

# Suggest-Choose-Plan-Compose: A Strategy to Help Students Learn to Write

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**F**or some students, writing is a serious challenge; however, carefully planned strategies that attend to well-crafted writing can play an important role in helping students learn to write (Graham, 2005). Experts agree (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998; Graham, 2005) that most struggling writers differ from those who are successful writers in that the struggling writers have not developed a strategic approach for creating and organizing ideas. However, reluctant writers can overcome these deficiencies when writing is taught systematically using graphic organizers (Graham, 2006). Instruction in writing must emphasize a process for story development (e.g., theme, plot, story line) and focus on literary elements such as character selection, compelling leads, and commanding endings (Alexander et al., 1998; Graham, 2005).

In this article, the Suggest-Choose-Plan-Compose (SCPC) strategy is described, and an example of how the strategy was used in a fifth-grade classroom to help students understand and employ the craft of writing independently is given. The first stage of the strategy emphasizes the composing processes of creating ideas. In the second stage, students choose the characters and setting. In the third stage, students plan the plot, and the fourth stage centers on composing the story.

Another component of SCPC strategy includes the implementation of a combination of various grouping patterns and the application of a careful approach to removing teacher support. Initially, the strategy focuses on using a supportive environment to determine the characters, setting, and outline to be used for the development of the story. Students are given more autonomy throughout the stages but continue in a supportive environment as they collaborate with a partner. Through this gradual release of responsibility framework even young students can acquire the skills needed to develop their writing skills.

## Implementing the SCPC Strategy

The following illustrates how SCPC was implemented in a fifth-grade classroom. The timetable for implementing SCPC began with a 10-minute lesson that incorporated the first stage, followed by 5–10 minutes for the second stage, and 15–20 minutes for the third stage. The workshop concluded with 25 minutes for the fourth and final stage. These stages may be implemented over several days.

### Stage 1: Suggest

In the first stage, the objective is for the student to develop a process for creating the characters and setting of a narrative text. The idea is for the entire class to brainstorm a repertoire of possible suggestions from which the individual groups will later make their selection. The following example illustrates how these essential components were incorporated into the lesson.

Teacher: (to students) When writing a story, we have to decide who will be in our story, also known as characters, and where the story will take place, also known as setting. We want to write about a character that has qualities like others we know or have read about. Our new character might incorporate several aspects or qualities of people or characters we already know. Think about whom you want to include in our story. If you have a suggestion, you must include a reason for your character choice.

As the students make suggestions and give their reasons for their suggestions, the teacher writes their

responses on a chart visible to the entire class (see Figure 1).

Once students understand the concept of character selection, the teacher facilitates a discussion about choosing the story's setting. The process for developing the setting is similar to that used for character selection (see Figure 2).

Teacher: (to students) We have brainstormed possibilities for the characters in our story, so now we have to decide where the story will take place, also known as the setting. When we decide on the setting, we have to determine the location and time period. It could take place a long time ago, in the present, in the future, or in a combination of time periods. As with character selection, we decide the setting on the basis of our own personal experiences, places we have either visited, read about, or seen in movies or on television. If you have a suggestion, you have to give the reason for your selection.

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- SCPC teaches writing with the use of graphic organizers. How might this approach be helpful to struggling students?
- An integral component of SCPC is peer interaction, which includes both peer partners and small groups. How may this facilitate learning for struggling writers?
- How can SCPC's organizational model be transferred to other classroom situations to facilitate learning?

class listed in the previous brainstorming stage.

The teacher implements the second stage by dividing the class into heterogeneous groups, each containing six students. Each group comes to a consensus as to the final character selection and location for the story. From the suggestions brainstormed earlier in the first stage, each group refers to the large class chart and decides who will be in their story and where it will take place and then writes its final decision for characters and setting selection.

The following lesson illustrates how the teacher introduced this stage of the strategy.

Teacher: (to students) Now that we are in small groups, each group must select the final characters and setting for

the story. From those choices we have on our charts, we need to pick up to three characters we want to write about. Each person in the group should present one choice to the group. It may be someone we know firsthand or someone we have read about or seen in movies or on television. Each group has a chart with the words *characters* and *setting* listed at the top of the page. After making your final decision, write your character selection on the chart provided.

## Stage 2: Choose

The purpose of the second stage is for each group of students to choose the characters and setting they wish to include in their story from the options the

**Figure 1**  
Examples From Whole-Class Brainstorming Session

Character	Reason
1. Father	1. My father helps me.
2. Dog	2. Dogs can do neat things.
3. Friend	3. We need a friend to do stuff with.
4. Horse	4. Horses are interesting animals.
5. 10-year-old kid	5. We need someone our own age.

**Figure 2**  
Students' Suggestions From Whole-Class Brainstorming

Setting (location and time period)	Reason
1. Home—Present	1. We live there.
2. School—Present	2. We go to school every day.
3. Forest—Past	3. Stories in the forest are cool.
4. Plane—Future	4. On planes, lots of stuff happens.
5. Outer space—Future	5. We see lots of movies about it.

After the students make their character selection, the teacher guides the groups in their final choice for the setting (see Figure 3).

### Stage 3: Plan

The objective for the third stage is for students to plan the plot. Students work together in groups to develop the story’s outline. Using the common conceptualizations of story parts developed in the previous stages, each group now outlines the major elements. For this, students remain in their small groups and focus on the beginning, middle, and end sections of the story. As each group plans the outline, students write their selections on the individual charts (see Figure 4).

The following example illustrates the planning of the outline for the story structure in this stage.

Teacher: (to students) We have selected the characters and setting for our story. Now we must focus on what happens in the story, or the plot. We know that every story has a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning, we introduce the characters and setting and lay the groundwork for the problem

to happen. In the middle, the problem unfolds, and in the end, we explain how this problem is resolved or solved.

We must now examine the characters and setting and develop an outline for our story. Each group has a chart that contains three columns titled Beginning, Middle, and End. Now each group must come to a consensus as to what should occur in each story part. After the discussion, each group will develop an outline by writing at least three things that should happen at each stage in the story under its designated column.

### Stage 4: Compose

After students outline the general plot, they focus on composing the story (see Figure 5). During this final stage, each group separates into three sets of partners who then divide the responsibility for writing the story on the basis of their outline. For example, each pair is responsible for writing either the beginning, middle, or end of the story. The pairs rotate to ensure

**Figure 3**  
Students’ Final Character and Setting Choice for All Four Groups

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Christine</li> <li>■ Friend</li> <li>■ Mother</li> </ul> Setting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Home—Present</li> </ul>	Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Mother</li> <li>■ Dog</li> <li>■ 10-year-old kid</li> </ul> Setting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Forest—Past</li> </ul>	Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Father</li> <li>■ Friend</li> <li>■ 10-year-old kid</li> </ul> Setting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Home—Present</li> </ul>	Characters: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Father</li> <li>■ Horse</li> <li>■ 10-year-old kid</li> </ul> Setting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Farm—Present</li> </ul>

**Figure 4**  
Examples of Outline From Group 1

Beginning	Middle	End
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Christine hears A.M. alarm.</li> <li>■ Still tired</li> <li>■ Decides what to wear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Looks forward to going to dad’s house</li> <li>■ Dad can’t make it.</li> <li>■ Christine feels bad.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Her friend Ellen calls.</li> <li>■ Christine gives her a ride to school.</li> <li>■ Christine’s friend helps her.</li> </ul>

**Figure 5**  
The Three Sections of the Story Developed by Group 1

Beginning	Middle	End
<p>Christine heard the alarm in the distance. It was too early to get up. At first she thought the alarm was in a dream, but slowly she realized it was morning. Then she heard her mom calling her from downstairs telling her that breakfast was ready. She wished she could sleep longer and that she had not stayed up so late texting her friends. She started to think about what she would wear to school.</p>	<p>Then she realized that today was very important because it was the day she would spend after school with her dad. Every Thursday, Christine's dad would pick her up after school, and she would spend the weekend at his house. Christine looked forward to Thursdays because she and her dad always went to the pizza house for dinner, and Christine liked being alone with him. Christine quickly got dressed and ran downstairs just in time to hear the telephone ring. It was her dad, and he called to tell her he couldn't make it because he had a business meeting. Christine felt bad and didn't eat much breakfast and didn't even want to go to school.</p>	<p>Her friend Ellen called to ask her if she could have a ride to school. Christine's mom said she would pick up Ellen on the way to school. Christine liked being around Ellen because she was always in a good mood and was really funny. When she arrived at school, Christine felt much better. She was thankful for her friend and decided she would have a good day.</p>

that eventually each student has the opportunity to write all three sections in order to reach the goal of becoming competent in developing the entire story.

As the following example indicates, the teacher introduces this stage of the strategy by stressing the importance of using the outline as a basis for developing the assigned story section.

Teacher: (to students) Now that we have developed our outline for the story and know the plot, we are going to take that outline and use it as a blueprint for embellishing our story. We have three pairs of students in

each group, and each pair is going to write about one part of the story. This is possible because we developed the outline for the whole story, so we know what happens before or after our individual section. (At this point, students and teacher make the section assignment.)

First, we need to review the complete outline for our story. Next, we must look at the part we were assigned and check the outline for the section on which we will be writing. We need to include all of those

## Take ACTION!

1. For stage 1, have students brainstorm possible story ideas for characters and setting and write them on large chart paper available to the entire class.
2. In stage 2, divide the class into heterogeneous groups of six students and have each

- group select the characters and setting for their group story.
3. In stage 3, give each group a graphic organizer containing the subtitles Beginning, Middle, and End and have each group outline the story's plot.

4. For stage 4, have each group of six students divide into pairs to compose one section of the story. Finally, have students evaluate the narrative for mechanical elements and share their story with one another.

events that are in the outline in our part of the story. At this stage, we need to get our thoughts on paper. Later, we will focus on spelling and grammar. After we write our section with our partner, we will get together with our group and read the complete story.

After each pair composes its section of the story by linking the individual elements within the story outline, the three pairs reconvene to read the entire story. During this period, students focus on whether all elements in the outline were included in each of their sections and note if anything needs to be added or deleted in order for the story to flow naturally and easily. After students are satisfied that the composition of all three sections of the story has met these established criteria, they focus on the mechanical elements and grammatical corrections. Each group then shares their completed story with the class. This is important because by taking the time to celebrate the students' attempts, teachers reinforce the idea that as writers, students can develop the crafting techniques necessary to create narrative plot.

## Practice and Support

SCPC is a strategy that supports students' development of creative writing and construction of text in a sequential manner. The goal of this strategy is to improve students' ability to create a story by helping them clarify their thoughts as they generate and organize ideas and basic story elements. SCPC enables students to focus on one section of the story at a time. As these examples illustrate, by deliberately planning and engaging students in stages within SCPC, students can develop their ability to produce well-crafted writing.

Depending on the students' ability levels, it can take several implementations of SCPC before students are able to apply the strategy on their own. In order for a strategy to be fully mastered and used effectively by most learners, repeated practice and varying amounts of gradually reduced teacher support are required.

As students are given extensive opportunities to use SCPC and become proficient in its implementation, teachers should encourage them to apply the strategy independently and strategically reduce the amount of support provided. To achieve independent

mastery, each student could be given blank character and setting formats and plot outlines as a prompt to help them implement the strategy with the writing of new stories. With repeated use of SCPC, prompting, and continued support, students should be able to apply the strategy in new situations and use it effectively to develop their own stories. Such strategy acquisition can provide lifelong benefits as students apply these skills in their writing.

## References

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## MORE TO EXPLORE

### ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plan

- "Empowered Fiction Writers: Generating and Organizing Ideas for Story Writing" by Shawna Rodnunsky

### IRA Books

- *I Can Write Like That! A Guide to Mentor Texts and Craft Studies for Writers' Workshop, K–6* by Susan Ehmann and Kellyann Gayer
- *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Beginning Writing, K–3* by Lori Jamison Rog
- *Marvelous Minilessons for Teaching Intermediate Writing, Grades 4–6* by Lori Jamison Rog

### IRA Journal Articles

- "An Effective Framework for Primary-Grade Guided Writing Instruction" by Sharan A. Gibson, *The Reading Teacher*, December 2008
- "A Model for Scaffolding Writing Instruction: IMSCI" by Sylvia Read, *The Reading Teacher*, September 2010

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