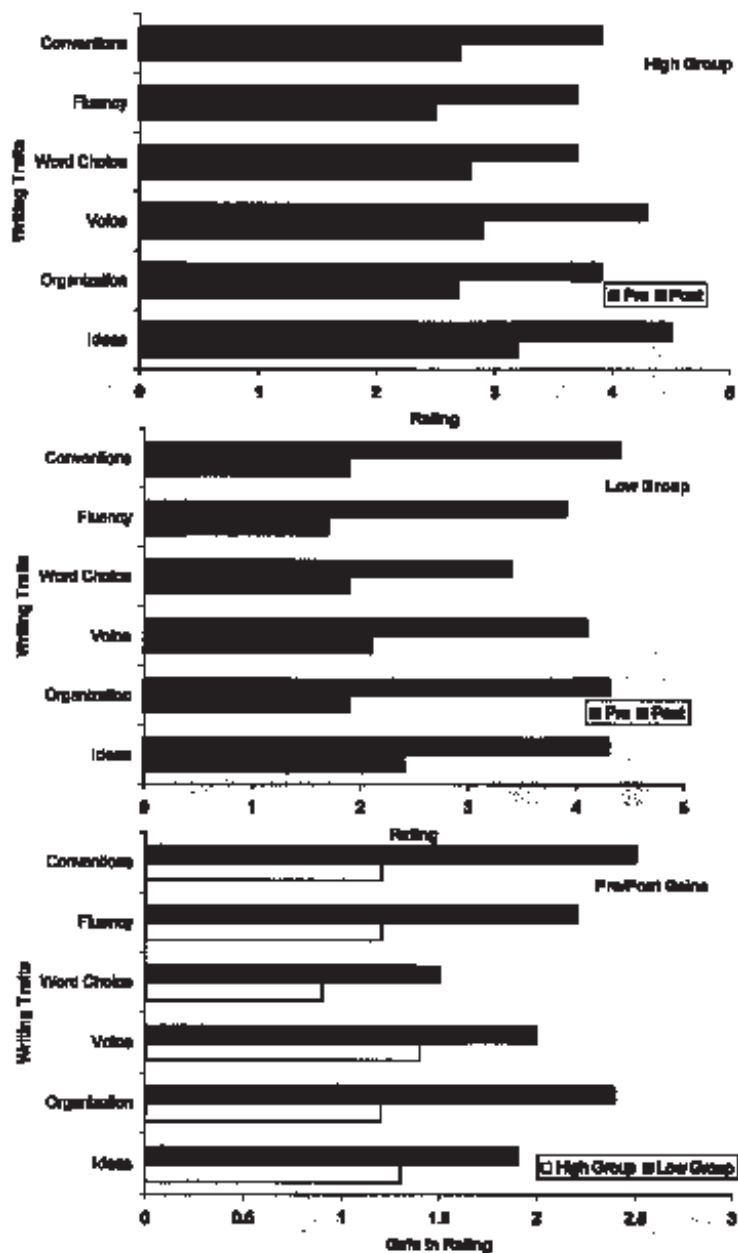
### Objective Scoring on District Assessment

After the teacher conference, the student wrote the final draft, and the paper was scored using the district's provided six-trait guidelines (see Table 1; Hargrove, 1995). To ensure objectivity, the classroom teacher and the researcher scored student compositions independently. A third rater (another researcher) compared the two ratings. Where disagreements occurred, the team reviewed the six-trait definitions and the writing sample and came to a consensus as to the score. In keeping with the writer's workshop philosophy, the number of writings completed by each student varied. Students in the high group generally completed more compositions than those in the low group during the 9 weeks. The emphasis for each composition was quality rather than quantity.

### How Did the Students Do?

Overall, students' pre/post scores in both groups had improved after the 9-week instruction (see Figure 6, upper and middle panels), however, the low group achieved the greatest improvement (Figure 6, middle panel). For both groups, five of the six writing traits gained by at least 1 point on the 5-point scale (see Figure 6, lower panel); and students' average ratings were generally 4 or above. In Ideas and Content, the

**Figure 6. Pretest, Posttest, and Gains in Writing Trait Ratings for Low and High Groups**



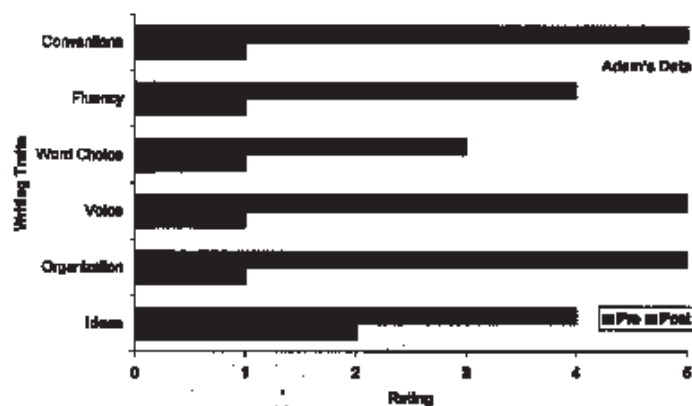
Note: Ratings are from the 0-5 scale on the Six-Trait Writing Assessment Rubric (see Table 1).

low group gained 1.9 points compared to the high group's gain of 1.3 points. Likewise in organization, the students in the low group made a gain of 2.4 and the high group made a gain of 1.2. Although the low group's pretest scores were lower than the high group's, by the

end of the intervention the two groups' scores were similar.

As Figure 7 shows, Adam made similar improvement. At pretest all his ratings were 1.0 except Ideas at 2.0. At Posttest his ratings were 5.0 with the exception of Fluency (4.0), Word Choice (3.0), and Ideas (4.0).

**Figure 7. Adam's Pre and Posttest Writing Trait Ratings**



Note: Ratings are from the 0-5 scale on the Six-Trait Writing Assessment Rubric (see Table 1).

### What Does All This Mean?

Not to be at all modest about our results, but with an appropriate researcher's conservatism: *It appeared to us that improvements in students' writing were the result of the integration of the six-trait writing assessment and writer's workshop models in combination with the use of graphic organizers.*

### Cooperating Components

By placing these fourth-grade students in differentially supportive environments, making specific elements of composing and writing explicit, and providing instruction on needed skills, we believe we assisted students in improving their basic writing skills. These components allowed individuals to compose without the constraint that all members of the class move at the same pace.

### Empowered Students

Most important, the students began to view themselves as in charge of their own progress and as empowered authors capable of telling their story to the reader. It was not the purpose of the present study to attempt to separate the effects of single components like graphic organizers from writer's workshop or differences in teacher/pupil ratios. The goal was to evaluate the effects for all

students in what was considered to be an effective writing program built around research-validated components.

### Emphasis on Graphic Organizers

For children with special needs, in particular, findings reported in the literature suggested that a large part of their gains could be attributed to the use of graphic organizers (Griffin, 1995; Robinson & Keiwa, 1995). Traditionally, students with academic challenges have exhibited greater difficulty coping with abstract writing concepts, and successfully learning concepts that teachers do not teach explicitly (Berninger et al., 1998). By using graphic organizers and individualized explicit instruction on clearly defined components of good writing, the instructor provided the concrete steps necessary to ensure success for all students. The greater gains made by members of the lower group also appeared to be explained by the lower student/teacher ratio in the low group (7:1 ratio) enabling the increased opportunities for teacher and student to confer, and finally for students to receive feedback on their writing progress. The high group was instructed at a 23:1 ratio.

### Challenges and Suggestions

A difficulty was separating the writing instruction of the two groups across

semesters, reducing total time taught writing for each group. Future areas of research might profitably address flexible grouping using these components, wherein groups of teachers working together in process writing co-ops could create the same flexible grouping environments we created for this study and sustain them over all semesters.

For students making rapid progress, as some did in this project, regrouping could be used to refine the match between current skills and focus of instruction in terms of graphic organizers and outlines. Research could also focus on teasing out the effects of graphic organizers in students' programs from the other instructional components by alternating their use across groups and semesters. Equally important will be examining additional means of boosting the performance of the high-group students.

### From Research into Practice

We believe that an important component in the success of this program was the collaboration between a classroom teacher and a researcher. This project helped bridge the gap between research and practice in special education and assisted in translating research findings to practice. These professionals collaborated to implement an effective instructional program and monitor progress in student learning. This is significant. Selecting instructional practices and then confirming their benefits when actually implemented in local school classrooms is too often only a vague process.

This collaboration led to the selection and implementation of practices supported by research. The collection of data reflecting student learning confirmed that the translation into practice was, in fact, accomplished. In closing, we believe strongly that these collective changes helped teacher and students promote success, boost confidence, and break the cycle of painful experiences with composition writing.

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