An exploratory investigation of the effects of prewriting on fifth grade students' writing ability

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AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PREWRITING
ON FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS' WRITING ABILITY

by

Katie Montegary

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
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ABSTRACT

Katie Montegary
AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECTS OF PREWRITING ON FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS’ WRITING ABILITY
2005
Dr. Marjorie Madden
Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the use of a graphic organizer during the prewriting stage of the writing process improved the writing of narrative compositions in fifth grade students. For this study, the Four Square approach to writing was the selected prewriting strategy. Four Square Writing is a systematic approach to writing designed around a graphic organizer that teaches students how plan before they write. The students in this study were introduced to the approach through small group instruction over a five-week period. By interviewing students, comparing writing samples throughout the intervention, and assessing writing using a rubric, I determined if there was an improvement in the students' writing throughout the study. At the end of the intervention, all of the students had exhibited improvement in their quality of writing. The findings of this study suggest that through appropriate instruction, students who employ prewriting strategies during the writing process can improve the overall quality of their narrative compositions.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my family for supporting me throughout this entire process. If it were not for my mom, this may have never become a reality. Her offer to sit on me until I was complete was my motivating force. Also, without the help of my dad and Nicole, the participants in my study would have never had such creative names. And as for Liz, her belief in my ability to write anything overnight was inspiring. I would also like to thank Paul who put up with my constant complaining, as he always does, and ensured me that I would complete this.

Next, I would like to thank Dr. Madden. Throughout this entire process, she believed in me and my study, even when I had doubts. Her support and expertise were priceless. Without her this would have never been possible.

I would also like to thank my participants. Their enthusiasm and high spirits turned this work into pleasure. I can only hope that I encounter more students like them in the years to come.

Finally, I would like to thank Travis for being behind me, literally and figuratively, every step of the way. I always knew that when I was feeling overwhelmed that I could call him and he would be in the same shape, and sometimes, even worse off. He was my constant reassurance that I could pull this off and we did it together.
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Chapter One

"Attention please, Attention please!" demanded the overly spirited woman, eager to begin her presentation. At the sound of her voice, I could almost feel the crowd collectively sink back into their chairs, preparing themselves for the undeniably long day that is synonymous with a scheduled, teacher in-service.

The presenter, obviously a former teacher herself, applied the stare-and-wait approach until she was certain that she had gained the attention of the entire audience. Once-satisfied with the noise level, she proceeded with an inquisitive tone in her voice. "All right," she directed, "Raise your hand if you ever took a writing instruction course in college."

As a pre-service teacher, in attendance merely as fulfillment for my course requirements, I almost immediately raised my hand, assuming that I was probably enrolled in one at the present time. However, once I processed the command, I slowly brought my hand back to my lap. "Why could I not come up with one single course that focused on writing instruction?" I pondered. As I mentally reviewed my course schedule over the past five years, I grew anxious. "Was it possible that I had no taken a course in that area?" At this point I began to grow angry at my "prestigious masters program" for inadequately preparing me and I also grew nervous at the possibility that I would not be hired or prepared to teach the following year and that....
Fortunately, shortly before I suffered a mini breakdown, I scanned the school auditorium filled with new and experienced teachers alike. All of them appeared to be coming to the same, disheartening realization that I myself had just reached. Not one single hand was raised. Could it be possible that an entire district of teachers had never received a formal course on teaching writing?

"Relax," announced the presenter, at precisely the right moment, "I have presented across the nation and each time I ask this question very few to virtually no hands are raised." With this said, the crowd appeared to simultaneously breathe a sigh of relief, satisfied that we were not the exception in this case. Yet, after my initial relief wore off, I was actually frustrated that I had not received instruction in such a crucial subject area.

"Does this make sense to any of you?" questioned the presenter. "We have all received extensive instruction in the areas of reading, math, science, and social studies. While some may argue that writing is embedded in all of these areas, I am not satisfied with this justification. Most teachers are not required to complete a course explicitly focused on writing instruction, yet it is a crucial part of every subject we must teach on a daily."

With this said the overall attitude of the audience changed. For the first time since she began her presentation, she had everyone’s full attention. People now sat upright in their chairs, nodding their heads in agreement with the “injustice”. “Now I ask you,” she proceeded, “How can you effectively teach others to write when you have never been taught to write yourself or how to instruct someone else to write?”
Story of the Question

In order to fully understand my position in this research, it is important to understand my personal connection to the topic. First and foremost, as a future educator, I am personally connected to the topic in my role of as a pre-service teacher. As the above vignette explains, I recently attended a mandatory in-service, which was focused on “Teaching Writing the Four Square Way”. As a pre-service teacher, I was required to attend the in-service in order to fulfill my requirements; however, on this particular occasion, I came away with much more than a simple check mark in the completed column.

After her insightful opening, the presenter focused the remainder of her presentation on a prewriting tool known as the Four Square Method. After spending a significant portion of the day learning about graphic organizers, the power of brainstorming, and several other key concepts, I was truly inspired. Could such a simple tool, the graphic organizer, really provide students with so much assistance and guidance? More importantly, would using the “Four Square” approach really lead to overall writing improvement?

Although I left the in-service inspired, I was still skeptical about the potential power of such a simple tool. However, during my experience in a special education classroom, my skepticism was abolished. In this particular classroom, the students were briefly taught how to design a Four Square and how to develop their ideas into solid writing. Yet, even despite their minimal training, the students began creating writing samples, which were longer, more detailed, and more structured. After just a few sessions of watching students “write the Four Square way”, I began to imagine the tool’s
full potential. What would happen if students were formally trained in “writing the Four Square way”? Would writing ability and quality really improve and, if so, would this improvement be substantial? As my thoughts began to explore the possibilities, I knew that it was my duty to examine whether the “Four Square” graphic organizer is truly connected to overall student writing improvement. And so begins my journey.

**General Background and Introduction**

The aforementioned presentation recently took place at an in-service I attended in New Jersey. However, as the presenter indicated, the lack of writing instruction is actually a national problem, not confined to only one school, or one district, or even one state. Over the past several decades, the United States has been struggling with how to address the issue of writing instruction within school districts. As early as 1975, a *Newsweek* article identified an escalating problem by announcing that the nation had encountered a “writing crisis” as a result of simply ignoring the basics of writing instruction (Nagin, 2003). Unfortunately, despite attempts made to improve the crisis situation, the nation still faces undeniable obstacles that must be overcome.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), many American students, from all academic levels, are struggling to develop as writers (Baker, Gersten, and Graham, 2003). In 2002, the NAEP conducted a national assessment used to evaluate the writing ability of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students in the areas of informative, narrative, and persuasive writing approaches (Nagin, 2003). Once the assessment was completed across the nation, results were compiled and the scores were published in a report titled “The Nation’s Report Card: Writing 2002”. For reading purposes, the results were divided into four separate categories: below basic, basic,
proficient, and advanced (Winick, 2002). Overall, the assessment results were compared to data collected from the 1998 NAEP writing assessment.

However, despite efforts towards improving students’ writing ability, fourteen percent of participating, fourth graders still tested at the “below basic level” (Baker, Gersten, and Graham, 2003). Along with this alarming statistic, the report card indicated that fifty-eight percent, or more than half, of fourth-grade students tested at the “basic level” (Baker, Gersten, and Graham, 2003). Therefore, according to the NAEP, seventy-two percent of American, fourth graders are either writing at or below the basic level, while only twenty-eight percent are writing at a proficient or advanced level (Winick, 2002). The study also provided detail about the writing instruction that most students receive in the classrooms. After reviewing the statistics, it is not astonishing that sixty-nine percent of fourth graders spend ninety minutes or less per week on actual writing assignments (Nagin, 2003). By simply examining the NAEP results, it is apparent that the national “crisis” mentioned above is still evident thirty years later.

Currently, a lot of research examining possible causes for the abundance of struggling writers exists, focusing on possible means for improving the ability of writers and the quality of writing throughout the nation. A substantial amount of this research examines the significance of implementing the writing process in classrooms, which indicates a shift from product-based instruction to process-based instruction (Alber & Marchisan, 2001; Calkins, 1994; Fleischman & Unger, 2004; Scott & Vitale, 2003). Once teachers substitute product-based writing instruction for process-based instruction, the emphasis of writing begins to shift from the final, written product to that of the process that was implemented to achieve the final product. Unfortunately, although this
paradigm is strongly supported in theory, standardized testing and large scale assessments, developed around impromptu essays, are not able to successfully assess students and at the same time support process writing instruction (O’Brien, 1992).

Along with the assessment mismatch, there are other problems that result from ineffective implementation of process-based instruction. In most classrooms throughout the nation, the writing process, defined as “the process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, which are not necessarily completed in a sequential process” (Tompkins, 2001, p. 20), is highly valued and frequently promoted. However, Donald Graves argues that writing instruction is still suffering as a direct result of insufficient teacher training, which is highlighted by teacher education programs that do not require a writing instruction course in order to obtain certification (Nagin, 2003). Although most teacher training programs offer instruction courses on how to teach math, science, reading, history, they do not provide instruction on how to teach writing despite the fact that it is embedded in all of the subject areas.

Therefore, as a result of incompatible assessment methods and inadequate training programs, educators are still struggling to appropriately implement process-based writing instruction. Although the entire writing process is of great significance, the prewriting phase is often regarded as one of the most crucial stages, responsible for setting the foundation necessary to produce quality writing (Marra & Shweiker-Marra, 2000). Even though it has been suggested that students spend approximately seventy percent of their writing time in the prewriting phase, employing prewriting strategies such as brainstorming, drawing, mapping, etc., it is still, by far, the most neglected stage of the
prewriting process (Tompkins, 2001). Therefore, it has been suggested that by improving students’ prewriting abilities, the overall quality of students’ writing will also improve.

Research Question

Consequently, since the key to improving student writing appears embedded in students’ prewriting ability, the question of this research study becomes “Does teaching the process of prewriting, when accompanied with a graphic organizer, improve elementary school students’ writing ability?” When used during the prewriting process, a graphic organizer serves as “visual aid or representation used to clearly illustrate and arrange one’s ideas” and is later applied during the remaining phases of the writing process to provide assistance when necessary (Gould & Gould, 2002).

Along with examining the results of implementing a graphic organizer, questions arise: Why was a graphic organizer, specifically the Four Square organizer, selected as the appropriate tool? and What are the primary elements of “quality” writing and what is a successful writing assessment that can identify these elements?

Significance of the Research

While examining the research on the writing ability in the elementary classroom, statistics indicate that almost fifteen percent of elementary school students can not even write at the most basic level and clearly indicate that the nation desperately needs to improve writing instruction (Nagin, 2003). These statistics alone suggest that the nation’s schools would significantly benefit from additional research focused on improving students’ overall writing ability.

As past studies have indicated, there appears to be a connection between the prewriting phase and improved writing performance (Marra & Schweiker-Marra, 2000).
Additional studies suggest that students, ranging from eighth to twelfth grade, who are taught to plan their writing assignments outperform their peers who do not plan more often than not (Nagin, 2003). However all of the previous studies have focused primarily on older students and neglect to examine the potential connection between the prewriting phase and the writing of elementary school students.

Along with this interesting realization, previous studies also indicate that students who engage in prewriting activities on NAEP assessments tend to achieve a higher level of proficiency than those students who do not (Nagin, 2003). Yet, despite this discovery, no studies appear to examine which prewriting activities are connected to a higher level of proficiency. Therefore, due to lack of research on the role of graphic organizers in writing and more specifically the role of Four Square writing in prewriting, this study hopes to determine if a connection exists between the use of a graphic organizer during the prewriting phase and students' overall writing ability.

**Limitations of the Study**

As I prepare to conduct a study of the prewriting stage and the implementation of the “Four Square” graphic organizer as a writing tool, I am aware that there are several potential limitations that may arise during my study. As all teachers are taught and quickly learn, the ability to be flexible is the key to successful teaching. Therefore, it is important for teacher researchers to also be flexible during the process. To successfully complete a study of “Four Square Writing”, I will need time to collect data, instruct and model, and then recollect data. Typical studies of this nature are often conducted on a daily basis for a significant amount of time. However, in this case, I understand that as a student teacher, I may not have that much time at my disposal. Often, in schools,
schedules are constantly changing and unplanned events are always surfacing. Therefore, the issue of time may impact the implementation of the “Four Square Writing”.

Another realistic limitation that may impact the study is the existence of student absenteeism. In this particular research, I will be conducting a case study on a selected population of an elementary classroom. If selected students miss sessions, resulting in lack of instruction and data collected, the study may be impacted. While preparing for this study, it is important to recognize that the data collected in this research will be done in an elementary classroom. In this setting, the issues of time and attendance will always be factors no matter what is studied.

What’s Next?

Throughout the remaining four chapters, the prewriting stage of the writing process will be thoroughly examined and studied. In the next chapter, existing literature about the writing process with an emphasis on the prewriting stage, the use of graphic organizers during the prewriting stage, and the elements of narrative writing is examined. The following chapter highlights previous studies and the conclusions reached during these studies. The next chapter provides information about prewriting and other elements of the research that will allow readers to better understand the data collected throughout this study. Finally, the second chapter will highlight why the “Four Square Writing” method was chosen and why this particular study is necessary.
Chapter Two

Throughout the following chapter, pertinent literature and existing studies on the topic of prewriting and the use of graphic organizers are examined. The examination of existing literature offers insight into the development of my study and will also assist in the implementation of my strategy. In order to fully examine the research question, "Does teaching the process of prewriting, when accompanied with a graphic organizer, improve the quality of writing in elementary school students?", three particular areas must be further dissected.

As the following chapter unfolds, I will first examine the topic of quality writing. By exploring a variety of sources, this chapter will offer several views on quality writing and what elements are necessary in creating quality writing. While examining the broad topic of quality writing, the literature will also examine the specific style of writing described as narrative writing and what constitutes quality narrative writing. Once this issue is addressed, the chapter will examine the use of process-based instruction in elementary schools. This section will explore the writing process with a particular emphasis on the prewriting stage of this process. Finally, once quality writing and the writing process are reviewed, the chapter will provide the latest research on using graphic organizers during the prewriting process. Finally, the chapter will then describe previous
studies that have been conducted based on similar research questions, while focusing on the design of the “Four Square Writing” approach.

Characteristics of Quality Writing

After examining a variety of different scholarly sources, it becomes clear that there are many different opinions on what constitutes quality writing. However, although there are many differences of opinion, there are also some common characteristics concerning perceptions on what makes a piece of writing quality. In this section the various views on quality writing, with a specific focus on narrative writing, are examined. To begin this examination, it is important to identify the characteristics of quality writing that most experts agree upon.

According to research, as students' develop into writers there are four major elements of writing that emerge and must be examined in all their complexities. According to Tompkins (2001), as elementary students' writing develops, ideas emerge, organization is evident, language is appropriately selected, and proper mechanics are employed (p. 98). Other experts concur with this opinion and also add additional characteristics to further define quality writing. According to several statewide assessments of writing, quality writing is determined across six aspects, including the four mentioned above, as well as content selection and voice (Isacson, 1999). Therefore, in order to create a piece of quality writing, experts can agree that “ideas must be creatively developed, content must be appropriate for purpose and audience, material must be presented in an organized sequence, the appropriate voice must convey the authors’ conventions, the selection of language must match the text format, and mechanics must be formatted appropriately” (Isacson, 1999, p.33).
In addition to examining the elements of quality writing, for the purpose of this study, it is important to understand the accepted definition of narrative writing and the key components found in this style of writing. Throughout the educational process, students are required to learn different styles of writing, including narrative writing. The purpose of narrative writing is "to recount an event or experience or to tell a story based on a real or imagined event"; additionally, narrative writing helps "foster imagination and creativity by providing an opportunity for writers to analyze and understand their actions and the actions of others" (Hodgins, 1996, p.13). While constructing a narrative essay, it is important for the author to remember two important factors: all narrative essays must tell a story and all narratives should, at the end of the story, prove a point (Hodgins, 1996). Therefore, when evaluating writing throughout this study, it becomes necessary to examine both the six characteristics of quality writing and the two elements of narrative writing.

Although a commonality can be found in determining the characteristics of quality writing, different experts hold different beliefs and argue that certain characteristics should receive more attention than other ones. According to Calkins, too much emphasis is placed on the structured brainstorming and planning phase of the writing process. She explains that "many educators imagine that rehearsal for writing begins with listing and choosing among ideas and topics", while most writers argue that "a writer’s rehearsal is the way of one’s life and living that life" (Calkins, 1994, p.31). Therefore, Calkins and her supporters feel that although organization and structure is important, the content and ideas presented in writing are the key elements to successful writing. However, although Calkins makes a valid point, other believe that in order to
properly convey creative ideas and content, writers must be able to organize their thoughts in a logical sequence (Nagin, 2003). They argue that the good writing evolves during the prewriting stage, when writers “organize ideas and find ways to properly control the content and flow of the piece” (Nagin, 2003, p. 9).

**The Writing Process**

Therefore, based on the beliefs of Nagin (2003), Calkins (1994), and many other researchers there are many elements that must be taught to create quality writing. Up until thirty years ago, students were expected to create final products that demonstrated creative ideas, appropriate content, organization, strong voice, rich language, and proper mechanics. During this time, students were evaluated largely on product and print, not the process that it took to achieve the final product (Nagin, 2003). As education progressed, the system recognized that a “student’s single writing sample does not measure ability and indicates little about a students’ knowledge of how to write” (O’Brien, 1992, p. 28). Thus, at this realization, Nagin (2003) states that the teaching and evaluating of writing shifted from “product-centered” to “process-centered” (p. 25). The term the writing process gained popularity and it is still widely used in educational practices today.

Once writing became “process-centered”, many different researchers and educators developed different stages that when combined created the writing process. Although, there are a variety of terms used to describe each stage of the process, the concepts behind each stage are extremely similar and can be explained using one single definition. Donald Murray (1982) and Calkins (1994) both define the stages of the writing process as prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. Other researchers,
including (Scott & Vitale, 2003) argue that there is an important fifth stage, that of publishing, which must be included to provide students with a sense of purpose. Further, it is crucial to realize that writing is "recursive" and it "does not proceed linearly but instead cycles and recycles as writers move throughout the process" (Nagin, 2003, p.25).

After understanding the development and definition of the writing process, for this study it is necessary to examine the prewriting stage in depth. According to the Nagin (2003) in conjunction with the National Writing Project, prewriting is "any planning activity that helps the writer invent and generate ideas to be developed into a piece of writing" and, further, writers may use organizational strategies, including graphic organizers, to help during the prewriting stage (p.26). Murray (1982) argues that at least seventy percent of writing time should be spent prewriting, so that students can select topics, consider audience and purpose, and organize ideas (cited in Tompkins, 2001).

A recent study, conducted by Marra and Schweiker (2000) investigates the effects of prewriting activities on the writing performance of at-risk students. During this study, the research indicated that "students who were encouraged to plan and define the purpose and structure were found to be better writers" (Marra and Schweiker, 2000, p.100). However, the study also indicated that many students, even when encouraged were not sure how to actually prewrite and if notes or outlines were created, most students did not later use these planning notes in future stages. Marra and Schweiker (2000) concluded that, "teacher-led prewriting activities were associated with the highest average proficiency scores (based in a holistic rubric assessment)" (p.109). This conclusion
indicates that prewriting is a crucial element to creating quality writing; however not enough instruction is given to students on how to prewrite.

In addition, Nagin (2003) with the National Writing Project, found that writers are often confused about how to begin writing because they do not know that writing “does not take shape all at once in fluent sentences and organized paragraphs” (p.9). In order to achieve a piece of quality writing, time must be devoted to planning and organizing, which will also save the writer time in the following stages. Despite several studies proving the importance of prewriting, it is still “the most neglected step” in the writing process (Tompkins, 2001).

Although most educators agree that prewriting motivates and prepares students for the remaining phases on the writing process, there are debates on how prewriting should be taught and what strategies are most effective at creating quality writing (Boiarsky, 1982). According to Boiarsky (1982), prewriting is itself a process consisting of several different stages, with the final stage creating an organizational plan. Educators must realize that students will need the tools and instruction on how to properly prewrite. Nagin (2003) suggests that methods including brainstorming, discussion, drawing, grouping, webbing, mapping, or outlining be modeled on a regular basis so that students can eventually prewrite independently.

**Graphic Organizers**

Therefore, studies and research indicate that the amount of time spent prewriting can positively impact the overall writing product. However, research has also indicated that students are not provided with time to prewrite or taught the strategies that produce effective prewriting. Gloria Houston’s article, *Learning How Writing Works*, suggests
that one of the most effective tools used during the prewriting phase is the graphic organizer (1997). A graphic organizer is a visual representation of concepts, knowledge, or information that can incorporate both text and pictures while allowing the writer to see undiscovered patterns and relationships (Sinatra, 1994). Common graphic organizers that are used frequently include concept maps, story webs, Venn diagrams, various outline formats, and flow charts.

When used during the prewriting stage, a graphic organizer provides writers with a visual plan that allows easy organization of ideas and a logical outline of various thoughts. Many supporters of graphic organizers agree that this tool allows students to conceptualize, understand, and structure a piece of written discourse successfully, while providing coherence and cohesiveness in a piece of writing (Houston, 1997). However, some researchers believe that the use of graphic organizers eliminate the creativity and originality in writing. Some believe that the use of a graphic organizer during writing is damaging to the creative process and will result in unoriginal five-paragraph, similarly structured essays (O’Brien, 1992).

Although it is important to recognize the warning contained within this belief, during the age of standardized testing, graphic organizers are quickly becoming students’ most reliable tools. Although writing is supposed to be a process, large scale, standardized assessment, which evaluates students on their final essays, “send the message that developing writers need not think and work out their writing” (O’Brein, 1992, p.28). There exists a mismatch between process-writing instruction and most state assessment tools for evaluating writing. Therefore, although it does not solve the assessment problem, graphic organizers can be used during standardized testing to ensure
that students are still approaching writing as a process, with a strong emphasis on prewriting. The use of a graphic organizer allows students to “structure writing projects while ensuring that several elements of quality writing (ideas, organization, voice, content, and language) are addressed and incorporated” (Houston, 1997, p. 42). It is crucial for educators to acknowledge that creativity in writing and its structure are also important; however learning the proper structure and the three to five-paragraph framework is also equally as important. Therefore, the use of graphic organizers during the prewriting stage will assist students and, ultimately prepare them for both creative writing and standardized testing requirements.

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to examine closely one particular graphic organizer, know as “Four Square Writing”. Creator Judith Gould defines “Four Square Writing” as a “step-by-step approach is built around a simple graphic organizer that first shows students how to collect ideas and then helps them use those ideas to create clear and polished prose” (Gould, 2002, p. 2). The simple graphic organizer consists of dividing a piece of paper into four squares and placing a smaller fifth square in the middle of the sheet. Students are then taught specific steps, depending on the grade level, to complete the graphic organizer and use the tool to complete a specific writing assignment. Since “Four Square Writing” is so versatile, this approach can be used to assist students with the development of persuasive, narrative, informative, and expository writing assignments. With this approach students are clearly taught the skill of organizing and clarifying their thoughts around a topic and developing that content into sentences and then paragraphs (Gould, 2002).
The “Four Square Writing” approach consists of a lot of teacher based instruction and modeling to ensure that students are familiar and comfortable with the process. When explored in the early elementary grades, students are taught classification, developing main ideas and supporting details, and the basic structure of a paragraph. As the students progress, “Four Square Writing” evolves as well. Students in the later elementary grades or middle school, are taught to create a main idea, topic sentences, and supporting details. The use of elaboration and the ability to select vivid language is also strongly emphasized. At this point, students are also taught to use transitions between thoughts and how to develop multi-paragraph, writing samples. As stated above the use of graphic organizers, including the Four Square organizer, can help students develop structured and planned pieces of writing that embody the characteristics of quality writing (Houston, 1997).

Although graphic organizers have proved successful in small scale studies, According to C. G. Rice there is “no systematic approach to analyzing graphic organizer research, resulting in a lack of explanations for why graphic organizers work or do not work” (1994, p.26). Therefore, although there is some research on the topic of graphic organizers, the topic still needs further investigation.

What’s Next?

In the following chapter, the actual framework of the study is described. The specific process of implementing the prewriting strategy, known as “Four Square Writing” is also addressed in several steps. The general methodology is examined, the specific participants and the environment are described, the procedures are explained, and the method for data collection and data analysis is briefly discussed.
Chapter Three

In the previous chapter, the existing literature on the topics of prewriting, graphic organizers, and the quality of narrative writing was examined. The literature provided insight into the importance of prewriting and the various strategies that can be used to assist students during the prewriting stage. Based on the literature and personal experience, the study described in this chapter intends to examine the research questions outlined in Chapter One. First and foremost, the study was designed to determine “does teaching the process of prewriting, when accompanied with a graphic organizer, improve elementary school students’ writing ability?” Also, throughout the implementation stage and analysis stage of this study, additional questions including “why was a graphic organizer, specifically the Four Square organizer, selected as the appropriate tool?” and “what are the primary elements of “quality” narrative writing and how are these elements appropriately assessed?”.

General Methodology

For the purpose of this research, the use of a case study, or “a study where a researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, or a process by focusing on one or more individuals”, was selected as the appropriate framework (Creswell, 2003, p.15). Through the use of a case study, I was able to thoroughly examine the
implementation of “Four Square Writing” with six diverse students from my student teaching placement. Creswell also explains that the case study is “bounded by time and activity”, which is appropriate for this study since it will be bound by the length of my student teaching experience and by the actual implementation of “Four Square” approach during this time frame. Finally, the definition of a case study states that “researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (Creswell, 2003, p.15). Therefore, throughout this study over a six-week period of time, I utilized several data collection procedures including student interviews with the selected students, entries in my teacher-research journal, student completed “Four Square” graphic organizers, and student writing samples. Overall, based on the purpose of this research, the framework for a case study seemed the most appropriate based on the elements identified above.

Research Participants and Setting

Throughout this study, all of the data was collected in the elementary school classroom. In this particular study, the elementary classroom was a fifth grade inclusion classroom located in suburban New Jersey. At this particular school, the term inclusion implies the full inclusion of all students at all times. In this inclusion classroom, there were twenty-three students in the classroom with two full-time teachers, one general education teacher and one special education teacher. Out of the twenty-three students, seven were classified and had Individualized Educational Plans. All of the students received all instruction in the classroom. The only time that students received outside instruction was for speech therapy, occupational therapy, gifted and talented instruction, and counseling sessions. Along with the diverse academic needs found in this classroom,
the students were also from diverse backgrounds, including different races, religions, and socioeconomic statuses.

For the purposes of this study, I chose to not complete the intervention with all twenty-three students. Due to the possible limitations presented by time constraints, I felt that a selected population of students could provide valid insight into the effectiveness of the “Four Square Writing” approach. In order to accurately capture the diversity of this fifth grade classroom, I chose to study six students that embodied the differences that most classrooms throughout this country also contain. With the assistance of my cooperating teachers, I selected the six students based on specific requirements.

First, I determined that I wanted a cross sample of genders, so I decided to select three males and three females to participate. After determining that I would select half females and half males, I decided that I wanted to incorporate a variety of different academic levels. For the males, I selected one student classified with as Learning Disabled (LD), one student with no classification or special needs, and one student who received gifted and talented instruction outside the classroom. For the females, I selected one students classified as LD with a speech impairment, one student with a low IQ but no classification due to the “significant discrepancy” clause, and one student with no classifications or special needs.

Along with selecting students based on sex and academic level, I also considered the issue of race. Out of the six students selected, one student was African American, one student was Filipino, and four students were Caucasian. The final factor that I considered was the socioeconomic status (SES) of each participant. In this study, two students were from low-income homes and received free breakfast and free lunch through
the school. The remaining four students were from either middle or upper-middle class homes. After considering a variety of factors, including sex, academic level, race, and SES, I arranged a very diverse group of students with which to conduct my case study.

**Procedures**

Throughout this study, I was under a lot of constraints with time. Therefore in order to ensure that all necessary data was collected I developed a very precise schedule of procedures that needed to take place. Each stage of the process took place during a 45 minute session conducted in an empty classroom in the school building. These procedures, in turn, become my data sources.

The first procedure for this study was to collect narrative writing samples from the students. The first sample needed to be collected in order to provide baseline data as to what level of writing each student was at prior to the implementation of the “Four Square” approach. The students were assigned, as a class, to write a narrative essay based on the topic “Snow Day”. The students were told to take time to plan ideas before they actually began writing the story, but were not required to provide evidence of planning. The students were then required to submit a rough draft to the teachers that would only be edited for mechanics. This writing sample was completed in one language arts session.

The second procedure was the assessment of the student writing samples using Judith Gould’s “Four Square” rubric. I completed the rubric following the assigned point scale. Each student then received a point total ranging from 6 to 18 based on the quality of the writing sample. The score also indicated if students were writing at a below
average, average, or above average level. This score was put on file with the sample for later comparison.

The third procedure was the pre-implementation interviews which I conducted individually with each student. Each student was asked five questions: how often do you write, do you plan before you write, why do you plan, how do you plan, and who taught you to plan. During the interview, all of the answers we recorded verbatim and later transcribed.

The fourth procedure was the introduction of the “Four Square” writing approach. At the beginning of this session, students were introduced to the concept of the four square organizer. The teacher modeled the necessary elements needed and the skills required to complete the assignment. The teacher and the students completed a “Four Square” on an unrelated topic to model the proper technique. Then the students were required to complete a basic “Four Square” for another narrative on the “snow day” topic. Students were required to list cause, effect, consequence, and solution in each box, but the ideas did not need to be written in complete sentences. The students also were required to list three details, using “feel, see, and hear words”, to add to the topics listed at the top of each box. Students were given assistance throughout the development process if they asked for it or if I deemed that assistance was required.

Then the fifth procedure was an expansion of the first “Four Square”. Students were required to use the information from the first “four square” and add additional elements to the product. Students were expected to turn the topics at the top of each box into appropriate topic sentences. Students were then introduced to the puzzle piece connecting word lists. After receiving explanation, students were required to select appropriate
In the sixth part of the process, students were required to *turn the "Four Square" into an actual writing sample.* The teacher modeled the process of writing from the organizer, using the four square that was completed as a class. The students were able to assist in the process and question any areas of concern. The students were then required to complete a multi-paragraph essay directly following the planning completed on the four square organizer.

During the next part of the process, I evaluated the final products of each student using the same rubric as before. I analyzed the four square organizers and read each students’ final essay. Then, independently, we each completed a rubric evaluation of the students’ essays. Each essay was then awarded another point scores, both ranging from 6 to 18 points.

The final stage of the procedure took place over a two period session. As a group students selected to *write another narrative essay on the topic of "being stuck in the Deptford Mall".* Students then created four squares for the assignment following the skills and procedures that they learned in the previous sessions. Students were able to ask questions, but the teacher only provided minimal assistance. Then students were required to complete a final, multi-paragraph essay. Students were responsible for turning in both a completed four square graphic organizer and a final essay.

Then, to conclude the study, I evaluated the students essays using the same rubric as before. The essays were awarded points based on the same scale of 6 to 18 points. As with all the essays read during the process, students’ names were not revealed until after a
score was awarded. This was a measure taken to ensure validity among the scoring process at all times.

After these procedures were completed, I complied a variety of different data sources. By following these specific steps, I was able to collect three writing samples from each participant, conduct two individual interviews, and three rubric assessment scores for each participant. After collecting the data, it was necessary to analyze the information and discover if any themes existed across participants.

Data Analysis

Once the procedures for collecting data were complete, I had to analyze the information that I had collected. As a result of using the format of a case study, much of the data that I collected was qualitative and relied on the collection of naturally occurring situations (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, in order to successfully present all of the information collected I presented my data in the form of thick description. According to Hubbard and Power (1999), thick description is “a sufficient amount of detail in describing the research techniques to allow others to make needed comparisons to research completed in other settings” (p.120).

In order to appropriately analyze all of the data, it is necessary to employ the process of triangulation. In this particular study, I relied on three major sources of data: student writing samples, student interviews, and rubric assessments. Triangulation is the process of “using different and multiple sources and methods to confirm findings (Hubbard&Power, 1999, p.120). Using the three major data sources collected, I triangulated the data and was able to discover the major themes that existed across all participants. Then, after determining the most appropriate organizational format, I
created an individual case study for each student to thoroughly report all of the findings in the format of a story.

**What’s Next**

In Chapter Four, the data is qualitatively analyzed and the findings of my research are presented in the form of individual case studies. As I share the story of each participant, the data collected for each student, as well as his or her experiences with the intervention, are illustrated. After sharing each student’s case study, the end of the chapter examines all of the data collected and there is a summary of all the results.
Chapter Four

In this chapter, I display my research data results in the form of four individual case studies. By utilizing the format of a case study, I am able to use narrative form to present each student and his or her experience with the intervention. Each individual case study provides "a detailed in-depth examination of the individual," including not only the data results collected but also insight into the individual person and his or her personality (Hubbard and Power, 1999, p.120). In analyzing the various data sources, I recognized that each student has his or her own story and that each story provides critical information necessary to fully understand the study.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, this study was initially designed using six students as participants; however two of these students were not able to complete all of the components as a result of unavoidable absences from school. Therefore, since these students missed essential components of the implementation, I determined that the data collected for these students would not provide a valid depiction of the study and its results. Although the study had to be modified, a substantial amount of data was collected on the four students who were able to participate throughout the entire study. During the analysis of this data, I discovered themes and patterns that were common throughout all of the case studies.
For the purposes of this chapter, I discuss the results of each case in three parts. These three sections were selected because they seem the most logical and appropriate way to illustrate the intervention. These selections were also determined since they are able to naturally portray the students' growth, or lack of growth, as writers. Therefore, after examining the students’ pre- and post-intervention interviews, several student compositions, rubric assessments, and brief excerpts from my teacher-research journal, I organized the information in the following three areas: pre-intervention, during intervention, and post-intervention. After selecting the organizational structure that also clearly depicted the results of the study, I composed individual case studies to share the story of each student writer. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, the four case studies are presented in no particular order. Then, after each case study is examined, the end of the chapter investigates the data across each case study to present a summary of all the results.

**Detailed Intervention Plan**

In this section, a detailed description of the intervention is described. For this particular study, there were several different stages that had to be specifically implemented in order to collect the appropriate data. Before the data is analyzed, it is important to examine the details of the data collection process.

Upon beginning the intervention with the selected students, I collected narrative writing samples from all students to determine his or her writing ability prior to the “Four Square” intervention. Each student was given the same directions and the same assignment. Shortly after the students and teachers had received a much needed snow day, the students were instructed to complete a narrative essay on the topic “Snow Day”.
The students were reminded that narrative essays are personal stories, either real or imaginative, told by the author. The students were then instructed to create an original essay. Although the students were also reminded that good writers plan before they actually begin writing, students were not required to provide any evidence of planning. Students were only expected to submit rough drafts of his or her completed essays. After the students received the assignment, I circulated throughout the group to observe each student and how he or she approached writing.

Then, after each student completed the sample essay, I used a rubric designed specifically for assessing writing developed with the "Four Square" approach (Gould, 2002). The rubric was based on the six characteristics of quality writing: the ideas and topic, the organization, the voice and style, the content, the language, and the mechanics. While using this rubric, it is suggested that a specific skill be identified for the mechanics section. For the purpose of this study, students had just completed a study on adjectives and vivid language, so that was the selected skill that would be analyzed throughout all of the writing samples.

Next, each element on the rubric is assigned a point value of 1 point to 3 points. One point is received if the element is seen “not enough”, two points are received if the element is seen “mostly”, and three points are awarded if the element is “definitely” seen. Students can receive a minimum of six points (one point for each element) or a maximum of eighteen points (three points for each element). According to the point range, an essay ranging from 6 to 10 points can be considered “not enough” quality or below average. An essay ranging from 11 to 14 points is considered “mostly” quality or average.
Finally, an essay ranging from 15 to 18 points is considered “definitely” quality or above average.

After collecting data prior to the introduction of the “Four Square Writing” approach, I was able to begin the intervention with the selected students. To begin the intervention, I presented the basics of the “Four Square” approach. As mentioned in the previous chapters, the “Four Square Writing” approach is not just the act of prewriting while using graphic organizer. It is actually a formulated approach centered around a simple graphic organizer. However, the approach is designed to be taught over a significant period of time building slowly upon different skills until the students have mastered each skill and are able to move onto the next phase. This approach is designed for students as young as kindergarten to begin learning to write the “Four Square” way. For this particular study, I implemented the approach with fifth grade students, who had never had any prior experience with the “Four Square” approach.

Although this was each student’s first experience, the students did not need to begin at the beginning stage of the process. Since the students are in fifth grade, they had received several years of formal writing instruction and had learned a lot of the skills that are addressed throughout the approach. Therefore, it was possible for me to introduce the approach starting at the fourth stage where students learn to use the four square organizer, create main ideas, provide three supporting details, and use vivid language (referred to as Four Square + 3 + V). It is important to acknowledge that this approach is designed to be taught over a sustained amount of time. As a result of the limited amount of time I had to complete this study, the instruction was taught in a shorter amount of time than suggested by the creators. However, to make up for my lack of time, I provided a detailed modeling
of each stage and I also provided support throughout the intervention to those students who required assistance.

On the first occasion with the approach, I created a sample Four Square + 3 + V with the students. Since the students were going to be using this approach to rewrite their “snow day” narratives, I created a sample using the topic “summer day”. I illustrated the information that went in the center box, including the who, where, when, and what of the story. Then I demonstrated how a beginning was written in the first square, a cause was written in the second square, an effect was written in the third square, and an ending (or solution) was written in the fourth square. I highlighted the importance of including actions in each box; since a narrative tells a story and verbs are necessary elements for storytelling. Then, with the help of the students we added three details into each box that went with the topic. The students not only had to have three details, but they were encouraged to use vivid language that would allow a reader to see, hear, and feel the story. After completing a group Four Square + 3 + V, each student was then instructed to create one independently using the same topic of “snow day”.

After completing the first session and introducing the “Four Square” approach, the second session was devoted to the expansion of the initial skills taught. In the second session, I taught the students how to turn the Four Square + 3 + V into the Four Square + 3 + V + E + C (or the Four Square plus three details plus vivid language plus elaboration plus connecting words). In order to thoroughly teach this process, I used the “summer day” four square that we had completed as a group. I once again modeled the process. This time, the elaboration element required the students to turn the main ideas into topic sentences. I modeled the process and had the students assist with the creation.
Then I explained that the four large squares would each be turned into a paragraph during the writing stage. However, before the planning was complete, the students needed to learn about “connecting” words, or transitions. With the assistance of three work sheets created by Judith Gould, I presented several common connecting words that help “piece the squares together just like putting together matching puzzle pieces” (Gould, 2002, p. 82). The students were each given a copy of all three worksheets and they were instructed which words could be used at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Then, as a group, we selected the most appropriate words for the sample four square. I was certain to inform the students that any word on the sheets would work when used in the proper place, but some words worked better in certain situations. Once the modeling was complete, students were required to complete a Four Square + 3 + V + E + C independently using the four square they created during the first session.

Once the intervention was complete, it was necessary to examine if the students were able to implement the strategy without assistance. This phase would make it possible to determine if the students’ writing had improved when compared to the first collected sample. For the purposes of this assessment, the students, as a group, selected a topic for a narrative essay: “Stuck inside the Deptford Mall”. After selecting the topic, the students were required to complete a “Four Square” organizer following the Four Square + 3 + V + E + C format. Then, the students were expected to turn the completed four square into a multi-paragraph essay. During this final stage, the students would not receive any further instruction and only minimal assistance would be provided to avoid frustration among the participants. Upon completing all of these steps, the students’ work will be analyzed.
Case Study Stories

Veronica's Story

Pre-Intervention

Veronica, at a first glance, is every teacher’s dream come true. She is eager to please, hard working, and never ever utters a complaint. However, Veronica has an extremely low IQ, but she is not currently classified because there is no “significant discrepancy” between her IQ and test scores. As one of her teachers, I quickly recognized that she was one of the students that often needed additional support, even if she was hesitant to ask for help. Therefore, although she appeared to understand the assignment, I was curious to see what constituted a narrative essay in Veronica’s eyes.

As I watched Veronica begin to tackle the assignment, I noticed that she appeared to brainstorm ideas for her story. She quickly listed several words associated with snow and winter including “snow flakes, snowmobiles, no school, ice”. Once I collected the student writing samples, I conducted individual pre-intervention interviews with each student. After asking Veronica how she planned before she wrote, she explained “I will think of ideas, write them down, and put them in order to pick the best ones.” Although Veronica appeared to think about her story before actually writing it, her list of words did not appear to be organized in any logical fashion and when she began writing her list was placed underneath her paper never to be referred to again. All in all, Veronica spent less than three minutes planning for her story.

Then Veronica began to write her narrative essay explaining one particular snow day. Her story began with a well developed introduction that explained the topic:
I woke up one winter day and ran down the stairs. I looked out the window and quickly turned on the radio. We had no school! I was so happy. I went to go get breakfast and watch the toons that I always have to miss. I couldn’t wait to see what I would do on my snow day.

Veronica’s beginning was very well developed. She had a clear topic sentence and closing sentence. She also explained the topic of her essay to her audience.

However, despite her strong introduction paragraph, the remainder of the essay was disorganized and did not flow in a sensible order. In the following paragraph Veronica’s lack of planning became evident with her jumbled thoughts:

I went to Vicki’s house because I like to hang out with her. We rode snowmobiles and explored the woods. We wanted to find a place to have a campout. We were finding many things. We made lots of snowball. I like snow but it is cold. Ryan my cousin sneaked up on me. I hate when he does that because it makes me jump.

We finally found a spot to build a campout. Of course...

Throughout the remainder of her essay, Veronica continued to list a variety of activities and her involvement. Although her ideas were linked to topic, they were not presented in an organized fashion, which resulted in a narrative essay that was very hard for readers to follow.

Along with her unorganized thoughts, the writing sample also illustrated Veronica’s difficulty with identifying appropriate paragraph spacing. Although Veronica had a clear introduction paragraph, she only had one paragraph in her body that included several different major events, including a search for a campout, a snowball fight, and an encounter with an unfriendly snowplow. Finally, at the end of her essay, she did create a
conclusion paragraph. However, the closing paragraph was lacking basic elements including a transition, a restatement of the topic, and an ending:

_The next day we had to go to school. But then we went back to the spot. It was so perfect and we were finally done building. We hang out at the snowy campout a lot._

This paragraph did indicate the end of her story, however it did not have a solid closing sentence to signify the end and restate her topic sentence.

Overall, Veronica’s essay was three paragraphs in length. As she explained during her initial interview, Veronica feels that the more one writes the better the story becomes. When I asked her why she plans before writing, she simply stated that “it helps me write more and it is important to write more.” Therefore, after examining Veronica’s answers and her narrative essay, Veronica may have felt that she was successful in her planning and writing simply because she was able to write three complete paragraphs.

After assessing the sample essay Veronica completed, she received a total of 10 points, placing her at the high end of the below average level. Veronica received the lowest amount of points, only one point, for the organization of her essay, the content of her essay, and her use of mechanics, specifically her use of vivid language. Her main weaknesses were her ability to organize her thoughts and determine appropriate paragraphs. Her essay did receive three points in the area of topic since all of her ideas, no matter how confusing, were related to the topic of snow day. Overall, Veronica’s writing sample and pre-intervention interview depicted Veronica as a struggling writer who was eager to put forth the effort, but lacked the knowledge of how to properly plan and use her plan to then create a coherent essay.
During Intervention

After teaching and modeling the four square process, I was interested to see how the students would perform working alone. The students were not given back the original writing samples; however, they were told that they were allowed to use the same ideas as long as they created a proper four square. While observing the students' first experience with the "Four Square" approach, I noticed that Veronica seemed to grasp the concept quickly. She immediately filled in her four square center box explaining that the characters were “me, Vicki, my cousin, and my mom”. She also identified the setting as both “my house” and “the woods”. Then she explained that the story took place in “the winter” and it focused on “exploring for a spot”. After observing her center box, it was obvious that Veronica was using the same story she first created. I was curious to see if the four square organizer would help her better organize her ideas.

After completing the center box, Veronica sat for quite a while staring at her blank organizer. Initially I thought that she was confused with the directions and that she was just avoiding asking for help. As I began to approach her, I noticed that she was beginning to write. I quickly asked if she needed assistance and she replied that she was simply trying to pick out the best parts from her first story. At this moment I realized that I mistook Veronica’s mental planning as simply sitting and staring. She then filled in each box with details about selecting a campout site. She had successfully identified the four main parts of her story and even used action words in each box:

(1) School closed, (2) Went to Vicki’s to find a campout, (3) Looked for a spot and found a perfect one, (4) Build it and now we go there a lot
By identifying the main elements of the story, Veronica had successfully planned out her story in a logical sequence. She also provided three details for each box; however the language selected was not very vivid and she failed to include a lot of adjectives. In her first box, she explained that she “saw snow outside”, “heard the radio”, and “felt happy”. Although these were all supporting details for the “school closed” square, she did not include adjectives that assisted the reader in creating a visual image. Overall, the session appeared to help Veronica organize her ideas, but it did not help her improve her details or her selection of descriptive language.

While observing the students working independently, I noticed that Veronica seemed to struggle with the development of topic sentences. Although she had created four strong story parts, she had difficulty turning her ideas into a sentence. In the first box where she explained “school closed”, she developed the following sentence, “One morning school closed.” Although this is an opening sentence, compared to her first sample, “I woke up one winter day and ran down stairs”, it lacks excitement and the ability to grab the audiences’ attention. Veronica had difficulty with constructing three out of the four sentences.

Also, while observing Veronica’s work, I noticed that she was very comfortable with selecting appropriate connecting words. She was able to identify which words worked well with specific sentences. For her third square, she was able to create a decent topic sentence in addition to an appropriate transition. Her third sentence was her strongest created using the elaboration and connecting strategies:

*Then, we searched the woods looking for the perfect spot and we would not stop until we found it.*
Based on this sentence, it was evident that Veronica understood the purpose of connecting words and was able to use them properly to help make her piece flow more smoothly. Overall, although Veronica did struggle with the creation of topic sentences, her first four square illustrated her ability to identify key story elements, while focusing on the organization and structure of her writing.

As the final portion of the intervention, the students were taught how to “write right from the four square.” As with the other steps, I modeled exactly how students were expected to complete this final process. With the group created four square on the “summer day” topic, I modeled how easy it was to write a complete essay when a four square was correctly and completely filled out. I illustrated the important fact that each square, except for the center square which was combined with the introduction paragraph, represented a separate paragraph. Each paragraph needed to have a connecting word, a topic sentence, and three supporting details. Therefore, following this pattern each paragraph should have a minimum of four sentences since each supporting detail should be turned into its own sentence as well. Also, I illustrated the importance of creating a closing sentence for the final paragraph by restating the topic and main theme of the entire narrative essay. I had each student take a turn recording a sentence, directly from the four square, in the final essay. The students were given a lot of practice with this technique and were then expected to do the same with his or her graphic organizer.

During this part of the intervention, I found that Veronica understood the instructions and the process; however, she seemed to have some difficulty turning her supporting details into sentences. In her second square, she explained that she went over to Vicki’s house to find a campout. Her supporting details included “it had to be hard to
see", "it had to feel safe", and "it had hard for other people to hear". Although these are appropriate supporting details, her final paragraph did not successfully illustrate her thoughts:

So, I went to Vicki’s house to try and find a campout. It had to be hard to see. It had to feel safe when we went in. And it had to be hard for other people to hear. We could say whatever and get away from people.

She was able to turn each detail into a sentence; however she did not add any vivid language to add to the story. Also, she did not fully explain each of her thoughts, which may leave the reader confused. Overall, she was able to turn each square into a complete paragraph, but she did not add in creative language or any personal touches like she had in her first essay. Perhaps Veronica was simply trying to understand the process and was not aware that she was encouraged to add more as she generated her essay. After she completed her essay, I informed Veronica that it was okay to add extra detail into the story and put in vivid language to help the readers create pictures in their minds. She seemed relieved about this and said, “I thought we could only have just what we put in the squares.” Now, hopefully, she will include personal touches that will improve her details and language.

After Veronica completed her second “snow day narrative”, I used the same rubric assessment as before. On this particular piece, Veronica was awarded a total of 13 points. She received three points in the area of ideas and topic, selected content, and organization and structure. She received two points in for the voice element. Finally, she only received one point for language selection and mechanics. Overall, her second writing sample was considered “mostly” quality or in the average range. Although her
organization and her ability to designate appropriate paragraphs improved, she still had difficulty adding vivid language and focusing on her use of adjectives to help tell the story.

Post-Intervention

After allowing the student group to select the topic, I again observed Veronica. She was quick to begin filling out her four square, starting with the center box. For her story, the characters were going to be her mother and herself, it was going taking place at night time at the Deptford Mall, and it was going to involve her getting stuck inside. As I watched, Veronica spent almost seventeen minutes planning her story before she began writing. Again, as I observed above, she did spend some time sitting and staring but I believe that she was mentally preparing her ideas during this time.

Then, she was able to fill in each square with an action sentence. This time she seemed more comfortable with creating the sentences and I suspect that this was because she was writing them right from the start instead of trying to turn ideas into sentences. She included three details in three of the boxes, however she only had two in the first box. She also selected connecting words for each box. Her second box read, “I saw something in the window of my best store and went to look at it”. Her details said, “it was peaceful”, she “did not see anyone”; and then “it got very dark.” When she transformed her planning into a paragraph, she created it read:

Then, I saw something in the window of my best store and I went to go look at it.
I was shopping peacefully, then all of a sudden there was no one in the mall!
That’s when I was starting to worry. All of a sudden the lights went out and it was very dark.
Not only did Veronica create a well-structured paragraph with a topic sentence and supporting details, but also she had added some vivid language that gave her narrative character.

However, Veronica did encounter problems with her final square. She was to identify the solution to her story, which indicated "I got out the next morning when the mall opened." However, she had a hard time finding details to enhance her ending. Despite her trouble with finding appropriate details, she did create an excellent closing sentence that restated the theme and clearly ended the essay. Her final paragraph was her weakest due to lack of details:

*Finally the next morning the mall opened and I snuck out with all the people coming in. I was glad! But I wondered what it would be like if I had to live in the mall forever!*

Overall, Veronica seemed to truly understand how to use the plan using the four square approach. After interviewing Veronica after the intervention, using the same questions as before, Veronica explained that "I plan so that I know what important parts need to be in the story. And when I make my squares, then I know where my different paragraphs go." After the intervention, Veronica seemed to realize that planning helped her not only "write more" but to write in a more logical and organized fashion. After examining Veronica’s final writing sample, I assessed it using the same rubric. On this particular essay, Veronica received a score of 14 points. She received three points in the area of selected content, organization and structure, and voice element. Finally, she received two points for the ideas and content and the language selection. Lastly, although
her use of adjectives did improve, she still only received one point due to the minimal amount used.

As a result, this score suggests that Veronica once again improved her score. She is still in the average range of writing ability; however, she is at the very high end of the average range and has moved up a total of four points from the pre-intervention assessment to the post-intervention assessment. Overall, it appears that the more time Veronica spent planning the more organized her writing, which in turn meant a higher quality of writing too. In her case, it appeared that the more time she spent planning, enabled her to create a better final product. Her improvement may have also been the result of practice and a sense of comfort with the “Four Square” approach.

**Martin’s Story**

*Pre-Intervention*

After receiving the “snow day” assignment, Martin instantly picked up his pencil and began scribbling away. At first I was unsure if he was planning or if he was actually writing his story. As I continued to observe him for a while, I realized that he was writing his story. And after completing his first interview he confirmed that he, in fact did not plan before writing simply because “it would take too long and I just like to start right away so I can finish.” According to Martin, the only reason that people might plan is “because they are made to by teachers.” So, based on his interview and his actions, before any intervention the amount of time that Martin spent planning was non-existent.

While watching Martin writing his story, I could not help the smile that was automatically forming on my face. Martin, a highly energetic, extremely personable child with a sense of humor far beyond his fifth-grade peers, has a positive attitude that
he uses to approach all assignments. Therefore, although writing was not Martin’s
favorite activity, he attempted to make the challenge enjoyable for himself by relating it
to his own life. As he wrote his story, I watched him smile, laugh, and reread his
sentences for pure amusement. Therefore once Martin completed his essay, which was
well before many other students who had spent some time planning, I was not surprised
that it incorporated several humorous elements. However, despite the humor, Martin’s
story was disorganized, difficult to understand, and unstructured.

At initial glance, it was easy to ascertain that Martin had trouble with organization
and structure. The biggest indicator of his difficulties was the fact that his entire essay,
which took up the entire front and back of a piece of paper, was one enormous paragraph.
As his story began he and his friends wound up getting snowed in at school and they had
no way to get home. He explained, in the beginning that he and his friends were bored
and decided to play a game of snow football to pass the time. In the following several
sentences, Martin attempts to explain the sequence of the game:

We all went outside to pick teams and me and Joey were picked to be captains.
We played and I was quarterback for my team and we got ball first. The play
went off and guys were running. I found Jake and passed it to him, but then it got
Jake, got hit and faceplanted in the snow. The other team went for it. They got a
point with the throw long. Joey did it okay. But then they missed the chance for
the extra point.

For the next several sentences, Martin continues to try to give a play by play of the game.
Unfortunately, since he did not plan out his writing, he did not know the main events he
wanted to highlight and he had trouble conveying his thoughts.
As he continues his essay, he begins to talk about a variety of events that all take place on the same day. Martin encounters trouble when he begins to talk about a specific event and then recalls that he forgot to mention something that happened previously. At this point, he appears to get confused:

*When we were playing, the other team wanted to quit because they were losing. A big bus pulled into the parking lot and the Eagles football team got off the bus. There was McNabb, Owens, Dawkins, Trotter, and some more. They came on the field to play. But before, in the game, Joey said that he was better than Owens. Now that he had said that before they got there, everyone wanted to see them play against each other. I told Owens what Joey. He got mad.*

While writing this paragraph, it is obvious that Martin had created a detailed story inside his head. However, as he was writing it down, he was becoming confused by all the details and was having a very difficult time putting the events in order.

Despite his struggle organizing his ideas and creating paragraphs, Martin did not have trouble creating a conclusion for his story. After attempting to explain the details of the football game, he wrote about his own success while playing. He explained that he turned out to be the “all-star of the snow bowl” and after the game, all of the students had to go back in school. Martin then explained how his snow day would come to a close:

*When I was lined up to go in, Andy Reid came up to me. He said that I could leave school and go with them on the bus. Everyone else was still stuck in school, but I was going to be an Eagle.*
Therefore, although Martin has obvious struggles with writing, he is familiar with the elements of a story and creating a beginning, middle, and ending. Also, he is extremely creative and has no trouble thinking of interesting topics to keep his audience engaged.

After analyzing his strengths and weaknesses, I assessed Martin's first writing sample using the rubric explained in Veronica's story. His sample was awarded three points for his ideas and his content. It received two points for his voice and style. However, the sample received only one point in the areas of organization, language selection, and mechanics. Altogether Martin's initial writing sample was awarded a total of 11 points out of a possible 18. According to the point scale (Gould, 2002), Martin's essay is on the border between average and below average. Martin claims, "I was never taught to plan to write or maybe I was absent on that day." Now I will observe if by learning to plan, he is able to improve the quality of his writing.

**During Intervention**

During the first session, Martin was very energetic and excited to learn a new strategy. After explaining the "Four Square" approach to writing, Martin stated that it "sounded like a cheat sheet for a test". I explained that, in a sense, using a graphic organizer was like using a cheat sheet. However, I was sure to stress the fact that a graphic organizer is acceptable to use and that no one will ever get in trouble for using it (and some teachers may even praise students for using a planning strategy). The class liked Martin's analogy and it was actually a term that we used throughout the process.

Once I demonstrated the steps necessary for creating the Four Square + 3 + V, Martin began to fill out his center square. He decided that he was going to recreate his first "snow day" story, so he listed the characters (me, my friends, and some Eagles), the
setting (the playground at school), when (in the middle of January), and what (the first Snow Bowl). Then Martin attempted to put the introduction, the cause, the effect, and the solution into the appropriate squares. He listed the introduction as “we got stuck at school because of snow”. Inside the second square he wrote “we got bored so we played football and the Eagles came”. His third square read “we played some more and my team won”. His final square explained that “I was the best so I got to join the Eagles.” During this first stage, Martin was not required to write topic sentences, however in each box he wrote an entire sentence instead of only a thought.

After selecting the topic sentences, Martin began to add details to each square. At this point, Martin actually put down his pencil for the first time since he began his four square. He appeared puzzled and confused and when I confronted him, he explained that he could not think of three details for each square. I reminded him that he had already created a rather detailed story about the same topic and that he should try to think of some his ideas from that story. Although that seemed to help him, he still was only able to list two details in each box. He remarked that it was “just easier to write things down then trying to make them fit into the right squares.”

Therefore, after introducing the Four Square + 3 + V + E +C, I provided Martin with additional, individual assistance. I allowed him to look over his initial writing sample to help him remember some of his ideas that he had developed. Then I modeled how the topic sentence can help you think of supporting details. I also suggested that he try to select vivid details that help the reader to see, hear, and feel exactly what was happening in the story. After remodeling the skill, I left Martin on his own to see how he was able to work independently. For his third box, “We played some more and my team
won, "he listed the three details "I still played quarter back", "There was a lot of yelling and cheering", and "It was snowing it was hard to see." Although he had trouble developing details, Martin seemed successful after his additional assistance and my suggestion to appeal to the readers' senses.

As for the “C”, or connecting words, stage of the process, Martin had no trouble selecting words that helped his writing transition smoothly. He too, like Veronica, enjoyed using the puzzle piece work sheets and was able to easily find a connecting word for each square. After completing the final four square, Martin was ready to begin turning is organizer into an actual writing sample. Although Martin had watched my demonstration, he did have trouble with this process. He started off following the strategy and created a developed and properly organized introduction:

Yesterday we got stuck at school because of the snow. It was snowing really hard all day. When it was time to go, there was too much snow so the buses couldn’t come. All the kids and teachers were stuck and everyone had to spend the night at school.

Martin not only created an introductory paragraph with appropriate details, he also indented and recognized that the above information constituted a paragraph.

However, as Martin continued to transfer his ideas from his four square to an actual essay, he had trouble with the second and third squares. Although Martin was instructed and actually shown that each square is its own paragraph, he combined the second and third squares into one complete paragraph. He did include transitions between the two paragraphs, however he did not format his writing to fit his plan. Therefore the body of his story was too long and not organized properly:
...and many Eagles got off the bus. There was McNabb, Owens, Pinkston, Dawkins, and lots more guys. They came on the field and wanted to play with us. We made new teams with the Eagles. Then we played some more snow football. I was still quarterback for my team...

Despite the Four Square that Martin created, he still had trouble separating his ideas into different paragraphs. However, he did include a concluding paragraph with proper indentation, a topic sentence, and a good closing sentence.

For further evaluation, I assessed Martin’s second writing sample using the “Four Square” rubric. In this instance, Martin received three points for his ideas and topic and content selection. He received two points for his organization, his voice, and his language selection. However, he received only one point for his mechanics due to his lack of descriptive adjectives. Therefore, Martin received an overall of 13 points on his second writing sample. With this amount of points, Martin’s quality of writing fell in the average category and had improved from his first writing sample, which was awarded 11 points.

Post-Intervention

After Martin completed the “Four Square” intervention, he was required to demonstrate what he had learned, or perhaps, what he had failed to learn. Martin, like Veronica, was asked to write a narrative essay about being “trapped in the Deptford Mall”. He was required to complete a Four Square + 3 + V + E + C independently and then transform his planning into a multi-paragraph narrative essay.

As with all of the assignments that Martin received throughout this study, he approached the final writing task with enthusiasm and a positive attitude. After receiving
the topic, Martin spent approximately 13 minutes completely his “Four Square” graphic organizer. During our post-intervention interview, I asked Martin if he now plans before he writes. He explained that he does plan and he plans because “it helps me keep my thoughts in a line instead of them going back and forth and it helps me figure out where to make a paragraph.” Since Martin was emphatic about not planning prior to the intervention, it is very interesting to see how his view was shifted throughout the study.

After examining Martin’s final writing sample, it was obvious that he had made some improvements from his initial writing sample. The key indicator that his final sample was better structured than his first sample was the existence of paragraphs throughout the paper. Martin successfully created an essay that had four separate, distinct paragraphs. His final essay also had transitions that allowed the story to flow between the four paragraphs. Therefore, from the initial evaluation, Martin’s final piece followed the more traditional structure of written format.

Along with the proper structure, Martin’s piece was also organized in a logical fashion that allowed the reader to follow the story line. He conscientiously created his plan in an organized fashion. He was certain to include a variety all of the major events in the order in which they occurred in his story. He made sure that he still included a lot of detail, like in his first sample, however the details were easier to follow and presented in a logical sequence. In his second paragraph, his organization is clearly evident:

*After I found the food court, the fun started. The first place I went was the pizza place and it was awesome. After eating a few pizzas I needed to sit down and rest. I went to the furniture store and found a big chair to sit in.*
I saw the pets in the pet store. They looked mad that they were stuck in cages. I got a good idea.

Throughout this paragraph, Martin included a lot of details and a lot of different components to his story. However, as a result of his four square, he was able to keep his story organized and understandable.

Along with his organization, Martin was also able to develop a sensible conclusion to his story. Initially, during his planning, he struggled with developing an ending. However, I reminded him to fill out the final square and develop his ideas prior to writing. After devoting time to the ending of his story, Martin created a creative close to his story:

After my shopping, I went back to the food court to eat some more. Then at about 6 o'clock common sense hit me. I never checked the doors. I just opened the door and it was unlocked. I left and took all my stuff home. I would not mind being stuck in the mall again.

Martin was able to successfully end his story and also restate the main topic of his story in his final, concluding sentence.

Overall, Martin appeared to have improved in his writing ability based on his organization and structure alone. In order to compare his writing samples, I used the same rubric to determine the amount of points he earned on his final sample. For his final sample, Martin received three points for his ideas and topic, his content selection, his voice, and his organization. He then received two points for his language selection and his use of mechanics. Therefore, his overall point total for his final essay was 16 points. He improved a total of five points from his first sample, which also moved him
into the “above average” category of quality writing. Also, not only was there a change in his writing ability, but he also developed a new perspective on the topic of planning and its importance in the writing process.

Samantha’s Story

Pre-Intervention

On my first day of student teaching, I introduced myself to the class. During my introduction, I briefly explained about myself, why I was there, and what I would be doing during my time in the classroom. In this short introduction, I mentioned that I would be working with some students in a writing circle to work with a different writing strategy. Immediately after mentioning this, Samantha came to me and expressed her interest in the study and her desire to be included. Throughout the next several days, Samantha brought me in a variety writing samples that she had written on her own. Samantha, a very successful student who takes pride in succeeding, explained that she loves to write and writes every day in her journal and on her computer. After reading some of her stories, I recognized that she was a creative writer; however, she was lacking certain skills. Some of her stories lacked a solid beginning, middle, and ending and she also appeared to have trouble determining where to start new paragraphs. Observing her genuine love for writing, her eagerness to participate, and areas where she could possibly improve, I determined that Samantha was a perfect candidate for the study.

After receiving the “snow day” assignment, Samantha was eager to begin creating a story. Observing her I noticed that she engaged in some planning before she actually began writing. Using a blank sheet of paper, Samantha listed all of the letters in the alphabet. Then she listed different words under each appropriate letter. For example,
under the letter “I”, she listed ice, ice skating, and igloos. Then, after creating a comprehensive list of things associated with snow and snow days, she went through and circled different words on the list. When I interviewed Samantha, she explained that this was “an ABC sheet that helps think of a lot of good ideas.” She also stated that after she creates an “ABC sheet”, she looks over it and selects key words that help her develop a story idea. The circled words then become the different parts that she includes in her stories as they develop. During the interview, when I asked Samantha how she plans, in addition to explaining the “ABC sheet” she also mentioned that sometimes she uses a story web. However, with the “snow day” assignment, the only prewriting strategy that Samantha used was an “ABC sheet” to brainstorm ideas.

Once she had completed her “ABC sheet” and selected several key words, Samantha began writing her story. Her story was creative and had a lot of details, however it did not have a clear beginning, middle, and ending. She wrote about doing many activities including sledding, ice skating, and shoveling. Then she simply ended her story by saying that the day ended. After reading her essay, I realized that Samantha’s writing sample read more list a list rather than a story:

When we got outside we all met at the park. We brought snowboards, sleds, ice skates, and quads. We went to the biggest hill in Deptford. We pulled sleds with quads. We had so much fun while the snow kept falling. We had snowball fights. Then we went ice skating. When our dads came to pick us up they brought cappuccinos to warm us up.

Although her story has a lot of details, she never really creates a solid beginning, middle, or ending.
In addition to her struggle with organization, Samantha had trouble determining when to start a new paragraph. She had a clear introduction paragraph that explained the topic of her story:

One day, when Billy, Bobby, Tori, and I woke up we looked out the windows and saw a blizzard. We rushed down stairs to call Amanda, Danny, and Jay to talk about our day off from school. The snow was too much. Everyone was stuck inside until the roads got cleared. When I looked out the window all I could see was a white world.

However, the remainder of her story was one, long paragraph. She did not have any transitions to help her story flow properly.

Samantha’s story continues in the same fashion until it abruptly ends. She explains different “snow day” activities; then, she simply ends the story:

...We all helped shovel Tori’s driveway until there was only ice left. When we got off all the snow a snow plow came by and pushed it all back on. Then the sun went down. We went home and went to bed.

She fails to provide the audience with a conclusion and she does not restate the topic of her essay in the final sentence.

After Samantha completed her narrative essay, I used the same rubric used with each candidate to determine how many points her sample received. Based on the different elements, Samantha received a total of 13 points. She received a total of three points for her ideas and topic and her content. She received two points for her language selection, her voice, and her mechanics. Lastly, she received only one point for her organization.
During Intervention

At our first session, Samantha was very eager to begin learning and writing. She was enthusiastic and I think her energy helped excite the other members of the group as well. As I presented the “Four Square” strategy, she listened intensely to each step and asked several questions about the supporting details and how much information should be in each box. After the modeling of a sample Four Square + 3 + V, Samantha was ready to begin creating her own. As she usually does with most new concepts, Samantha quickly grasped the “Four Square” strategy. She was create a comprehensive four square without any assistance. Although she had trouble identifying a clear beginning, middle, and ending in her original essay, the four squares helped her visually organize her thoughts. In her four squares, she selected the topics “school was closed”, “went sledding”, “had fun but got a cold”, “school was open but I was sick”. Samantha used some of the elements from her first writing sample, but she was able to create an actual story instead of a list of different snow activities.

During the next session, I introduced the Four Square + 3 + V +E +C. Samantha was very excited to add information to her four square. Without any additional prompting, Samantha was able to expand her details with extensive elaboration. She had listed “old, wooden sled” in her sledding square. When she elaborate on the detail, she explained that “My favorite sled is very old and wooden. You have to be careful when you use it because it can give you splinters.” She was also able to easily create solid topic sentences with her ideas. For her third box, she had listed “had fun but got a cold.” When she elaborated and turned it into a complete sentence, she wrote, “The whole day was a lot of fun but because it was so cold I even got a cold.” With each square she was
easily able to create solid topic sentences and add excellent, descriptive details. She, like
the other students, also had no trouble selecting appropriate connecting words and
including the words in her squares.

Once I modeled the process of writing from the four square organizer, Samantha
had a breakthrough. As I modeled the process of writing each square as a separate
paragraph, Samantha exclaimed, “so that’s how you know what to put in a paragraph”. While talking with Samantha she explained that she always had a hard time knowing
when to end and begin new paragraphs, but now she felt like she could do it without any
trouble. As Samantha began using her four square to guide her writing, I noticed that she
seemed very pleased with the entire process. Her final product indicated that she
thoroughly understood how to use a four square during the prewriting stage.

In her initial writing sample, Samantha had completed her entire essay with only
two identifiable paragraphs. However, after using the four square, her new “snow day”
story had four clear paragraphs. Each of her paragraphs had an opening sentence with
supporting details. Her story had a strong and easy to understand beginning; middle, and
ending. Her third paragraph illustrates her ability to use her four square to write a
complete paragraph:

All in all the whole day was a lot of fun but because it was so cold I even got a
cold. I spent the whole day sled riding with my friends and my clothes got wet.
When I got home my nose was all red and it would not stop running. I sneezed a
lot and had to use a lot of tissues. I could feel my throat starting to get scratchy.
I was out in the cold for too long and I was getting sick.
Throughout her entire essay, Samantha used her plan to create an organized and creative story.

After she completed her essay, it was assessed using the 18-point rubric. Her essay received a total of 16 points. She received a total of three points for her ideas, content, organization, and language. She then received two points for her voice and her mechanics. All in all, based on her total score, Samantha’s narrative essay was considered “above average” and of high quality.

Post-Intervention

Throughout the entire process, Samantha was eager and actively involved. After learning the strategy, she applied it to her own writing as well. She brought in several more writing samples that she completed at home using a four square organizer and she was very excited to complete a final essay for the study. After determining the topic, which Samantha played a major role in developing, she was eager to begin her story. But, before she began writing her story, she spent approximately 16 minutes creating a four square with all of the elements she had learned.

For this particular story, Samantha had a lot of knowledge about the Deptford Mall and knew specific details that she wanted to include in her story. She was able to incorporate in her story knowledge about time spent in the mall to create a very vivid and descriptive essay. As with her second writing sample, Samantha used her four square to truly guide her writing. She wrote a four paragraph essay with a clear beginning, middle, and ending. As her story unfolded, she provided the reader with a proper introduction:

One rainy night I did not have anything to do so I decided to go the mall. It was late so I knew that I could not stay long because the mall would close soon. I only
had time to go to a couple of stores. One store had a really big sale so I went to it. I was so busy shopping that I did not hear the announcement that it was time to go home.

In successive paragraphs, Samantha included many of details to support each topic sentence. However, instead of her details reading like a list, she created vivid images that were easy to read. She also consciously included a variety of descriptive adjectives and worked to add “see, hear, and feel words”:

“When I realized that I was going to have to sleep in the mall I went straight to JC Penny’s. I went to the section that sold bed stuff and found a giant bed. It was so soft and comfortable. It had a fluffy blanket with lots of pillows.

Samantha also created a well-developed conclusion that helped wrap up her story and provide the reader with closure. Samantha did have trouble coming up with an ending, but she made sure that she had a strong fourth square before she began actually writing her story. During our interview after the intervention, Samantha explained that she always plans before she writes now because “it helps me figure out how to keep my story in order and it reminds me to pick a good beginning, middle, and ending.”

Although she was using some prewriting strategies prior to the intervention, she did recognize that the “Four Square” helped her create paragraphs, especially “a really good last paragraph”. In her final writing sample her conclusion had all the appropriate elements:

Once I woke up from my great sleep, people were in the mall shopping. When I saw the people, I knew that now I could go home so I started for the doors. I pushed and pushed till I couldn’t push anymore. Then I noticed that the sign
above the door was flashing and said pull. I realized that I spent the entire night in the mall because I did not see that sign. I was happy to finally get out but I did have a good night in the mall.

After she completed her essay, I assessed her final sample with the rubric. According to the elements on the rubric, Samantha’s narrative essay received a total of 17 points. She received three points in all of the areas except she only received two points for her use of proper mechanics. Based on her score, Samantha writing was “above average”. As she explained in her post-intervention interview, “When you use the four squares it is hard to not write good.”

Charlie’s Story

Pre-Intervention

When selecting participants for my study, I knew that I wanted a diverse group of students. In order to see the true impact of the “Four Square” approach, I believed that it was necessary to teach the strategy to a student with special needs. However, I also needed a student that was hard working, dedicated, and not absent too frequently. Reflecting on this criteria, I immediately thought of Charlie. Charlie is a student classified as Learning Disabled (LD), however he is the hardest working student in the entire class. He is older than all of his classmates, he repeated first grade, so he has a sense of maturity that many of the other students do not. As soon as I mentioned the writer’s circle to Charlie, he explained “I think I will really be able to help you out.”

Before we began the intervention, I assessed Charlie’s first “snow day” narrative. Charlie, after receiving the assignment, immediately began to write his story. During our first interview I asked Charlie if he planned before writing. He explained that he did not
plan and he was “not sure why anyone would plan before writing anyway.” Shortly after he started, he raised he hand and asked how long it was supposed to be. When I told him that he was allowed to make it any length as long as it told a story, he seem relieved. He worked hard for quite a long time, however he seemed to spend more time erasing than he actually spent writing.

Once Charlie handed in his final product, I was able to evaluate his writing ability. As with most of the other participants, Charlie’s sample was one, long paragraph. He too was unaware of what elements were needed to create a paragraph. Therefore, instead of his sample having a clear beginning and ending, it appeared to simply be all one. In turn, this made his piece more confusing and harder to follow. Along with the absence of paragraphs, Charlie’s sample was disorganized. Although it had an opening and a closing, his story was hard to follow. His writing appeared to be a random collection of thoughts that he recorded as they came to him:

One day at school it started snowing a lot. First the principal said that we were going to stay but then he said that we had to go home. I was so excited because I wanted to go play in the snow. I wanted to have a snowball fight. I am good at snowball fights because I can throw real hard and I am very fast too.

Another problem that Charlie had difficulty with was developing ideas. He spent a lot of time working on his piece; however, his final product was less than thirty sentences long. When he turned in his sample, he explained that he “didn’t have anything to write” and he “couldn’t come up with any good ideas”. However, although he felt that he did not have anything to write, he had actually come up with a creative concept:
When we got on the bus and started to go home, it was snowing hard. The bus driver had the windshield wipers on fast and then the bus got stuck on ice. The driver said that we couldn’t go anywhere and we would have to spend the whole night on the bus unless someone found us. It was a good thing that I had brought a lot of snacks in my book bag so I wouldn’t starve to death.

Although his story was not long or detailed, he did develop a creative plot about getting trapped on a school bus. Perhaps if he had planned out his ideas, he would have been able to create a solid beginning, middle, and ending with lots of details.

After assessing Charlie’s writing using the “Four Square” rubric, he was awarded a total of 9 points for his first sample. He received three points for his ideas, two points for his voice, and only one point for content selection, organization, language, and mechanics. Based on his score, Charlie’s writing is considered “below average”.

During Intervention

When I began the intervention, Charlie was very excited to learn and also excited to be a part of a select group. Once the intervention started, I realized that Charlie was definitely lacking skills that the other students had already mastered. Charlie had a lot of trouble with spelling and his inability to spell often slowed his writing process. For the purposes of this study, I informed Charlie that it was okay if he spelled words incorrectly as long as he could read his work. However, he also had trouble with grammar and punctuation. His struggles with these areas created some difficulty for him during the writing process.

During the first session, I introduced the Four Square + 3 + V. Charlie did not seem to have trouble with coming up with ideas for his squares. He used the same
concept that he used for his first story, but he organized it in a logical sequence. His four squares included “left school early”, “got stuck on ice in the bus”, “had dinner on the bus”, and “found by the fire department”. Although he was able to easily create topics for each square, he still had trouble developing supporting details. In order to assist him I helped him create a detail for the first box and then left him on his own. He took a very long time to plan, but he did eventually have at least two details in each square.

During the following session, Charlie learned the Four Square + 3 + V + E + C. Like the other students, Charlie was had no trouble selecting appropriate transition words. He too enjoyed using the puzzle piece worksheets and he told me later that he actually used the sheets when writing other assignments as well. However, although he was able to select appropriate transitions, Charlie struggled with the elaboration process. He was able to write a topic sentence for each square, however he had a hard time elaborating on his details. When I suggested that he add additional adjectives, he explained that he did not know that many adjectives. Therefore, I provided Charlie with a list of different adjectives that could help create descriptive writing. Charlie appreciated the list, however he did not appear to really utilize it.

After demonstrating the process of writing a story using the four square as a guide, Charlie attempted to do the same with his organizer. However, this was an area where Charlie required additional assistance. I had to provide individual help to Charlie and walk him through the process, turning his first square into his introduction paragraph. He had a good topic sentence and two supporting details, however he could not figure out how to write it as a paragraph. With my help he created an acceptable introduction:
One day at school I looked out the window and it was snowing real hard. The ground and the road were covered in all snow. I was hoping that we could go home. I heard the principal come on and say that school would have to end early. I was so happy and I cheered really loudly. I couldn’t wait to go home and play out in the snow.

After creating the first paragraph together, Charlie completed the rest of the story on his own. I reminded him that each square was its own paragraph and that the connecting words are placed at the beginning of each new paragraph. Soon, he was hard at work concentrating on his story and nothing else. Although he combined the second and third paragraphs into one, but he did have a concluding paragraph with a topic sentence and a good closing sentence:

Finally when I was about to fall asleep I heard sirens. I looked out the window and I saw a fire truck coming to help us. The fireman hooked the truck up to the bus and used it to pull the bus off the ice. It took a long time but the truck got the bus moved over. Then we could drive home. I got out of school early but when I got home it was too dark too play outside. I just wished that we would have another snow day tomorrow.

Even though he had trouble with the process, Charlie was able to create a comprehensive paragraph that followed all of the standards.

After analyzing Charlie’s writing, I used the rubric to score his sample. For this specific piece, Charlie received a total score of 12 points. He was awarded three points for ideas and his voice. He was awarded two points for his content and organization. Finally he was awarded only one point for his language and his mechanics. With this
score, Charlie’s writing was in the “average” category. Overall, although he struggled with the process, Charlie’s writing did improve from the first writing sample collected.

Post-Intervention

After learning the strategy, Charlie appeared to have a more positive approach to writing. When I presented the final writing sample, Charlie did not ask how long it had to be. During our final interview, I asked Charlie if he plans now and he explained that he does now. However, when I asked him why he plans he explained that “it helps me to write longer and if you write more then its better and you get a better grade.” Interestingly, although he was now able to write longer stories, Charlie still did not understand that content was more important than length.

After receiving the “Trapped in the Deptford Mall” assignment, Charlie immediately filled out his center square. His story was going to star “Charlie and the Deptford Mall phantom” and take place at the Deptford Mall at night. He wrote four topic sentences in each square and put them in a logical order. And even though he still struggled, he was able to create three supporting details for each square.

However, after Charlie planned, he encountered difficulty in attempting to write a story using his four square as a guide. He was able to create a well-developed introduction paragraph:

*Last week at the Deptford Mall I was walking around having a good time. Then I completely lost track of time and when I found out what time it was the mall had already closed. The entrances were closed and so were all the stores. I was the only one in the whole mall. Then, I remembered the story of the Deptford Mall phantom.*
However, after creating an interesting opening paragraph, Charlie struggled. The rest of his story was all one paragraph and he did not include any of his transitions in the final product.

Although he had trouble with the structure and organization of his story, he still included an ending to his story. He did not have a concluding paragraph, but he did include several sentences that ended the story and restated the topic:

...Then I saw it with its phantom like face looking straight at me. I tried to run but I couldn’t move. Then it was too late and it got me. I wish I had never got stuck in the mall but now I am stuck there forever.

Also, it is important to recognize that Charlie was able to develop a very complex and creative plot without assistance. For a student who usually complained about “not having any good ideas to write about”, it appeared that the four square helped him develop very good ideas and organize them as well.

Another issue that Charlie exhibited was his inability to include all of his information on his four square into his writing. For the second square, Charlie included a detailed description of the phantom and all of his favorite hiding spots. However when he only wrote that “the phantom is scary looking and likes to hide in dark places.” If Charlie had followed his plan more accurately his piece would have been more organized and it would have also been more descriptive with vivid language.

After assessing Charlie’s piece using the “Four Square” rubric, I determined his total amount of points. For this narrative essay, Charlie received a total of 11 points. In this particular essay he received three points for his ideas and voice. He received two points for his content. Then, he received one point for his organization, language, and
mechanics. Although this score was lower than the score he received on his second assessment, it was higher than the score he received on his initial writing sample. With the score of eleven, Michael’s writing was still considered “average”.

Summary of Results

After completing my analysis of the data, I recognized that there was a common finding that emerged across the four case studies: all of the students writing quality had improved when comparing the first sample to the final sample. Therefore, it can be concluded that the “Four Square” approach to writing is capable of teaching students how to write better narrative essays. It can also be concluded that students who prewrite and plan before writing are capable of producing higher quality writer than those students who do not prewrite or plan.

A second finding became the significance of planning in student writing. Each student, those who did and did not plan according to the pre-intervention interviews, all agreed that they now do plan in the post-intervention interviews. Each student, although for different reasons, agreed that planning and prewriting was important and helped make the writing process easier. Although the purpose of this study was to determine if prewriting impacted the quality of writing, it also sought to increase student awareness about the benefits of planning. Throughout this study there were several themes that emerged across the studies, but it is necessary to further examine the results. In the following chapter, the results will be examined in depth to determine the major conclusions that were found in this study. Overall, although there existed limitations with this study, the results indicate that the teaching of prewriting strategies is related to the quality of writing.
What’s Next

In the final chapter, the summary of results is expanded to present the final conclusions illustrated in this study. After presenting the conclusions, the chapter identifies the implications of this study. Finally, the chapter offers suggestions for future research.
Chapter Five

In the previous chapter, all of the data collected for this study was presented and analyzed in the form of four individual case studies. The end of the chapter provided a summary of all the results and the existing patterns and connections that could be ascertained. In this chapter, the summary of results will be expanded to present final conclusions that were determined as a result of this study. After examining the conclusions, the next section of this chapter will present the implications of this study. It will explore what the study determined and if any new discoveries were made as a direct result. Finally, the last section of this chapter will examine possible suggestions for future research. As a result of all studies, there are always additional questions that arise and it is important to identify possible research directions that may provide additional insight into the areas of prewriting and the writing process.

Conclusions

After analyzing the various data sources, I identified several significant themes. The purpose of this study was to examine if teaching how to prewrite, using a graphic organizer, would improve elementary students' writing ability. I was interested to see if students writing improved, based on the six characteristics of quality writing, when they used the "Four Square" approach to writing (Isacson, 1999). Although much research indicates that prewriting is the most important stage of the writing process, I realized that
students are not given the time or the know how to prewrite. Therefore, I asked what might happen if students were shown how to plan and prewrite; and how might this, in turn, impact the final written product created.

As I examined my data sources, I realized that the writing of three out of the four students had improved. Students’ improvement was visible in both the quality of the writing they had created and in scores determined by the “Four Square” rubric. The other student in this study improved his score on both of his final samples; however, he received a higher score (12 points) on his second piece than he did on his final writing sample (11 points). Although he did not improve with each piece, he did show overall improvement. It is important, too, to acknowledge that this participant is actually classified as Learning Disabled (LD).

Therefore, although his results were unlike the other student results, he has different needs that may have not been addressed throughout the study. In his second sample, Charlie received assistance in writing a story from his four square organizer. However, when writing his final sample I encouraged Charlie to complete it independently. Also, the “Four Square” approach is designed to be taught over a long period of time, but for this study the students were taught the approach in just three sessions. I believe Charlie’s results may suggest his need for additional scaffolding experiences and his need for additional instruction. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that these students all benefited from prewriting instruction.

Therefore, based on the results of this study, it appears that there exists a correlation between the strategies used during prewriting and the quality of the final product. Although this study did not determine if the “Four Square” graphic organizer is
the best tool to teach children how to prewrite and plan, it did suggest that the use of a
graphic organizer during the prewriting stage is a way to improve students’ writing
abilities. Overall, this study indicates that students who prewrite and plan before writing
will create higher quality writing in the end.

This study also concludes that when students are taught how to plan and prewrite,
existing perceptions about the process are often changed or altered. According to the pre-
intervention interviews, most of the students did little to no planning before writing. In
addition to the lack of planning, most students did not understand the importance of
planning. Post-intervention interviews find that each student now plans before writing.
Each student also recognized, to some extent, the importance of planning. They agreed
that prewriting was capable of improving overall writing because it helped with
organization and structure, developed more descriptive ideas, and improved the quality
and quantity of content.

This study also suggests several conclusions about the process of writing. The
study clearly indicates that the amount of time spent prewriting and the strategies used
while planning directly impact the quality of writing. Also, although the study did not
prove that the “Four Square” approach is the best prewriting strategy, it did prove that the
“Four Square” approach is an effective prewriting strategy that improves the quality of
writing. Finally this study indicates that once students are taught how to prewrite and
why they should prewrite, the students’ perceptions on the process of prewriting can
change and develop into those of a conscientious writer. Overall, throughout this study,
several major conclusions about the importance of prewriting were illustrated and
discussed in depth.
Implications of the Study

After completing this study, it is important to examine its implications. First and foremost, this study provides research and data that indicates the importance of prewriting during the process of writing. As examined in Chapter Two, much research that indicates that the prewriting stage is the most important stage in the writing process. However, as the research discussed and as I observed, students were often not given time to prewrite or instruction on how to properly prewrite. This study suggests that students who are taught how to prewrite, in turn, produce higher quality writing. Therefore, it becomes very important for educators to acknowledge that a correlation between planning and writing exists; however, it is not enough for educators to provide time for students to prewrite.

As I observed in this study, even when students are given time to prewrite, many of them are not sure how to do so. Therefore in addition to providing time in the classroom for prewriting, educators must also instruct students how to prewrite. It is important that all elementary level educators provide students with a variety of prewriting strategies and model the same strategies in the classroom. As mentioned in the opening vignette, there is an absence of writing instruction in the majority of all college programs designed to prepare future teachers. This study not only implies that students must be taught how to prewrite, but future educators must also be taught different prewriting strategies as well. This study suggests pre-service teachers are not prepared to teach the process of writing, a fact, that in turn affects the way in which students are being taught to write.
Suggestions for Future Research

This study suggests several conclusions and implications as previously discussed. But new questions also emerge. First, it was found that all of the students’ writing ability improved throughout the intervention. Why did the one classified student, Charlie, receive different results from the rest of the group? This student did improve his writing, however he received his highest score on his second writing sample as opposed to his final writing sample. Therefore, this study suggests that the use of graphic organizers during the prewriting stage by students with special needs could be examined in further detail.

Secondly, how would study have been different if the intervention were implemented over a longer period of time? Along with further examining a specific population and the “Four Square” approach, the intervention of the complete “Four Square Writing” approach should be examined more in depth. The “Four Square” approach to writing is an entire technique that is supposed to be taught over a significant amount of time. Teachers are supposed to introduce this approach and then build upon it step by step. However, for this study, I developed a modified version of the approach that could be taught in a shorter amount of time. Therefore, it would be interesting to analyze the more in-depth “Four Square” approach. It may also prove beneficial to examine the effect of the “Four Square” approach on students in primary grades. Most students, including this one, studied prewriting and its impact on students in the upper elementary grades and middle grades. Therefore, it may be interesting to investigate the same strategies with younger students.
Finally, another possible study that could provide additional information about the prewriting process is a study of different prewriting and planning strategies. This study was able to determine that students who prewrite produce higher quality writing. However, this study only studied the “Four Square” strategy. In order to determine the most effective prewriting strategies and which ones work well with specific students, a more complex study of many different planning strategies would need to be conducted. Overall, this study was successful in identifying a connection between prewriting and the quality of writing. Despite this predominant finding, there are many future studies that can be conducted to provide additional information on this issue.
References


