Teach Struggling Writers to Unite Their Paragraphs

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Abstract

This case study measured the effectiveness of a writing strategy designed to enhance the organization and cohesion of paragraphs written by four students with writing difficulties who are currently enrolled in a resource program. The strategy steps were taught through a mnemonic in which steps beginning with each letter of UNITE provided an overall action plan: 1) Unload all you know in note form; 2) Note categories and arrange facts into each; 3) Identify categories in your topic sentence; 4) Tie detailed sentences together with transitions; 5) End with an exciting conclusion. A self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) model was used to teach these steps. All four students made marked improvements according to measures of organization, completeness and cohesion. These gains were maintained over time and transferred to assignments done in classes outside the resource setting. Students also seemed to enjoy writing more so after learning this strategy.

Keywords
self-regulated strategy development, writing, middle school

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Students with writing difficulties struggle with: generating content, planning, revising, monitoring themselves as they write and handwriting (Troia, 2006; Graham & Harris, 2003). When these students receive supportive suggestions, such as being prompted to plan before writing, they still fail to do so (MacArthur & Graham, 1987). Instead, they often resort to "knowledge telling" (McCutchen, 1988), where they simplify the writing assignment by listing everything they know without evaluating which information is most essential, relevant or how it should be organized. Fortunately, such students show marked improvement after learning writing approaches based on the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) model, developed by Harris, Graham and their colleagues and described in Harris, Graham, Mason and Freidlander (2007).

The model goes beyond mere writing instruction to address metacognition. Students are coached to use self-talk to self-direct.

Overview of Self-Regulated Strategy Development

In this approach, students learn to self-instruct themselves through critical steps of the writing process independently. There are six stages to SRSD. These include:

Stage 1 Develop Background Knowledge
Stage 2 Develop Rationale for Using it
Stage 3 Model it
Stage 4 Memorize it
Stage 5 Collaborative Practice
Stage 6 Independent Practice

In the first stage, the background knowledge needed for them to write a specific type of assignment is developed and in the second stage the value of the strategy is discussed. In the third stage, students are then given extensive scaffolds such as model writing pieces so that they can 'see' examples of good writing. Additionally, students are given checklists to help them evaluate whether the model pieces contain the targeted exemplary characteristics. After that, students use these checklists to evaluate their own and their peers' writing. Once they show that they can successfully assess their writing, such scaffolds are slowly removed and they are encouraged to memorize the strategies in stage four. As student enter stage five, they formulate goals based on self-evaluations of their previous writing pieces. They then use these goals to guide them when they write next.

Additionally, in stage five they also continuously memorize mnemonics and checklists of self-instructions designed to guide them through the steps of the writing process so that they can work independently without teacher support.

Most importantly, the model goes beyond mere writing instruction to address metacognition. Students are coached to use self-talk to self-direct themselves while writing after they observe a teacher model self-instructing herself. Self-talk consists of statements that writers use to direct and motivate themselves while writing, particularly when they get stuck. Self-talk is used specifically by students to reinforce and applaud the work that they are doing, to understand the purpose of an assignment, to redirect focus on a specific area in writing and to allow writers to take a break from writing to refuel. Students learn to monitor and direct the self-talk they use while writing through hearing self-talk modeled, identifying the self-talk they use, reflecting on the effect of what they say to themselves while writing, creating new and more constructive self-talk patterns and monitoring their use of these as they write. These

types of scaffolds are similarly systematically removed as students master the steps of the writing process. In the final stage, stage six, they write entirely independently.

Our Rationale for Using SRSD

The SRSD model has been rated as the single most effective writing strategy available in a recent meta-analysis of writing instruction (Graham and Perin, 2007). Within those studies using this model, the specific teaching strategy that has been found effective for teaching expository writing skills, the area addressed in this study, has been the mnemonic TREE: Topic Sentence, Reasons (three or more), Ending, Examine (Harris et al, 2007). This mnemonic has enabled students to improve their planning and the overall quality of their writing (Sexton, Graham and Harris, 1998; Sawyer, Graham and Harris, 1992; Graham and Harris, 1989).

Students Selected for this Study

The students who participated in this study were in fifth and sixth grade students, two in fifth grade and two in sixth grade. All four had been identified as low achieving writers by their classroom teachers. After having been referred for extra support, their parents were notified and gave approval for them to be removed from foreign language and placed in a resource setting for remediation because they were all likely to receive passing marks in our school's English classes. None had been officially diagnosed with learning disabilities, but all four had recently moved to our school over the past 2 years and so had not yet had enough time here to qualify to be evaluated. I believe if they had been, at least three of them would be found to have learning disabilities because of the fact that there were noteworthy discrepancies between their ability to speak and their written language.

On a spoken level, they had impressive ideas and were extremely articulate. This was not reflected in their writing which was full of mechanical errors, brief and disorganized. The fourth student may just be low achieving in the area of writing. These students were a convenience sample in that they were selected because they were enrolled in the resource program at the school where the first author teaches.

Strategy Adaptation for My Students: UNITE

I adapted TREE to address the specific needs of these students. I observed that my students used the "knowledge telling" approach to writing, described in McCutchen (1988). They would fill a page with facts about a topic, yet their topic sentences were weak or nonexistent. Moreover, they used few transitions to link their ideas together and did not use effective conclusions. Therefore, I developed the mnemonic "UNITE" which I told them would help them unite the ideas in their paragraphs. Each letter in "UNITE" represented the first letter of an action designed to address their specific difficulties: 1) **U**nload all you know in note form; 2) **N**ote categories and arrange facts into each; 3) **I**dentify categories in your topic sentence; 4) **T**ie detailed sentences together with transitions; 5) **E**nd with an exciting conclusion. Each of the steps in this mnemonic was taught through the SRSD model.

I met with these students three to four times a week over nine weeks to teach this strategy. Before teaching the strategy, I collected three baseline paragraphs to assess their current writing skills. For these paragraphs, I asked the students to write about topics related to those being taught in their general education classes. Students were requested to write a paragraph on a given topic and to remember that a good paragraph is

well organized. They were not given any more support during the three pretest samples, or during the final post test sample, which I collected at the end of the unit. I also collected writing samples that they had completed in their regular English classes to see if they were using the strategy in other settings and during tests. All of these post test samples showed they had generalized using the strategy to other settings and maintained them over time.

Six Stages of SRSD used to Teach UNITE

The six stages of SRSD that I used to teach this strategy were not taught in an exact sequence. Rather, as recommended in Harris, Graham, Mason and Freidlander (2007), I moved through each and returned to earlier stages, as needed. According to this model, students move ahead at their own pace, based on their success and their having mastered each stage rather than at a predetermined pace. Therefore, students had to meet a certain criteria in each stage and activity in order to move forward. The following repeats the six stages of SRSD described above and describes exactly how the students moved through each in this specific study.

Stage 1. Develop background knowledge.

I began instruction by activating my students' prior knowledge about how to write a paragraph by asking them to answer specific questions about the parts of a paragraph. I asked them to focus on specifics such as: What is a topic sentence? What is a good supporting detail?

When discussing the various elements of a good paragraph, if they did not seem to

Whenever using it in class, I saw them write organizing outline notes in the margin to help them jot down their ideas

understand a fundamental concept, I discussed and reviewed it at the start of the next few classes until they seemed to grasp these concepts. These concepts included: thesis, topic sentences, reasons, supporting details and conclusion. Students kept their responses in a small notebook that was used throughout the entire unit.

Stage 2. Rationale for Using the Strategy

I then introduced each element of the mnemonic UNITE. I presented this mnemonic on large chart paper and posted it in the classroom. The students and I discussed why it was important to use these steps, when they would be used and why it would be helpful for them to know the mnemonic. They reflected on this several times in conversations and in their notebooks in response to structured questions such as: "When will you use this? Why is it valuable to learn?" We regularly shared and discussed their responses in the group. In addition, students kept these questions listed in their notebooks for future reference. For the most part, students stated that they wanted to learn the mnemonic because they believed it would help them to get better grades and write better.

Next, students scored their baseline paragraphs and then set goals for improving these, as an additional way to motivate themselves. A format for creating these is shown in Appendix B. Students scored their paragraphs according to whether they included all elements of UNITE such as topic sentences, succinct and relevant supporting details, effective transitions uniting the sentences and an exciting overview conclusion.

Scoring Unite Samples The following is the specific criteria used to score the paragraphs. Sample weak and strong anchors are included in the results section of this article. Each paragraph can receive up to fifteen points if it contains a complete topic sentence, related supporting details, effective transitions and an interesting conclusion. First, the topic sentence can receive up to four points. One point is given if it presents an overview of the main idea of the topic. Score one additional point each for up to three superordinate categories listed in the topic sentence, each of which overview the supporting detail sentences that follow in the paragraph. Next, the three main supporting detail sentences can receive up to three points each. The supporting detail can be more than one sentence if the same idea is extended in following sentences. Score one point if it is accurate and relevant, then a second point if the first sentence to address the supporting detail is richly detailed, smooth and concise. Rich means at least 3 valuable facts are well woven together smoothly. Score an additional third point for each supporting detail that is introduced with an effective transition. These can include specific transitional words such as "next or firstly", using pronouns that link back to an idea in a prior sentence or repeating words in a way that link backs to same idea in prior sentence effectively and smoothly. For the conclusion, score one point if present. Score an additional point if it rewords the topic sentence and effectively expands, enriches or adds an interesting perspective on the main idea. All paragraphs were scored independently by both authors. Few discrepancies in scores were found, but when they did occur these were resolved through discussion.

Individual conferences were held in which they set goals for their next paragraphs, based on the weaknesses they had identified

when scoring those they had written during baseline in the format shown in Appendix A. They recorded these scores on charts that they glued into their notebooks. They also recorded their goals in their notebooks and referred to them before writing their next paragraphs.

When the unit first began, students were not engaged or particularly interested in setting goals. In fact, behavior management at this time was still problematic with students often daydreaming, playing, fidgeting and generally appearing disengaged. However, after scoring several paragraphs, setting goals for their next paragraphs and achieving those goals, they began to see progress, and their behavior in class improved. Students became more engaged in class and more enthusiastic about writing.

In a key session, a student pointed to their graphs and said to another child, "Look the lines on our graphs are going up. That means we are getting better at this!" After that, they raced to class, sometimes arriving early, and eagerly asked, "Will we write a paragraph and score it today?" It seemed as if paragraph writing had begun to attain the status of a video game for them, and they were hooked. They also identified the reasons why the numbers on their graphs were rising.

We returned back to this stage many times after having moved ahead. When we did so, we revised the goals and discussed how they could use the strategy for specific tests and assignments in other classes. I had students specifically state when and where they would use it. This allowed them to envision themselves using the strategy in other settings, as transfer to other settings is the ultimate goal of strategy teaching.

We also reviewed student performance on assignments and evaluated how using UNITE had helped produce better writing so

that students would recognize the value of UNITE, attribute their success to it and, as a result, consistently use UNITE because they had been convinced of its value.

Stage 3. Model the strategy.

Before students wrote paragraphs independently, I initially modeled the steps of UNITE by writing a paragraph in front of the students, scoring it and then evaluating, with the students, what was exemplary about the paragraph I had written. However, in the early stages of modeling writing paragraphs, I found that the students did not attend well as I modeled the writing. Therefore, I asked them to help me write the paragraph; they copied it in their notebooks as I modeled it. The topics of the paragraphs were based on topics they were studying in English or Humanities classes.

I then reviewed the overall structure of the paragraph aloud while looking for elements targeted in UNITE. I modeled questions such as; "Have we unloaded all we knew before writing, organized information into categories and used those categories in the topic sentence?" We also evaluated the transition words and conclusion in the modeled paragraphs. While modeling writing, I diagrammed ideas in various graphic organizers, such as that shown in Appendix C, to help with organizing information before actually writing the paragraph. After modeling the writing of a paragraph, students collaboratively scored several model paragraphs themselves, and then scored a few independently. When students could score model paragraphs independently, I began coaching them in how to self-instruct themselves through the process of writing a paragraph.

In a key session, a student pointed to their graphs and said to another child, "Look the lines on our graphs are going up. That means we are getting better at this!"

First, and aloud, I self-instructed myself through the process of outlining and then writing a paragraph. Importantly, I also reinforced myself when I completed the process and used self-talk to congratulate myself on the aspects I felt I had done well. I carefully modeled those aspects of the paragraphs that students had difficulty with such as finding categories for the topic sentence. For example, I first listed various pieces of information related to Ancient China on the board, then categorized them under social, economic and political aspects of life in that society. Next I crossed out each as I added it to my modeled paragraph, used transitions between ideas and revised each sentence for richness and smoothness. I also intentionally left out certain steps or made errors and allowed students to correct me.

As recommended in Sexton, Graham and Harris (1998), I also modeled self-talk in the form of attributional self-statements. I wanted to model attributing success to our hard work and this strategy because these students often believe that good writing is partly based on luck and so I said, "If I work hard and follow the steps of the strategy, I'll write a good paragraph" and "I want to write a good paragraph, so I will try hard to use the strategy and include good paragraph parts (Sexton, Graham and Harris, 1998)." Essentially, I wanted to stress the role of effort and the value of this strategy in the self-talk I modeled. To lighten the atmosphere, I also made very negative self-statements at times and allowed them to catch me and correct me on these as well.

While thinking aloud, I also modeled asking questions such as; "What is the aim of this writing task? What are the steps that I have to follow in this task? I reminded myself that if I follow the writing strategy I will not encounter any problems and that I feel capable of writing a good text. I asked myself, "Am I following all the steps?" I also added that I did the first step, now the second step is ..." I told myself that I have made a big effort and I got a good result as well as self-reactions such as "I think this part does not actually make sense so I will add a sentence to clarify it. I am very satisfied, my text is great." Progressing through self-statements in this order is recommended in Fidalgo-Redondo & Garcia-Sanchez (2006).

Finally, I had students list their own self-talk with attention focused on how using the strategy and putting in the extra effort had helped to improve their writing. I also had them brainstorm what they could say when they felt stuck. To do this, I had them imagine themselves in situations in which they felt comfortable such as playing sports. I asked them to think about "What you would say to yourself when at bat." Students readily came up with statements such as, "It is OK. I can do this." "I will give my best like I do with basketball or art and then I know I can do well," and "When I don't have ideas, I'll just give my best and get it done." I wrote these statements on chart paper and referred to them while writing.

Stage 4. Memorization of the strategy.

Students practiced each step of the strategy until it became over-learned, which allowed them to internalize and recall it automatically, so that they could focus on using appropriate self-talk statements when necessary. I also had them practice saying each step during a ball toss game and saying

the steps as they entered the classroom. After several weeks, they began taking UNITE quizzes in which they would write down all the steps of the strategy as soon as they entered class; then we would score these. They kept track of their UNITE scores in the back of their notebooks. When they could recall the main point of each step, though not necessarily the exact words, correctly on three separate days, they no longer had to do the UNITE quizzes. This took about five attempts for each student.

Stage 5. Collaborative practice.

For the next step, I had students refer to the mnemonic chart as we continued to practice writing mini-lesson paragraphs together as a class with me serving as a scribe and them copying the paragraph, before they practiced writing their own paragraphs. I continued to model outlining the paragraph with a graphic organizer. While doing this, I added statements to the self-talk bank as I went along to emphasize the importance of talking ourselves through each step and encouraging ourselves as we proceeded. Next, we practiced using the checklist to ensure we had included everything for the paragraph.

When our students could easily create a paragraph working together and using graphic organizers, they were guided to begin self-instructing themselves more independently through each step of the process as they wrote their own paragraphs. If a step was omitted or not completed properly, I offered individualized feedback, support and guidance. I also provided feedback designed to enable them to understand how they were applying the strategy effectively and what they still could work on.

Students then used the checklist to evaluate their work individually and in pairs with peer editing checklists. Students had the

greatest difficulty with finding categories to list in their topic sentences. They could generate lists of ideas that were all related to the topic, but struggled with how to arrange these. I modeled this many times and had them participate by suggesting categories that their ideas might fall under that could be used for the topic sentence. I showed them how several categories which were all equally acceptable could be used to summarize various points. I also gave them a list of possible transition words that they could use to tie sentences together and we discussed what makes an exciting concluding sentence. As students became more proficient in writing paragraphs, I slowly eliminated each support such as the lists of transition words and graphic organizers. I monitored their progress toward achieving their own self-set goals to determine their readiness for fading the use of each graphic organizer.

Stage 6. Independent performance.

Students were encouraged to self-instruct themselves covertly in their minds rather than aloud at this point and to begin to refer less frequently to the mnemonic, graphic organizers, peer feedback and their written self-instruction statements. As they had memorized these, this step was achieved easily. At this stage, I also heavily emphasized transfer again which had originally been addressed in stage two. I reviewed their use of the revision strategies on writing samples collected from pieces they had written in other classes and we discussed together what obstacles had prevented them from fully

All of the post test samples showed they had generalized using the strategy in other settings and maintained them over time.

using the strategy in other classes and how they could overcome these. Instruction ended when students could write two full paragraphs with no support and no cue cards.

I found the fifth graders became able to self-direct themselves through this process more easily than did the sixth graders. Therefore, I had the sixth graders spend more time crafting self-instruction plans. They wrote up a list of steps with everything they needed to say to themselves when writing paragraphs. Once the list was complete, I quizzed them, asking them to write these out at the start of class, in a similar was as they had done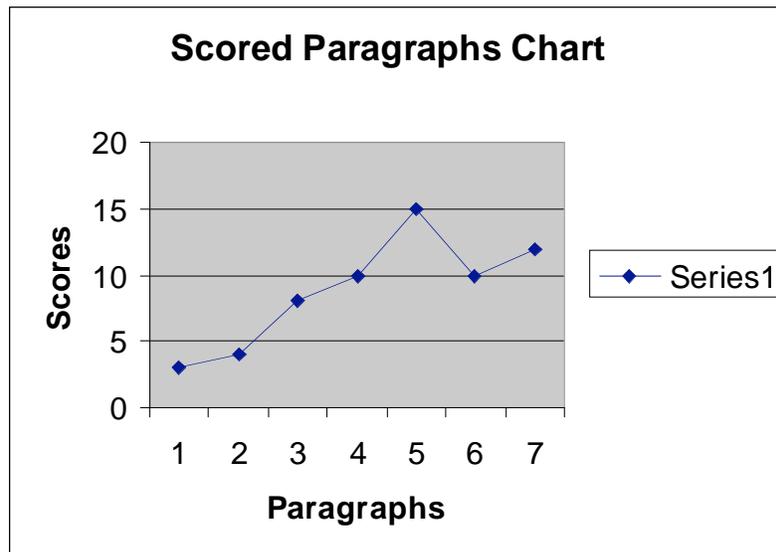 for the UNITE quizzes. After three attempts, they were both able to write out the six self-instructional steps that they created for themselves independently. These steps included some aspects of UNITE that they were having difficulty with, a statement used to encourage themselves and a strategy for outlining the major categories for their topic sentences. One student came up with a particularly effective plan for using the strategy. Essentially, he spontaneously wrote the three categories that he would use for crafting his topic sentence in the corner of his paper. He then referred to this list as he wrote. When he began doing this, his scores spiked and he easily met and exceeded his goals, as is shown in his chart (Figure 1).

I showed this to all the other students. The other fifth grader began using this strategy immediately. The sixth graders agreed that it looked helpful, but kept forgetting to use it so they added it to their self-instruction steps and then began to use it as well.

Figure 1: Scores on Paragraphs

Scored Paragraphs Chart

Student Gains

Each of the following were scored by two raters independently, the first and second authors. When scores differed, they were discussed until agreement was achieved.

Three pretest samples were collected and their scores were averaged. The post test was done two months later, when instruction ended. The maintenance samples were collected three months after instruction ended.

Sample of Student Gain from Pre to Post Writing Sample:

The following shows a typical progression of one student from a pretest to a posttest paragraph writing sample, followed by a sample written in an English in-class writing assessment. All of these samples were done entirely independently. Unlike during those written during the instructional stages, no teacher feedback, graphic organizers, written strategy steps or peer feedback were provided as they wrote these.

Pretest – written in resource class in September

A river is blue people live next to rivers. So the can get stuff from other places. rivers have fish in them. People get wator from rivers to drink. People called rivers hiways befor cars some places only have bouts and rivers instead of roads people used to wasch there clowes in rivers people bield citys next to water

Note that this exemplified "knowledge telling" well. There is just a list with no topic sentence, no organization, no transitions and no conclusion.

Post-test - written in resource class in November with no assistance

There are many difrent things about the stone age like the tools, the way they lived and how the look. Firstly, the tools that the cave men used where all made of stone. The tools where used for hunting and to make more tools. Secondly, the way the lived was

in caves. In some caves, there where paintings on the walls. But, later on when the mammoth hunters came they lived in tents made out of momoth bones and skin. Lastly. There are many difrent looks of cave men. Some of them had big bones and didn't look like a nice guy. These are some of the things are happened in cave times and how they looked.

Note topic sentence that lists three categories (tools, way they lived and how they look), organization as well as sequence of ideas follows from topic sentence and is marked with transition words, and summary conclusion. All of these transferred to his writing on the following Social Studies test done in another class with no teacher prompting or assistance.

Transfer Sample - written in Social Studies Class on a test with no assistance in January (Strategy instruction ended in November).

Life in the Neolithic age was much better (than Paleolithic) because there where much more skills, jobs and the population grew. Firstly, there where much more skills in the world like trading and bulding. you could trade ideas with people. Secondly, jobs because people had more time to do stuff like paint pitchers and become better in there skills. Thirdly, the population because with much more people more people could do stuff and the best thing is that they where nomads. All of those things make the sivilizations better and biger because with the animals they could ride and eat the animals.

Maintenance On the maintenance paragraphs which they wrote over eight weeks after instruction ended, students scores showed that they had maintained the ability to write well organized paragraphs. All stayed the same or increased except one who only went down one point.

Table 1: Scores on Paragraphs

Student Name	Pretest Averages	Posttest	Maintenance
Jamal	4.3	11	11
Carl	4.6	11	11
Jane	4.6	11	12
Geisel	4.6	9	10

Generalization: I collected writing samples from other classes and compared our

students' performance to their peers and found that they were using these strategies in

other classes. As a result their grades in other classes increased. For the two fifth grade students, they scored six and eight out of ten total possible points on a paragraph essay exam. The class range was three through ten, and the average was seven so they came up close and even passed the average class scores.

Reflections

After instruction had ended and one student was asked to write a paragraph at another time, she now complained that knowing this strategy bothered her because it slowed her down so much. Previously, she had been a typical "knowledge teller" and just wrote any related idea that came to mind in any order in a kind of stream of consciousness. Now, before writing she had to think carefully about all of her ideas, reflecting on how relevant they were and how she would organize them. She found this process tedious and demanding, feeling that writing was easier before. However, when we discussed the relationship between how using this strategy increased the quality of her writing, she smiled and acknowledged that this was absolutely true. Furthermore, the students' English teachers frequently commented on the remarkable changes they saw in how well these students began to organize their writing and how the changes sustained over time. In fact, months later the students still showed that they were fully using the strategy in other classes.

In time, all of the students heartily agreed that the strategy had helped them. Whenever using it in class, I saw them write organizing outline notes in the margin to help them jot down their ideas, cross out less relevant facts and order overall categories for a topic sentence. I also found these organizing outline notes written on the corner of their essay exams, taken in other classes. While they did not do this on anything they wrote for other classes, they did consistently use topic sentences.

Essentially, I found that teaching the UNITE mnemonic through the SRSD model helped these students to write better paragraphs, which transferred to other settings and was maintained over time. Perhaps most importantly, not only did they benefit from this strategy, but their positive comments and smiles suggested that overall they showed far greater enthusiasm, investment and enjoyment when writing.

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Appendix A: Paragraph Review Checklist

What is the topic sentence?
What are the three categories listed in my topic sentence?
Are the categories listed in the thesis in the same order in the paragraph? Yes or no
What is my first detail? Summarize it here.
      Does it contain three facts? List them.
      Are they well worded and do they make sense?
      Write the transitions used.
What is my second detail?
      Does it contain three facts? List them.
      Are they well worded and do they make sense?
      Write the transitions used.
What is my third detail?
      Does it contain three facts? List them.
      Are they well worded and do they make sense?
      Write the transitions used.
Did you summarize your topic sentence in the conclusion?
Do you give an interesting angle on the topic?

Appendix B: UNITE Writing Goals

Current state of my topic sentences:
      *Topic sentence improvements I plan to make:
Current state of my supporting details:
      *Supporting detail improvements:
(relevant, essential, concise yet richly detailed, new point, specific rather than
      too general.)
How many of my sentences use smooth transitions?
      *Goals for transition improvements:
Current state of my conclusion:
      *Goal for my conclusion:
      (summarize TS in an interesting way without adding anything
      new)
How will I know whether I have achieved each goal?

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