RTI/MTSS Classroom Teacher Toolkit

The Teacher as Classroom First-Responder: Resources

Jim Wright, Presenter

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Edgemont UFSD
Scarsdale, NY

Email: jimw13159@gmail.com

Workshop Materials: *http://www.interventioncentral.org/edgemont*

Classroom Support Plan Writer: *https://interventioncentral-vue.firebaseapp.com/*

How To: Implement Strong Core Instruction

When teachers must present challenging academic material to struggling learners, they can make that material more accessible and promote faster learning by building assistance directly into instruction. Researchers use several terms to refer to this increased level of student instructional support: explicit instruction, direct instruction, supported instruction (Rosenshine, 2008).

The checklist below summarizes the essential elements of a supported-instruction approach. When preparing lesson plans, instructors can use this resource as a 'pre-flight' checklist to make sure that their lessons reach the widest range of diverse learners.

1. Increase Access to Instruction	
Instructional Element	Notes
☐ Instructional Match. Lesson content is appropriately matched to students' abilities (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008).	
☐ Content Review at Lesson Start. The lesson opens with a brief review of concepts or material that have previously been presented. (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008, Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ Preview of Lesson Goal(s). At the start of instruction, the goals of the current day's lesson are shared (Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ Chunking of New Material. The teacher breaks new material into small, manageable increments, 'chunks', or steps (Rosenshine, 2008).	

2. Provided 'Scaffolding' Support	
Instructional Element	Notes
☐ Detailed Explanations & Instructions. Throughout the lesson, the teacher provides adequate explanations and detailed instructions for all concepts and materials being taught (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008).	
☐ Think-Alouds/Talk-Alouds. When presenting cognitive strategies that cannot be observed directly, the teacher describes those strategies for students. Verbal explanations include 'talk-alouds' (e.g., the teacher describes and explains each step of a cognitive strategy) and 'think-alouds' (e.g., the teacher applies a cognitive strategy to a particular problem or task and verbalizes the steps in applying the strategy) (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008, Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ Work Models. The teacher makes exemplars of academic work (e.g., essays, completed math word problems) available to students for use as models (Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ Active Engagement. The teacher ensures that the lesson engages the student in 'active accurate responding' (Skinner, Pappas & Davis, 2005) often enough to capture student attention and to optimize learning.	
☐ Collaborative Assignments. Students have frequent opportunities to work collaboratively--in pairs or groups. (Baker, Gersten, & Lee, 2002; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002).	
☐ Checks for Understanding. The instructor regularly checks for student understanding by posing frequent questions to the group (Rosenshine, 2008).	

☐ **Group Responding.** The teacher ensures full class participation and boosts levels of student attention by having all students respond in various ways (e.g., choral responding, response cards, white boards) to instructor questions (Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ **High Rate of Student Success.** The teacher verifies that students are experiencing at least 80% success in the lesson content to shape their learning in the desired direction and to maintain student motivation and engagement (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002).	
☐ **Brisk Rate of Instruction.** The lesson moves at a brisk rate--sufficient to hold student attention (Carnine,1976; Gettinger & Seibert, 2002).	
☐ **Fix-Up Strategies.** Students are taught fix-up strategies (Rosenshine, 2008) for use during independent work (e.g., for defining unknown words in reading assignments, for solving challenging math word problems).	

3. Give Timely Performance Feedback	
Instructional Element	Notes
☐ **Regular Feedback.** The teacher provides timely and regular performance feedback and corrections throughout the lesson as needed to guide student learning (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice).	
☐ **Step-by-Step Checklists.** For multi-step cognitive strategies, the teacher creates checklists for students to use to self-monitor performance (Rosenshine, 2008).	

4. Provide Opportunities for Review & Practice	
Instructional Element	Notes
☐ **Spacing of Practice Throughout Lesson.** The lesson includes practice activities spaced throughout the lesson. (e.g., through teacher demonstration; then group practice with teacher supervision and feedback; then independent, individual student practice) (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice).	
☐ **Guided Practice.** When teaching challenging material, the teacher provides immediate corrective feedback to each student response. When the instructor anticipates the possibility of an incorrect response, that teacher forestalls student error through use of cues, prompts, or hints. The teacher also tracks student responding and ensures sufficient success during supervised lessons before having students practice the new skills or knowledge independently (Burns, VanDerHeyden, & Boice, 2008).	
☐ **Support for Independent Practice.** The teacher ensures that students have adequate support (e.g., clear and explicit instructions; teacher monitoring) to be successful during independent seatwork practice activities (Rosenshine, 2008).	
☐ **Distributed Practice.** The teacher reviews previously taught content one or more times over a period of several weeks or months (Pashler et al., 2007; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1995).	

References

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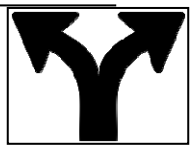
The Struggling Student in a General-Education Setting: Pivot Points



Directions. The student competencies in the table below represent 'pivot points'—opportunities for educators to support the at-risk student to 'pivot' them toward school success. \Number in descending order the 5 competencies that you believe pose the greatest challenge for students in your classroom or school to attain.

Ranking	Student Competency
	A. Basic Academic Skills. The student has sufficient mastery of basic academic skills (e.g., reading fluency) to complete classwork.
	B. Academic Survival Skills. The student possesses the academic survival skills (e.g., homework skills, time management, organization) necessary to manage their learning.
	C. Work Completion. The student independently completes in-class work and homework.
	D. Transitions. The student flexibly adapts to changing academic routines and behavioral expectations across activities and settings (e.g., content-area classes; specials).
	E. Attentional Focus. The student has a grade- or age-appropriate ability to focus attention in large and small groups and when working independently.
	F. Emotional Control. The student manages emotions across settings, responding appropriately to setbacks and frustrations.
	G. Peer Interactions. The student collaborates productively and has positive social interactions with peers.
	H. Self-Efficacy. The student possesses a positive view of their academic abilities, believing that increased effort paired with effective work practices will result in improved outcomes ('growth mindset').
	I. Self-Understanding. The student can articulate their relative patterns of strength and weakness in academic skills, general conduct, and social-emotional functioning.
	J. Self-Advocacy. The student advocates for their needs and negotiates effectively with adults.

Motivating Students Through Collaboration: Numbered Heads Together

Description. Teacher questioning during whole-group instruction is a key method that instructors use to monitor student understanding of content. Ideally, instructors should use a mix of closed-response queries (i.e., limited number of correct responses) and open-response questions (i.e., wide range of acceptable answers, opinions, or judgments). Students should also be given sufficient wait-time to formulate an adequate answer, and the teacher should provide targeted performance feedback (Maheady et al., 2006). Numbered Heads Together is an instructional technique build upon peer collaboration that provides the supports and structure necessary to promote effective teacher questioning and student responding (Maheady et al., 2006). This technique can be useful for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) (Hunter & Haydon, 2013).

Procedure: During whole-group instruction, Numbered Heads Together is implemented using the following steps:

1. Create teams. The teacher divides the class into 4-person teams. Ideally, each team includes a mix of high, average, and low-achieving students. Students in each team assign themselves the numbers 1 through 4. (Note: If a team has only 3 members, one student takes two numbers: 3 and 4.)

2. State a question. The teacher poses separate queries to the class. After each question, the instructor tells students to *"put your heads together, think of the best answer you can, and make sure that everybody in your group knows that answer."*

3. Allow think-time. The teacher gives students 30 seconds to discuss an answer in their groups.

4. Elicit student responses. The teacher randomly selects a number from 1-4 and says, *"All number [1, 2, 3, or 4] students who know the answer, raise your hand."* The teacher then calls on one student with hand raised and asks him or her to give the answer. The teacher next says, *"How many [1, 2, 3, or 4] students think that that answer is correct? Raise your hand."* [Optional: The teacher can call on additional students with hand raised to elaborate on a previous student's answer.]

5. Give teacher feedback. Finally, the instructor gives feedback about the answer, e.g., verifying that it is correct, elaborating on the answer, providing corrective feedback for an incorrect response.

Tips for Use. Teachers may wish to create standing groups for Numbered Heads Together to allow for more rapid transition into student teams. Also, the instructor might post a checklist that reminds students of appropriate NHT behaviors and briefly review that checklist as a pre-correction strategy prior to moving into the NHT activity.

References

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How to: Increase Motivation: Learning Contracts

Description. A learning contract is a voluntary, student-completed document that outlines actions the learner promises to take in a course to achieve academic success. This contract is signed by the student, the instructor, and (optionally) the parent. Benefits of all such contracts, however, are that they provide academic structure and support, motivate struggling learners by having them pledge publicly to engage in specific, positive study and learning behaviors, and serve as a vehicle to bring teachers and students to agreement on what course goals are important and how to achieve them (Frank & Scharff, 2013). NOTE: See the learning contract appearing later in this document as an example of how these contracts can be formatted.

Procedure: The learning contract is typically completed in a meeting between the student and instructor. (In middle and high schools, the parent may also be a participant.) While there are many possible variations on the learning contract, they often contain these components (Frank & Scharff, 2013; Greenwood & McCabe, 2008):

- *Statement of Purpose*. The contract opens with a statement presenting a rationale for why the contract is being implemented. A sample statement might be: *I am taking part in this learning contract because I want to improve my grades and pass this course*.

- *Student Actions*. The contract lists any actions that the student is pledging to complete to ensure success in the course. Suitable targets for learning contract items might include attendance, class participation, completion of classwork or homework, seeking of instructor help, etc. See Figure 1 for a listing of sample actions that might be written into a learning contract.

Figure 1: Sample Student Learning Contract Items

- Attendance. *I will attend at least 80 percent of class sessions.*
- Course Participation. *I will contribute at least one comment to every in-class discussion.*
- Readings. *I will complete all assigned readings.*
- Study/Assignments. *I will spend a minimum of 1 hour per day reviewing notes and working on assignments.*
- Course Help. *I will attend instructor office hours at least once per week.*
- Group Project. *I will communicate at least weekly with peers in my work group (face-to-face or electronically) about our shared course project.*

- *Teacher Actions.* The learning contract can be strengthened by adding a section detailing those actions that the instructor agrees to undertake to support the student. For example, the contract might state that the instructor will respond within 24 hours to course questions emailed by the student or will check weekly and alert the student to any missing course work. Listing teacher responsibilities on the contract emphasizes that success in the course is a shared endeavor and can prod the student to take advantage of instructor supports that might otherwise be overlooked.

- *Sign-Off.* Both student and teacher sign the learning contract. If the parent is participating in the development of the contract, he or she also signs the contract. Because this document is a kind of 'promissory contract' (Rousseau & Parks, 1993), the student signature in particular indicates a voluntary acceptance of the learning contract and a public pledge to follow through on its terms.

Tips for Use. Here are additional ideas for using learning contracts:

- *Contracts and Whole-Group instruction.* If a number of students in a class would benefit from learning contracts as a motivational tool, teachers can incorporate them into whole-group instruction. For example, an instructor may write a series of learning-contract goals on the board (similar to the list appearing in Figure 1) and direct each student to select 3 or 4 to include in his or her own contract. The teacher would collect copies of all learning contracts and hold every student accountable for their use.

- *Contracts & Enrichment.* Learning contracts can also be a convenient way to document individualized plans for enriched instructional activities. Advanced students can fill out contracts detailing their ambitious, self-directed learning goals; these contracts can also describe extra credit or other forms of recognition that students will earn for these enrichment activities.

References

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Greenwood, S. C., & McCabe, P. P. (2008). How learning contracts motivate students. *Middle School Journal, 39*(5), 13-22.

Rousseau, D. M., & Parks, J. M. (1993). The contracts of individuals and organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 15,* 1-43.

Name: [Student Name] Teacher: [Teacher Name] Class/Course: [Course Title] Date: [Date]

[Contract Title]

I am taking part in this learning contract because the strategies listed here will help me to learn the material and perform well in this course.

Student Responsibilities----------

I have chosen to complete the following actions:

1

2

3

4

Teacher Responsibilities----------

My teacher will help me to achieve success in this course through these actions/supports:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Length of Contract----------

The terms of this contract will continue until:

Sign-Offs----------

[Teacher Name]	[Student Name]	[Parent Name]
Teacher	Student	Parent

Name: Troy Blue Teacher: Mr. Smith Class/Course: Algebra I Date: 16 November 2015

Troy Blue's Learning Contract

I am taking part in this learning contract because the strategies listed here will help me to learn the material and perform well in this course.

Student Responsibilities----------

I have chosen to complete the following actions:

1. I will be on-time for class.
2. I will turn in at least 80% of assigned homework, with all work completed.
3. I will spend a minimum of 1 hour per day reviewing notes and working on assignments.
4. I will check in with the instructor during his free period at least once per week and bring any questions from current work.

Teacher Responsibilities----------

My teacher will help me to achieve success in this course through these actions/supports:

1. Answer questions and offer help during weekly free-period check-ins.
2. Remind Troy weekly about any missing assignments.
3. Supply review copy of class notes each period.

Length of Contract----------

The terms of this contract will continue until:

My Algebra course grade rises to 75 or higher.

Sign-Offs----------

Mr. Frank Smith	Troy Blue	Diane Blue
Mr. Smith	Troy Blue	Diane Blue
Teacher	Student	Parent

Teacher Communication Tools to Motivate

Teacher communication is a powerful way to unlock motivation and boost academic performance. Well-chosen instructor comments have the ability to increase confidence, focus attention, and engage reluctant learners. Four prime tools in the teacher communication toolbox are change talk, praise, growth-mindset statements, and wise feedback.

Change Talk. Change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2004) is any statement that expresses hope, interest in making positive changes, a willingness to try new strategies, or other positive attitudes. When people focus on their own 'change talk', they are more likely to develop and successfully carry out plans to make positive changes in their lives.

Elements of student change talk are often intermixed with expressions of uncertainty, frustration, and doubt. Teachers who are effective listeners listen for 'change talk' (Miller & Rollnick, 2004). In a low-key manner, the educator can then draw attention to that positive change talk, reinforce it, have the student elaborate on it, and thus increase that learner's optimism and confidence (Miller & Rollnick, 2004).

For example, in a teacher conference, the student may say, "I want to do better in this course but the work is so hard!" The student's statement includes both positive change talk (the goal of performing better in the course) and a limiting factor (the work is difficult). The examples below show different ways that the instructor can selectively draw attention to the student's change talk ("I want to do better in this course"):

- *"So, if you could find a way, you would like to [do better in this course], right?"*
- *"What does it mean to you to [do better in this course]?"*
- *"How would school improve for you if you [were doing better in this course]?"*
- *"Can you think of ways that I could help you to [do better in this course]?"*

The teacher's strategic focus on change talk can draw the student out, allowing that student to explore solutions rather than remaining stuck on roadblocks preventing change.

Praise. Praise is a type of positive coaching comment. It pinpoints for the student the specific academic or general behavior that is noteworthy and also conveys teacher approval of that behavior (Burnett, 2001). Praise can be thought of as a kind of verbal highlighter, prompting (and reinforcing) the student to engage in *more* of the praised behavior. Effective praise consists of two elements:

- DESCRIPTION. The teacher describes in specific terms the noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior to be praised.

- APPROVAL. The teacher signals approval of the student's performance.

For struggling learners, praise statements can be most effective when they target a mix of effort and accomplishment.

Challenging academic tasks require student engagement and work. Praising effort reinforces the student for investing time and attention in the task. Here is a sample praise statement for effort:

- DESCRIPTION. "*Russell, today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period.*"

- APPROVAL. "*I really appreciate your hard work!*"

Praising the student's academic output is also important, as it can more quickly shape the learner's skills in the desired direction. Even if the student is performing below grade level, the teacher can usually find authentic progress to praise, adjusted of course to the student's current skills and individual growth. Here is a sample praise statement for work output:

- DESCRIPTION. "*Russell, in your last writing assignment, 90 percent of your sentences were complete. At the start of the year, only 50 percent of your sentences were complete."*

- APPROVAL. *"You are making nice progress with sentence structure."*

Growth Mindset Statements. Research shows that there is one crucial factor that greatly impacts motivation and academic engagement: whether a student possesses a 'fixed' or 'open' mindset (Dweck, 2006). Students with a *fixed mindset* view intelligence, or general ability, as having a fixed upward limit. Viewed from this perspective, effort plays only a minor role in intellectual accomplishment. In contrast, students with a *growth mindset* see intelligence as 'malleable': they have faith that increased effort will result in more effective learning and accomplishment. When fixed-mindset students are challenged by academic tasks, they can easily give up, while, growth-mindset learners interpret academic struggles as "an opportunity for growth, not a sign that a student is incapable of learning" (Paunesku et al., 2015; p. 785).

In their day-to-day communication with students, instructors have many opportunities to craft encouraging statements about schoolwork that can help fixed-mindset learners adopt a more positive, growth-mindset view. These statements contain 3 elements:

- CHALLENGE. The teacher acknowledges that the learning task is difficult—but frames that challenge as an opportunity to learn.

- PROCESS. The teacher identifies the specific process that the student should follow to accomplish the academic task.

- CONFIDENCE. The teacher provides assurance that the student can be successful if the learner puts in sufficient effort and follows the recommended process.

The table below gives examples of teacher growth-mindset statements

Growth Mindset Element	Reading Example: Individual Student	Writing Example: Whole Group
CHALLENGE	*"Sarah, please keep reading. You still have 10 minutes to work. Your reading assignment has a lot of advanced vocabulary."*	*"Class, today you will all be hunting for sources for your research paper. Your goal is to find at least 3 quality sources—you will only have about 30 minutes."*
PROCESS	*"If you get stuck, refer to your checklist with reading fix-up skills. And if you are still stuck, it's OK to ask a neighbor or to come to me for help. "*	*"Remember to use the list of recommended websites that I gave you and stay focused."*

STATEMENT OF CONFIDENCE	*"Use your strategies, and you will get through the reading just fine."*	*"Stick to your website list and put in some effort and you should be done in plenty of time."*

Wise Feedback. Some students—particularly those with a history of academic underperformance or failure—may misinterpret critical instructional feedback as a sign that the teacher lacks confidence in and is negatively biased toward the learner.

Teachers can reduce the tendency of at-risk students to discount evaluative statements as biased by formatting those statements as 'wise' feedback (Yeager et al., 2013). The teacher structures written or verbal feedback to include these elements:

- HIGH STANDARDS. The teacher emphasizes and explains the high standards used to evaluate the student work.
- ASSURANCE OF ABILITY. The teacher states explicitly his or her confidence that the student has the skills necessary to successfully meet those standards.

Here is an example of wise feedback that any teacher might write on a student assignment (from Yeager et al., 2013).:

- HIGH STANDARDS. *"I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations …"*
- ASSURANCE OF ABILITY. *"…and I know that you can reach them."*

References

Burnett, P. C. (2001). Elementary students' preferences for teacher praise. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 36*(1), 16-23.

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Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2004). *Talking oneself into change: Motivational interviewing, stages of change, and therapeutic process*. Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy, 18(4), 299-308.

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Yeager, D. S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A., Hessert, W. T., & Williams, M. E. (2013). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*, 804-824.

Reading Comprehension: Retain Text Information With Paraphrasing (RAP)

Students who fail to retain important details from their reading can be taught a self-directed paraphrasing strategy.

The student is trained to use a 3-step cognitive strategy when reading each paragraph of an information- text passage:

1. READ the paragraph;
2. ASK oneself what the main idea of the paragraph is and what two key details support that main idea;
3. PARAPHRASE the main idea and two supporting details into one's own words.

This 3-step strategy is easily memorized using the acronym RAP (read-ask-paraphrase).

OPTIONAL BUT RECOMMENDED: Create an organizer sheet with spaces for the student to record the main idea and supporting details of multiple paragraphs to be used with the RAP strategy. RAP organizer forms can provide structure to the student and yield work products that the teacher can collect to verify that the student is using the strategy.

Read-Ask-Paraphrase (RAP) Sheet

Name: Date: Title/Pages of Reading:

Student Directions: For *each paragraph* from your assigned reading, (1) READ the paragraph; (2) ASK yourself what the main idea of the paragraph is and what two key details support that main idea; (3) PARAPHRASE the main idea and two supporting details in your own words and write them in the blank provided.

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 4

Paragraph 5

Paragraph 6

Paragraph 7

Paragraph 8

Paragraph 9

Paragraph 10

Comprehension: Annotation:

Link Pronouns to Referents reinforces understanding of an informational passage by replacing pronouns with their referent nouns during independent reading.

PREPARATION: Before each session:

Select an informational passage at the student's instructional level suitable for independent reading.

INTERVENTION: During independent reading, the student is taught to follow these steps:

STEP 1: While reading, the student circles each pronoun appearing within the text, locates that pronoun's referent (i.e., the noun that it refers to), and writes next to the pronoun the name of its referent. For example, the student may add the referent to the pronoun "it" in this sentence from a biology text: "The Cambrian Period is the first geological age that has large numbers of multi-celled organisms associated with it [Cambrian Period]".

STEP 2: The student reads the text at least once more. In this rereading, whenever the student encounters a circled pronoun, they consciously substitute that pronoun's referent.

Comprehension: Annotation:

Mark It/Jot It prompts the student to interact with informational passages by marking up and annotating text. During independent reading assignments, the student reads each paragraph closely and follows these 2 steps:

STEP 1: MARK IT. The student uses this simple annotation system to mark up elements of the paragraph that they find meaningful:

! = This is an important point.

? = I have a question or confusion about this point.

Circled word(s) = I do not know the meaning of this term.

Underlined word(s) = This information is important.

Highlighted words = This information is important.

STEP 2: JOT IT. The student writes notes in the margin of the text as appropriate to accompany the annotations, to include:

Question: e.g., “I have a question about…”

Clarify: e.g., “What does [term] mean?”

Connect: e.g., “This section made me think about…”

Comment: e.g., “I think that…”

Mariage, T.V., Englert, C. S., & Mariage, M. F. (2020). Comprehension instruction for Tier 2 early learners: A scaffolded apprenticeship for close reading of informational text. Learning Disability Quarterly, 43(1), 29-42.

Comprehension: Annotation:

Double-Entry Reading Journal prompts students to select relevant quotes from their reading and then write reflective comments.

PREPARATION: Before the intervention:

Format a double-entry journal log sheet. At the top of the sheet, include labels and spaces to record “Student Name”, “Date” and “Name of Reading Assignment”. Divide the sheet into 2 columns with a dividing line down the middle. At the top of the left column, insert “Passage from My Reading”. At the top of the right column, insert “My Thoughts about This Passage”.

Create a lookup sheet with a short list of reflective sentence-starters like these examples: This reminds me of ____./This makes me think of ____./This is important because ____./I think this means _____./The reason I picked this is _____./What confuses me about this is _____./This is interesting, because _____./Somebody who reads this might believe that _____.

Before each intervention session, select an informational passage within students’ instructional level for use with this strategy.

INTERVENTION: During the intervention session:

STEP 1: Students receive a copy of the double-entry journal log and the assigned reading.

STEP 2: Students complete the reading, recording their selected quotations under column 1 “Passage from My Reading”.

STEP 3: For each quotation, students write commentary notes. They are encouraged to consult their list of reflective sentence-starters if needed.

TIP: To motivate, you can conference with students prior to their reading and prompt them to set a goal for the minimum number of quotations from the text that they plan to select. You can then briefly check in at the end of the reading to view double-entry journal entries and verify that the students achieved their goals.

Poch, A.L., & Lembke, E.S. (2018). Promoting content knowledge of secondary students with learning disabilities through comprehension strategies. Intervention in School and Clinic, 54(2), 75-82.

Double-Entry Reading Journal

Student: _____ Date: _____

Reading Assignment: _____

Passage from My Reading	My Thoughts About This Passage

Sentence Starters: This reminds me of ____.
This makes me think of ____.
This is important because ____.
I think this means _____.

The reason I picked this is _____.
What confuses me about this is _____.
This is interesting, because _____.
Somebody who reads this might believe that _____.

Academic Survival Skills Checklists: 5 Ways to Help Students to Become Effective Self-Managing Learners

Students who hope to achieve success on the ambitious Common Core State Standards must first cultivate a set of general 'academic survival skills' that they can apply to any coursework (DiPerna, 2006). Examples of academic survival skills include the student's ability to study effectively, be organized, and manage time well.

When academic survival skills are described in global terms, though, it can be difficult to define them. For example, two teachers may have different understandings about what the term 'study skills' means. A solution is to complete a 'task analysis' of a given global academic-survival skill, dividing that larger skill into a checklist of component sub-skills (Kazdin, 1989). For an example of a component-skills checklist for 'study skills', see *Table 1: Academic Survival Skills Example: Study Skills.*

With a checklist in hand that breaks a global academic survival skill into components, a teacher can judge whether a student possesses those essential building-block strategies that make up a larger global 'survival skills' term. Teachers have access to good sources of information to verify what academic survival skills a student possesses, including direct observation; interviews (of the student, past teacher, or parent); and student work products.

TIP: Teachers can access a *free* web application to create customized student-skill checklists. The *Academic Survival Skills Checklist Maker* provides a starter set of strategies to address homework, note-taking, organization, study, test-taking, and time management. Teachers can use the application to create and print customized checklists and can also save their checklists online. This application is available at: http://www.interventioncentral.org/tools/academic-survival-skills-checklist-maker

Schools can find a number of valuable uses for 'academic survival skills' checklists, including the following:

1. *Consistent expectations among teachers.* Teachers at a grade level, on an instructional team, or within an instructional department can work together to develop checklists for essential global academic-survival skills. As teachers collaborate to create these checklists, they reach agreement on the essential skills that students need for academic success and can then consistently promote those skills across their classrooms.

2. *Proactive student skills training.* One excellent use of these checklists is as a classwide student training tool. At the start of the school year, teachers can create checklists for those academic survival skills in which students are weak (e.g., study skills, time management) and use them as tools to train students in specific strategies to remediate these deficiencies. Several instructors working with the same group of students can even pool their efforts so that each teacher might be required to teach a checklist in only a single survival-skill area.

3. *Student skills self-check*. Teachers can use academic survival-skills checklists to promote student responsibility. Students are provided with master copies of checklists and encouraged to develop their own customized checklists by selecting and editing those strategies likely to work best for them. Instructors can then hold students accountable to consult and use these individualized checklists to expand their repertoire of strategies for managing their own learning.

4. *Monitoring progress of academic survival-skills interventions*. Often, intervention plans developed for middle and high school students include strategies to address academic survival-skill targets such as homework completion or organization. Checklists are a good way for teachers to measure the student's baseline use of academic survival skills in a targeted area prior to the start of the intervention. Checklists can also be used to calculate a student outcome goal that will signify a successful intervention and to measure (e.g., weekly) the student's progress in using an expanded range of academic survival-skills during the intervention period.

   For example, a teacher may develop a checklist (like that appearing in Table 1) outlining 11 sub-skills that define her expectations for 'study skills'. Through interview, direct observation, and examination of student work products, the teacher ascertains that the student reliably used 7 of the 11 skills during baseline. She sets the outcome goal that--at the conclusion of a 5-week intervention period--the student will reliably use all 11 of those study sub-skills. Once per week during the intervention, the teacher meets with the student to review the checklist, record which additional study skills-if any--the student is now using, and chart this growth on a simple visual graph.

5. *Parent conferences.* When teachers meet with parents to discuss student academic concerns, academic survival-skills checklists can serve as a vehicle to define expected student competencies and also to decide what specific school and home supports will most benefit the student. In addition, parents often appreciate receiving copies of these checklists to review with their child at home.

When students struggle with global academic survival skills such as study, organization, or time management, those deficits can seem so all-encompassing as to inspire a sense of helplessness. In contrast, targeted and prescriptive checklists (such as those described here) that outline practical strategies to enhance school survival skills can serve as a tool to focus and empower teachers, parents, and students to accomplish the shared goal of turning every student into a effective, self-managing learner.

References

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TABLE 1: ACADEMIC SURVIVAL SKILLS EXAMPLE: STUDY SKILLS
❑ MAINTAIN A STUDY SCHEDULE. Maintain a regular (e.g., daily) study schedule with sufficient time set aside to review course content and information.
❑ AVOID DISTRACTERS. When studying, avoid distracters (e.g., cell phone, television, Internet) that can erode study time and divert attention.
❑ CREATE AN ORGANIZED STUDY SPACE. Prepare the study environment by organizing a space and setting out all necessary work materials before beginning study.
❑ SET STUDY GOALS. Prior to a study session, define one or more specific study goals to accomplish (e.g., to review information for an upcoming quiz; to locate key information to include in an essay).
❑ MAKE A STUDY AGENDA. If studying multiple subjects in one session, create a study agenda for that session with a listing of the key information to be reviewed for each subject and the time allocated for that review.
❑ DO THE TOUGH STUDY WORK FIRST. Tackle the most difficult or challenging study objectives first during study sessions, when energy levels and ability to concentrate are at their peak.
❑ VARY ACTIVITIES. Mix up study activities during a study session (e.g., alternating between reading and writing) to maintain engagement and interest.
❑ CHUNK A LARGE STUDY TASK INTO SMALLER UNITS. If studying a large amount of material in a single session, 'chunk' the material into smaller units and take short breaks between each unit to maintain focus.
❑ TEACH CHALLENGING CONTENT. When studying complex or challenging material, assume the role of instructor and attempt to explain or describe the material to a real or imagined listener. Teaching study material is an efficient way to verify understanding.
❑ HIGHLIGHT QUESTIONS. When reviewing notes or completing course readings, use highlighters, margin notes, sticky notes, or other notation methods to flag questions, unknown vocabulary terms, or areas of confusion for later review with teacher or tutor.
❑ SEEK HELP WHEN NEEED. Approach the teacher or tutor for help as needed to answer questions or clear up areas of confusion identified during study sessions.

Managing Academic Anxiety Through an Antecedent Writing Activity

Description. Students may become anxious when faced with academic tasks such as test-taking—to the point at which the anxiety seriously interferes with their work performance. Being barraged with anxious thoughts while trying to complete academic tasks is a negative form of multi-tasking and taxes working memory (Beilock & Willingham, 2014). Anxious thoughts divert attention and thus degrade student performance.

One strategy that can help students to minimize the intrusion of anxious thoughts during a stressful test or assignment is to have them first complete a brief (7- to 10-minute) writing exercise in which they write about their anxiety (Park, Ramirez, & Beilock, 2014). This activity can lower anxiety levels and thus allow the student to complete the academic task without interference.

We term this strategy an 'antecedent writing exercise' because the writing assignment precedes—and therefore reduces or eliminates—the academic anxiety.

Procedure. Just before an individual student or larger group begins a high-stakes academic task that is likely to trigger anxiety, the teacher hands out a worksheet with these (or similar) instructions (adapted from Beilock & Willingham, 2014):

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I would like you to write honestly about what you are thinking and feeling as you prepare to take this exam/start this assignment.

Because everyone is unique, there is no 'correct response' to this writing task. You should just describe as fully as you can your thoughts and feelings about the exam/assignment. You can also write about how your current thoughts and feelings might be the same as—or different from—those you experienced in similar past situations.

You will have __ minutes to write. Please keep writing until you are told to stop. I will not collect this assignment.

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The instructor gives students 7-10 minutes to complete the writing assignment. Students are then instructed to put their compositions away (they are not collected). The class then begins the high-stakes academic task.

Tips for Use. Here are suggestions for using this antecedent writing exercise:

- *Administer to the entire class.* Certain academic tasks, such as important tests, will trigger anxiety in many, if not most, students in a classroom. Teachers can use this writing exercise with the entire group as an efficient way to 'take the edge off' this anxiety for all students and potentially improve their test performance.
- *Teach students to use independently.* Some students experience significant levels of anxiety even during independent work – such as math homework. This writing exercise can be a good warm-up activity that students can use to allay anxiety and increase their academic focus.

References

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