WRITING AND THE LD STUDENT

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The term *learning disability* first was used thirty years ago. In a mere three decades, a new disability category has been institutionalized, garnering legal, social, and political recognition. The number of learning disabled (LD) students age 6 to 21 grew more than 170% between the 1976-77 school year and the 1990-91 school year. During 1976-77, LD students comprised approximately 25 percent of all students with disabilities; during 1990-91, these students represented over 50 percent of the population of students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1992).

In 1985, 14.8 percent of full-time first-year college students with disabilities reported having learning disabilities. This number grew to 24.9 percent in 1991 (National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, 1992). For many of these students, written language is an academic domain that is particularly difficult (Gajar, 1992). Blalock (1981) estimated that between 80 and 90 percent of adults with learning disabilities have written language disorders.

Written language deficits can appear as problems with mechanics, spelling, style, coherence, cohesion, semantics, and organization (Magnum & Strichart, 1988; Vogel, 1987). Strategies that have been suggested to help the LD postsecondary student with written expression problems include use of a word processor and use of a scribe for dictation (Carlisle & Johnson, 1989). Other strategies that have been used with LD writers of various ages include revision strategy instruction (Reynolds, Hill, Swassing, & Ward, 1988); instruction in cognitive and metacognitive text structure strategy (Englert et al., 1988; Wallace & Bott, 1989); self-instructional writing strategies (Newcomer & Barenbaum, 1991);

dialogue journals (Grant, Lazarus, & Peyton, 1992); strategy attribution training (Stevens & Englert, 1993); the writing-process approach (Graves, 1985); and shared writing (Mather & Lachowicz, 1992).

The purpose of this article is to describe, in a case study-like format, a cognitive strategy that might be helpful to the LD college student who must organize and write a longer text. This strategy uses knowledge of expository text structure, as revealed through the identification of subgoals of the writing task, as the foundation for planning and executing a writing assignment. After a brief description of the student, the actual assignment is presented. Following this is a description of how the student completed the task. Finally, educational implications of the approach are discussed.

The Student

Peter (a pseudonym) is a 20-year-old sophomore at a small, private university located in the northeastern United States. He was graduated from a suburban public high school with a grade point average (GPA) of approximately 2.0. Peter has a learning disability and received special education resource room services while in high school. He was administered the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R) (Wechsler, 1981), and obtained Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale IQs within the average range, i.e., all three IQs were above 100. He also was administered the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, Part II (Woodcock & Johnson, 1977), which consists of 10 subtests, grouped into clusters, that measure various aspects of academic achievement. Results were reported in age equivalent scores and standard scores. Age equivalent scores reflect a student's performance in terms of the norming sample age level at which the average score is the same as the student's score. Standard scores allow a comparison of a student's performance on two different tests. Peter's scores are shown below.

Cluster	Age Score	Standard Score*
Reading	9-6	79
Mathematics	12-1	82
Written Language	9-1	73
Knowledge	28-0	108

*Standard scores have a mean of 100.

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In a well written three to four page paper:
1. Identify the main themes, symbols, and human emotions of the *Epic*, and
2. Demonstrate how these themes, symbols, and emotions are universal and meaningful to the modern reader.
Helpful Hint: Do Not, Do Not, Do Not summarize the plot of the *Epic*. Use material or episodes from the *Epic* to support your essay.

Peter had to complete six similar assignments for this course, in addition to quizzes and tests. He also was enrolled in an English composition course, a course in American government, and a philosophy course. The reading and written language demands associated with these courses presented Peter with a serious challenge. In order to help Peter to complete this particular assignment, his learning specialist devised a method that used as a foundation the identification and achievement of subgoals, through which the expository nature of text was revealed. The learning specialist also recognized the applicability of this method to other written assignments that Peter had to complete during the course of the semester; therefore, transfer of learning was a desired outcome of this exercise. Before initiating instruction in the method, however, several obstacles had to be overcome.

The Use of Subgoals

The first subgoal concerning this assignment was to reduce Peter's anxiety. His concentration on the final product, i.e., three to four double-spaced typewritten pages, was impeding his initiation of the task.

Additionally, he already had failed to submit one previous similar assignment, and had concurrent written work due in other courses. He had begun to verbalize somatic complaints, e.g., an upset stomach, and appeared to be anxious to the point of despair, evidenced by comments such as, "I don't know what to do. I don't know what he [the professor] wants. I don't think I can do this."

Peter's learning specialist identified several objectives necessary for him to achieve the first subgoal. The two spent approximately 15 minutes discussing in general the necessity of making subgoals that were realistic and attainable, while noting that achievement

of each subgoal would bring Peter one step closer to completing this assignment. The learning specialist used analogies to enhance Peter's understanding of these ideas, e.g., successes in individual courses are the subgoals necessary to achieving the final goal of graduation with a bachelor's degree. This general conversation, with the learning specialist acting as empathic listener and guide, helped Peter to understand the advantages of breaking down this assignment into smaller tasks. Although Peter acknowledged that he could envision obtaining subgoals associated with this particular assignment, he still had the problem of having failed to complete the first essay for this course.

The learning specialist then contacted the course professor to discover what arrangements might be made concerning the overdue assignment. The professor was sympathetic to Peter's written expression difficulties and suggested that Peter submit a statement indicating when during the semester he expected to submit the first essay. No penalty would be exacted for a late submission. Additionally, Peter's textbook reader agreed to act as a scribe so that he could talk through his responses to written assignments due for other courses. Peter then would ask a peer tutor, professional writing instructor, or his learning specialist to work with him to correct errors. This process expedited the completion of competing assignments, thereby reducing Peter's anxiety level.

With some internal and external roadblocks eliminated, Peter was ready to tackle his response. Again, subgoals were identified and pursued. First, his learning specialist went through the directions on the assignment sheet and highlighted the action words, e.g., identify and discuss, and talked about what these meant in the context of this assignment. Next, Peter identified unfamiliar words or concepts in the directions. For example, he was unsure of the meaning of the word universal, prompting the learning specialist to provide multiple concrete examples, e.g., family/tribe, birth, and death, and abstract examples, e.g., beauty, religion, and loyalty.

Next, in order to set the stage for discussing themes, symbols, and emotions in a literary work, the learning specialist asked Peter to discuss these concepts with respect to a recent film that he had seen. Peter chose to talk about The Firm, and was able to identify hypocrisy as a theme, money as a symbol for power, and hate as a powerful emotion. Praising his good insight, the learning
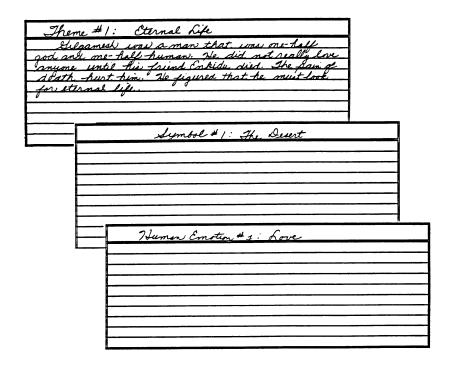
specialist suggested that Peter now was ready to make similar types of identifications in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

At the top of an index card, the learning specialist wrote the word *theme* and elicited from Peter the identification of one theme in the *Epic*.

As Peter spoke about this theme, the learning specialist scribed his thoughts on the index card. On other cards, two more themes were identified, without elaboration. The learning specialist then wrote the word *symbol* on several index cards and asked Peter to provide examples from the *Epic*. Finally, index cards were completed for the identification of emotions in the story. (See Figure 1 for facsimilies of index cards showing thematic, emotional, and symbolic information from the *Epic*.)

Figure 1

Facsimiles of Index Cards Showing Thematic, Emotional, and Symbolic Information from the Epic of Gilgamesh

Theme #1: Eternal Life

Gilgamesh was a man that was one-half god and one-half human. He did not really love anyone until his friend Enkidu died. The pain of death hurt him. He figured that he must look for eternal life.

Symbol #1: The Desert

Human Emotion #1: Love

Peter then was asked to write a paragraph about each of the ideas that appeared on the index cards. This process took two days; however, it allowed him to see the structure of a written essay and to work toward completing the assignment in manageable units. Each index card represented a subgoal. The palpable nature of the index cards allowed Peter to move text physically, providing a multisensory aspect to the task. The cards also enhanced the organization and sequencing of writing and provided a tangible outline for text structure. Figure 2 shows one such paragraph composed by Peter.

Figure 2
Paragraph Concerning the Theme of Control in the
Epic of Gilgamesh

> GILGAMESH was as star as meny Men so he Had the control of his stranth and with that he was not skard of aeny Man. Gilgamesh was a bytufal Man so He did not fell that his aperins had to chang But the one thing he had no contnrl over was dieding and The was a felling that was forin to him this is what led him on his serch for eteral life & So he could contrl The one thing he was not show of.

Gilgamesh was as strong as many men so he had the control of his strength and with that he was not scared of any man. Gilgamesh was a beautiful man so he did not feel that his appearance had to change. But the one thing that he had no control over was dying and this was a feeling that was foreign to him. This is what led him on his search for eternal life so he could control the one thing he was not sure of.

Peter and his learning specialist then discussed the opening paragraph of the essay. The learning specialist read aloud the assignment and asked Peter what it was that he would talk

about in his paper. His response formed the basis for the introduction. The learning specialist then provided Peter with a series of transitional statements that he could use within the paragraphs and Peter generated transition statements for use between the paragraphs (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Within and Between Paragraph Transitional Statements

Within Paragraph

1. One important theme (symbol, emotion) in <u>The Epic</u> is ...

2. Another (a second) important thematic (symbolic, emotional) idea is ...

3. Finally, _____ is another important theme (symbol, emotion).

Between Paragraphs

1. Even though themes are an important part of the story, the symbols help to make the story clearer.

2. Now that I have discussed the themes and symbols of the story, I will talk about emotions.

After a very brief discussion, he also wrote several paragraphs concerning the universality of the themes, symbols, and emotions found in *Gilgamesh* and a concluding statement. Peter had a peer tutor type his essay using a word processor. He then submitted this first draft to his writing instructor for refinement. Upon completion of this step, Peter and his learning specialist made a few final changes, after which he submitted his paper

for a grade. (See figure 4 for facsimilies of portions of the draft and final copies.)

Figure 4

Facsimiles of Portions of the Draft and Final Copies of Peter's Essay Concerning the Epic of Gilgamesh

Draft

> One important human emotion that I picked out of the reading was that of love. Gilgamesh was a big, strong, handsome man, A picture of what almost any woman would want to have for a husband. Gilgamesh was never asked to be married for love. The only way he was asked was to profit from the marriage. His true love for his friend, Enkidu. With Enkidu there was no mystery, he knew where they both stood.

Final

> Finally, death is another relevant theme. Death was one thing that Gilgamesh did not feel comfortable with. When his friend Enkidu died, he was at a loss for what to do. For the first time in his life, he was scared and had no control. Death was something that he was going to have to deal with for the rest of his life.

Peter received a grade of C- on this paper. The professor commented that Peter had provided "very general thoughts and statements without proof from the *Epic*." Peter was not disappointed with this grade and acknowledged that his paper lacked specific citations from the *Epic* to support his ideas. He commented that he liked this approach to completing written assign-

ments and that he planned to use it in the future to complete other assignments.

Educational Implications

The organization and execution of expository essays often is a difficult task for the LD postsecondary student. Problems with putting thoughts into print, with grammatical correctness, and with correct spelling can be circumvented with the use of a word processing program with a spell check feature, the use of a scribe, and peer and professional editing. However, organization of such an essay frequently is a stumbling block. To help the student who has a written language disability, the use of analogies, topical discussion, task management via the identification of subgoals, and concrete aids, e.g., index cards, can put into perspective the task of producing an essay. Additionally, the combined use of technology, appropriate guidance and editorial assistance, and a cognitive strategy as described here support the student's work toward independence. Application to a variety of written language tasks is possible, with the ultimate goal of providing support for the mechanical aspects of writing, i.e., use of a scribe and use of a spellcheck program, rather than the process of text creation. With frequent use and practice, the time constraints imposed by creating subgoals will be minimized, and the student's confidence as a writer will increase.

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