

Study Skills: Crucial for the Students with LD

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Learning to apply study skills benefits all students. However, for individuals with learning disabilities, effective study skills training and application is crucial. Students with learning disabilities require more time to read material. They also often have deficits that make it more difficult to extract meaning and significance from their reading, and to commit information to long-term memory. They need on-going, explicit and direct instruction in study skills because they lack the learning processes needed to develop study strategies on their own. Direct study skills instruction teaches students to consciously and methodically organize, process and master information from reading or listening. It also presents strategies for organizing materials, assignments and time. Systematic procedures for approaching learning tasks emphasize the process of learning.

Most teachers agree that study skills are important, but many are not really sure what study skills are and whose responsibility it is to see that they are taught. College teacher-training and certification requirements usually do not include course work in the area of study skills. Most schools do not offer study skills instruction as part of the regular curriculum, and there is often an assumption on the part of teachers that students have been taught these skills in previous grades or developed them intuitively. Through no fault of their own, the higher the grade level, the less likely teachers are to include study skills instruction in lesson planning.

A Study Skills Model

Through my work with students with learning disabilities over the past twenty-five years, I have developed a flexible study skills model that can be taught in tutorials and small groups, as well as incorporated into regular class curricula. This model has been used to train thousands of teachers in public and private schools throughout the U.S. A number of schools have adopted this model on a team, grade, or school-wide basis.

The first part of the model addresses organization strategies for notebooks, materials, and assignments study space, and calendars. It includes the Master Notebook System which includes setting up a Working Notebook and Reserve Files. It is a system for organizing, studying and mastering material. The second part of the model addresses three “foundation” study skills: reading and listening for main ideas, applying two-column note taking, and summarizing. The final part of the model combines these foundation skills for building textbook, testing, and research/report-writing skills.

This article will review methods for teaching the first two foundation skills:

- Reading and listening for main ideas
- Two-column note taking

Reading and Listening for Main Ideas

Many students are not active readers or listeners. Though they hear what the teacher says and read the words on a page, they do not fully or accurately process the information. The single, most important skill to help students become more active learners is to teach them how to recognize main ideas and put them in their own words. It is the foundation skill for more advanced study skills such as summarizing, note-taking, and textbook skills. Students with learning disabilities often have difficulty “chunking”, or sorting, information into units or main ideas. Instead, they become overwhelmed by the details. Main idea instruction must begin at the basic categorizing level and systematically advance through longer, more difficult levels of material. Significant practice must be given to ensure mastery of the skill.

Children in primary grades can begin to identify main ideas by categorizing lists of objects and words. As students progress from grades three to five, they can learn to discern main ideas at the paragraph level. Over time, students learn to apply main ideas to longer, multi-paragraph material – ranging from a page in a sixth-grade textbook to a twenty-page college-level thesis paper.

Categorizing

The most basic task is to identify the category that applies to a list of words. For example, fruit is the main idea for a list that includes apple, pear, peach, and banana. The cognitive process that enables a student to come up with the answer (fruit) includes holding one detail in working memory (apple) long enough to compare it to the next detail (pear), then determining what the two have in common. As the student adds each new detail (peach, then banana), he compares it to the previous items to test against the main idea (fruit) for accuracy. This thinking process occurs in a millisecond. Most of us are not even aware of following these steps. The goal of main idea instruction at the categorizing level is to teach students to be cognizant of this process of “juggling” details to determine a main idea.

Main Ideas in Paragraphs: The Topic Sentence

Once students can categorize, the next skill to develop is recognizing and formulating the main ideas of individual paragraphs. Many paragraphs begin with a topic sentence that states the paragraph’s main idea. The rest of the paragraph usually conveys details that support the main idea. Students should be encouraged to search for topic sentences as they read. They should also be encouraged to use topic sentences when writing their own paragraphs.

Though the topic sentence is often the first sentence in a paragraph, this is not always the case. The topic sentence can sometimes be in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. Sometimes the main idea is not even stated; rather, it must be inferred by reading the detail sentences. It is much more difficult to generate the wording for an inferred main idea than locating a main idea which is already stated in a topic sentence. For this reason, be careful not to use some of the instructional materials which are supposed to be designed for teaching main ideas, but simply ask students to choose a main idea from

several options – they do not provide an opportunity to develop the skill of formulating main ideas in one’s own words.

When reading, have students underline or highlight the main idea if it is stated in a topic sentence. If the main idea has to be inferred, ask them to write it in his own words in the margin or on a piece of paper. This skill will eventually be the basis for teaching highlighting and margin notes in textbooks.

Main Ideas in Multi-Paragraph Material: A Hierarchy

Many reading assignments, such as textbook chapters, contain a hierarchy of main ideas and sub-main ideas. For example, a chapter title is the chapter’s overall main idea. Chapter sections, usually marked by bold-faced section headings, are the sub-main ideas. Finally, each paragraph within a section has a main idea.

Before reading a chapter, have students note the main idea and sub-main ideas by writing down the chapter title and bold-faced section headings from the chapter. This breaks the reading assignment into manageable units. They can then read each paragraph within a section and note its main idea. “Micro-uniting” a longer reading assignment in this way creates smaller, more manageable units and helps with comprehension.

Also, knowing the main ideas before a lesson or lengthy reading assignment gives students a hook to hang the details. It enables them to anticipate what they will be hearing or reading.

Helpful Hints for Locating Main Ideas

1. To identify a main idea that is stated, have students first answer the questions below.

- What is the one subject the author talks about throughout the paragraph? The answer to this question identifies the topic.
- What is the author saying about this topic? The answer to this question identifies the main idea.
- What details support the main idea? The answer to this question identifies the important details.

Next, students should find and underline the topic sentence that states the main idea. If the main idea must be inferred because there is no topic sentence, they should write out the main idea in his own words in the margin next to the paragraph.

2. When looking for the topic, students should look for the words that are most often repeated. They help suggest the topic.

3. Students should make sure all the details refer to the topic sentence (or their main idea in the margin if there is no stated topic sentence).

4. Students can double-check the main idea by asking if what they have underlined or written is too general or specific.

Note-Taking Skills

Note-taking is a way for students to record information from a lecture or reading assignment. It should enable them to retrieve the information easily at a later time for study purposes.

Students are active listeners when taking notes because they are processing information into their own words. However, note-taking (especially from lectures) is a very difficult task for many students with learning disabilities. That's because it requires the integration of listening, comprehension, sequencing, eye-hand coordination, writing, and spelling skills.

Begin by teaching from written sources only because it is easier for students to learn note-taking skills when they can go back over the information several times without the time pressure that occurs when taking lecture notes.

Two-Column Note-Taking Method

Once students know how to recognize and formulate main ideas, they can learn to take notes that include important details. Use the two-column method described below.

- Draw a line down a sheet of paper, with one-third of the page on the left and two-thirds of the page on the right.
- Write the main idea of each paragraph on the left side.
- List details on the right side of the page.

The two-column note-taking method visually separates information into main ideas and details. By placing the details to the right of the main ideas, students can easily see which details support which main ideas. In contrast, information in linear note-taking (such as outlining) exists as a stream of facts, with no visual way to distinguish main ideas from details.

A two-column note-taking format also makes it easier for students to use notes to prepare for a test. For example, students can cover the details on the right side of the page with a sheet of paper, look at the main ideas in the left column, and turn them into study questions. This challenges them to recall the details to answer the question. If necessary, they can lift the cover to review. Similarly, they can cover the main ideas and use the details to recall them.

Some hints for effective note-taking follow:

- Use as few words as possible – do not write out full sentences.
- Use abbreviations.

- Keep lots of space on the page as you take notes: skip lines between details and leave extra space to add information later.
- Use markers and highlighters to help organize notes on the page (e.g., draw horizontal lines to show the end of one main idea and the start of another, number details, insert questions marks next to notes that are unclear)

About the author

Joan is the founding partner of **Keys to Literacy** and author of *The Key Three Routine: Comprehension Strategies*. Joan is an experienced educator and nationally recognized teacher trainer. Joan worked at the Landmark School in Massachusetts for 23 years as a teacher, supervisor and principal. She was also founder of the Landmark College Preparation Program, and director of the Landmark Outreach Program. Joan was one of three Lead Trainers in MA for the NCLB Reading First Program. She is also a National LETRS author and trainer, a member of the Praxis National Reading Advisory Board, and an adjunct instructor at Fitchburg State. She received her M.Ed. in Reading from Harvard University and her B.A. from Boston College. Joan has authored a number of books, including *The Landmark Study Skills Guide*, *LETRS Module 11 – Writing: A Road to Reading Comprehension*, and *Active Learning Study Strategies: Using Kurzweil 3000*.

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