

**TE 846 Case Study**  
***By Danielle Alexander***

Background Information

“When we talk about reading motivations, we refer to 1) interest, 2) dedication, and 3) confidence. An interested student reads because he enjoys it, a dedicated student reads because he believes it is important, and a confident student reads because he can do it” (Morrow and Gambrell 177). The student I selected for my case study would definitely fall into one or more of these three categories as far as reading is concerned; nevertheless, she was nowhere near any of these as a writer, which is why I chose to focus on her motivation to write for this assignment. This student is a 15-year-old freshman female in my fourth hour class. According to Morrow and Gambrell, she would be classified as a “native-born” English Language Learner (119). Her parents were born in Iraq and moved here a few years before giving birth to her. In Iraq, they only spoke Chaldean and Arabic; here, her parents told me at parent-teacher conferences that they try to use English as much as they can, but their daughter definitely grew up listening to more Chaldean and Arabic than English at home.

Although she was born here, I have observed that she often struggles with spelling, vocabulary, grammar, writing, and any other application of the English language. This student does have the support of one English Language Learner paraprofessional at our school; however, it is up to her to initiate and ask for the help she needs. In addition to him, this student knows that she can always come to me for help, as well. I like to emphasize “positive interpersonal relationships” in hopes that “student motivation increases” (Morrow and Gambrell 181). Nevertheless, I have noticed that her motivation to write has severely dropped over the course of this school year, which she

said is due to the series of low grades she has received on her essays. With that said, she rarely, if ever, asks for help when it comes to writing, and when I offer it, she replies with, “It’s just too hard for me” or “I really hate it”.

### Overall Design

I met with the student described in the previous section above a total of four times after school:

- **The Pre-Assessment:** At our first meeting, I provided the student with a “Writing Attitude Survey”, which reaffirmed my assumption that her motivation to write was currently on the low-end. We also discussed the survey, and she shared with me that she really struggles with essay organization and coming up with ideas. On the following day, I told the student that I think she should select the essay option for her upcoming project, so we could work on organizing and formulating ideas together; she agreed.
- **Lessons One and Two:** The second and third meetings were when I taught my two lessons. The first lesson was focused on thesis and topic sentence organization using a structural paragraph, and the second lesson was focused on the relationship between the topic sentences and evidence (ideas). Throughout the lessons, this student was taught through modeling and was also provided with graphic organizers in order to yield better essay organization and ideas for her redo. At the end of the second lesson, I asked the student to redo her original essay body paragraphs using the strategies we worked on together.
- **The Post-Assessment:** Our last meeting was where I had her self-assess her original and final body paragraphs using the Student 6-Trait Rating Rubric. After that, I shared with her what scores I would have given her using the Teacher 6-Trait Rating Rubric. For the most part, our ratings were quite similar; hers, however, were actually a little lower, which I assumed was due to her low

confidence. Before she left, I pulled out her “Writing Attitude Survey” that she completed as a pre-assessment, and she shared with me that she now feels better and more confident about writing since she better understands how to organize an essay, as well as develop ideas.

### The Pre-Assessment

At our first meeting, I provided my student with a “Writing Attitude Survey” (see Appendix A). As mentioned above, I noticed that her motivation to write has decreased over the course of the school year, but before moving on, I wanted to make sure that my observation was correct. After looking over the survey and talking with the student, my assumption was spot-on. We conferenced after, and she shared, once again, that she “hated writing”, especially writing about books (which is what the majority of my assigned essays ask students to cover). She mentioned that she struggles with organization and is embarrassed that it always looks like she did not read since she has a hard time effectively communicating her ideas about the text. According to Morrow and Gambrell, “...lower-achieving students often exaggerate their limitations. Believing they are worse than they really are, they stop trying altogether. Retreating from all text interactions, they reduce their own opportunity to do what they want to do more than anything” (179). In her case, what she wants is to be able to write, but her low confidence pushes her even further in a “cycle of doubt and failure”. Additionally, she stated that she stresses over spelling and grammar, gets frustrated, and simply “gives up”.

After spending some time thinking about the survey and our one-on-one conference, I decided to focus on essay organization and ideas for my two lessons. According to Troia and Graham, “...devoting more attention to the development of basic skills, more explicit teaching of these skills, and more individual assistance” (81) truly benefits students. I decided, however, to place spelling and mechanics on the back-burner for now since Troia and Graham also say that “a strong emphasis on mechanics by

teachers who work with struggling writers serves to bias their students' views of writing, leading them to believe that text appearance is paramount" (78).

My students finished reading Of Mice and Men, and one project choice (see Appendix B) was an essay. Although I realize that "appealing to students' interests is a popular motivational approach" (Morrow and Gambrell 183) and the "most widespread recommendation for motivation is providing choices" (Morrow and Gambrell 187), I encouraged her to select the essay option and told her that if she attempts the essay, I will work with her to improve her organization prior to giving it a final grade. Since I know this student well, especially when it comes to writing, I figured that without my encouragement, she never would have chosen to write the essay. Luckily for me (and her), she agreed to do so.

### Lesson One

Lesson One (see Appendix C) was taught to my student one week after the pre-assessment. Since not all of my students chose the essay option, meeting one-on-one was definitely the better option. When my student walked into my room, she had her attempted, typed Of Mice and Men essay with her. I read it over, and, like I assumed, the thesis statement and topic sentences needed lots of work. “Compared with texts of their more accomplished peers, papers written by struggling writers are shorter, incomplete, and poorly organized, and weaker in overall quality” (Troia and Graham 77). Also, “...struggling writers typically use an approach to writing that minimizes the role of planning, one in which they generate content in an associative, linear fashion without considering broader rhetorical or personal goals for their compositions and the constraints imposed by the topic and text structure”. With that said, I told her that if the thesis and/or topic sentences are missing, out of order, or worded incorrectly in an essay, there is no way that it would be organized or developed. “Students must master lower-level skills before higher-level skills are taught” (“Adaptions for Struggling Literacy Learners” PowerPoint Presentation). Knowing this, I decided to create a structural paragraph outline (see Appendix D) for her to use, which basically makes the thesis statement the topic sentence and the topic sentences the support, so that way she could see the relationships between them even though they normally exist in different paragraphs in an essay.

To start, we discussed what a thesis statement was. In order to explain this, I used the following example since “...high school students are motivated when teaching is relevant to their lives and useful for their goals” (Morrow and Gambrell 180): “Pretend a

boy asks you on a date, you say yes, and he tells you that he is going to pick you up in a Mercedes at 7 p.m. and take you to Andiamo for dinner. He ends up picking you up in an old, Honda Civic at 8:30 p.m. and takes you to Burger King. How do you feel?” My student replied that she would be angry since he was not true to his word. I told her that I would be upset, too, since he technically broke a promise. I then related how she felt when she was promised something and did not receive it to how I feel when my students promise that they are going to discuss something in their paper (thesis statement) and do not. I then had my student point out where she thought her thesis statement was; although she pointed to the last sentence of the introduction paragraph which is correct, her thesis only summed up one of her two points. We discussed that a thesis should sum up the entire paper, so, in this case, it should mention a) the theme in Of Mice and Men and b) how the theme is shown in society today. We formed a thesis statement together, which read: “The theme in Of Mice and Men is ostracization, and this theme is best shown in society today through high school students.” From there, I decided that modeling would be a good way for her to learn how to write a topic sentence that supports the thesis statement, so that she could “analyze the examples” and “emulate the critical elements, patterns, and forms embodied in the models” into her own writing (Graham and Perin 20). I wrote the first topic sentence, and she wrote the second one on her own: 1) “The theme of ostracization in Of Mice and Men is best shown through the characters of Crooks and Lennie.” 2) “The theme of ostracization in society today is best shown through high school students.” For homework, I asked her to think of ideas for evidence since that would lead into our second lesson.



## Lesson Two

Lesson Two (see Appendix E) was taught to my student two days after Lesson One. For this lesson, I provided my student with two body paragraph graphic organizers (see Appendix F) since she planned for her essay to be two body paragraphs. “Because graphic organizers are visual representations of information that show relationships and contain key vocabulary, they make excellent planning tools for writing” (Morrow and Gambrell 306). Also, “graphic organizers also support inquiry”. To begin, I had her transfer the thesis statement and first topic sentence onto the first graphic organizer. From there, we discussed what pieces of evidence would support the first topic sentence, “The theme of ostracization in Of Mice and Men is best shown through the characters of Crooks and Lennie.”, and we agreed that we needed to find a piece of evidence for each character: 1) Crooks being ostracized and 2) Lennie being ostracized. She had very little problem finding these quotes since, as mentioned before, she does not seem to have too much difficulty reading.

Once she found the quotes, I modeled how to write the first piece of evidence in MLA format (“Crooks says, ‘I’m black. They play cards in there, but I can’t play because I’m black. They say I stink. Well, I tell you, all of you stink to me’ (68).”), and she correctly completed the second one on her own. From there, I modeled the setup (information that a writer should provide prior to the evidence, so that the readers know the context of the quote), as well as the reasoning (information that explains how and why the evidence supports the topic sentence) for the first half of the body paragraph. Together, we worked on the second half of the body paragraph, but this time, I let her lead the lesson. To finish, we restated the topic sentence together, which is how one

correctly completes the closing sentence. When completed with the first body paragraph graphic organizer, I handed her another one for the second body paragraph. Before releasing her to complete this on her own, we talked through it, and she seemed much more confident about both organization and ideas. For homework, I told her to complete the second body paragraph graphic organizer and type up both body paragraphs in the order that exists on the graphic organizers.

### The Post-Assessment

One week later, my student returned with her original work, completed graphic organizers, and typed body paragraphs (see Appendix G). Since “students need to regularly assess their own written products” (Morrow and Gambrell 307), using the Student 6-Trait Rating Rubric (see Appendix H), I had her score her essay on the “Organization” and “Ideas” sections since they not only go hand-in-hand, but that is what we focused during both lessons. Next, I had her score her original essay on the same two categories. Morrow and Gambrell’s book includes a story about a sixth-grade teacher named Sean who often has students give themselves a grade using his rubric. He also identifies a grade and conferences with students to determine whether and how they agree with this assessment, which he believes “helps in prove their writing and accuracy in self-assessment” (309). With that said, I found value in identifying a grade and conferencing with my student, so when she finished self-assessing, using the Teacher 6-Trait Rating Rubric (see Appendix I), I graded both essays on both categories in front of her, and we spent about ten to fifteen minutes discussing the scores. For the most part, our scores were similar (second essay score was much higher in both categories); however, she did tend to grade herself a tad lower than I did. She told me that she recognizes why her essay scores, specifically concerning “Organization” and “Ideas”, have been low in the past and mentioned how helpful both lessons were. To wrap up, I handed back her original “Writing Attitude Survey” and asked if anything changed since our first meeting. She shared that with more practice, she feels that her attitude about writing will become more positive since she now knows she is truly capable of writing.

### Final Thoughts

“Undoubtedly, the quality of instruction children receive plays a major role in their writing” (Troia and Graham 76). Unfortunately, “mandated assessments, higher standards, and accountability issues cause some teachers to reduce time for writing, teach writing artificially, and fragment the curriculum” (Morrow and Gambrell 301). Some teachers are even forced to create a “one-size fits all” writing curriculum (Morrow and Gambrell 413) due to time constraints, class sizes, and several other factors. According to Troia and Graham, a writing program must be “comprehensive, well organized, challenging, sustained across the grades, and responsive to the needs of each child” and include a “creative and engaging balance of meaning, process, and form” that is “maintained through formal and informal teaching methods” (78). Through this case study, I hoped to provide my chosen student with high-quality writing instruction that is tailored to her own, personal needs. Overall, it was successful; however, there is one change I would make if I were to do this again in the future.

Through the two lessons, my student learned that she definitely could write; nonetheless, low motivation was restricting her from reaching her potential. I could have easily bribed her with candy, homework passes, or other forms of extrinsic motivation in order to force her to write more or write better, but, as we learned in TE 846, if the motivation is not intrinsic, “it will not increase achievement in the long term” (Morrow and Gambrell 178). With that said, I created and taught “explicit” lessons (Morrow and Gambrell 417) that I knew she was capable of achieving, but also ones that I knew would help her produce writing that would make herself proud. I structured everything, so that my student would be “surrounded with examples and models, given expectations,

allowed to make decisions and mistakes, given feedback, and allowed time to practice in realistic ways” (Morrow and Gambrell 296) during (and in between) the two lessons. Unlike teachers in the past who viewed assessment like the “common cold”, “something to get over and then go on with normal classroom life”, I used it to both mine and my student’s advantage in order to tailor lessons to her literacy-learning needs, which is better known as “response to intervention” (RTI) (Morrow and Gambrell 415).

As I improve in writing instruction over time, I do plan on encouraging students to decide on and set their own goals, which Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) encourages. “Self-Regulated Strategy Development is a particularly effective approach for teaching writing strategies” since it is characterized by “explicit instruction of writing strategies and self-regulation procedures (e.g., self-assessment and goal setting), as well as individualized instruction and criterion-based learning” (Graham and Perin 16). Student self-assessment (also known as “scales”) actually plays quite a large role in our school district’s teacher evaluations; nevertheless, the teachers are the ones who write the daily goals (also known as “targets”), which makes no sense since not all students need to work on the same skills. As mentioned above, SRSD encourages individualized instruction, and when it comes to writing, I am not familiar with any better option. According to Morrow and Gambrell, students need to “examine their work, reflect on the patterns they see, and set new goals for themselves” (307), which ultimately increases motivation.

“Teachers seldom put motivation first, but when they do, students become interested, confident, and dedicated” (Morrow and Gambrell 194). Through this case study, I definitely placed emphasis on motivation while working with my chosen student,

and overall, I would definitely say it was successful. I am looking forward to enhancing and implementing these strategies to all of my students in the very near future.

References

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