

# A Four-Step Structure for Better Writing

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## **Introduction**

Students hoping to develop better writing skills in English have often been told to read and write more, as systematic, deliberate practice is reported to lead to success. The main question, however, is that of *how much* practice is considered adequate, *what kind* of practice is most beneficial, and *what* tutoring strategy can best scaffold effective writing. While some prefer a didactic mode of engagement to nurture cognitive growth of student-writers, others favour writer-oriented tutoring strategies that seek to understand, accept, and respond to individual student needs and purposes of writing.

Teachers of the didactic method tend to solicit student input, direct discussion, create a set of thinking prompts designed to steer students' attention to their writing goals, discourse coherence, choice of words, as well as comparisons between first and second languages and grammatical rules. Adherents of the writer-focused approach, on the other hand, generally advocate a minimalist style putting primacy on non-intervention where the tutor acts as a commentator and guide, rather than as an editor concerned with fixing flawed papers.

In Hong Kong, the relative merits of form-dominated, writer-oriented (process writing) and content-based approaches are widely discussed among language practitioners. This short article will outline a writing approach predicated on the principle that the shift of language from interior monologue to text is a challenging juggling act, and that a writer-based four-step approach can help students to articulate thoughts without imposing undue strain on the need for accurate use of language, grammar and content in the preliminary writing stage. The four-step approach is conceptualised as such so that using 'less' language (idea-dominated) initially has the benefit of facilitating 'more' focused attention to organization and coherence (language and meaning-oriented) in writing.

Errors at both the macro and micro levels are often identified in the writing of students of limited English proficiency. These could include variable and weak control of grammar and lexis, overuse of formulaic expression (e.g., overuse of 'to begin with' as paragraph introducer), inappropriate deployment of signalling (e.g., 'on the other hand' to mean 'in addition') and insufficient substantiation of thesis statement that often contributes to poor paragraph development, which in turn affects clarity and balance of argument (e.g., lengthy solid first argument, degenerating into shaky third and fourth paragraphs with minimal elaboration).

## **A Rule of Thumb**

There are several misconceptions about writing held by students in Hong Kong, three of which relate to: (a) writing improvement could only be derived from practising with full-length essays; (b) the ability to use complex sentence formations is the key to good grades; and (c) a draft or outline is the equivalent of a full-length essay and sometimes considered time-wasting in an examination setting. As a rule of thumb, we can respond thus. First, it is advisable to abandon the term 'draft' or 'outline' from our

vocabulary to avoid confusion. Instead, we can work with a 'skeletal framework' - the bare-bones without the meat - as a starting point to help students articulate their ideas. Second, we can assume multiple roles when working with student-writers, shifting back and forth from informant to collaborator, teacher to guide, directive to non-directive, as the occasion demands. For example, a student could sometimes indicate specifically what s/he would like to practise or discuss in a particular session; at other times s/he would simply express frustration at the lack of visible progress, soliloquizing the difficulties encountered in composing.

Third, the student-writer can be encouraged to concentrate on effective paragraphing and write only one paragraph at a time. The rationale for this is that inner speech of the adult represents thoughts for private consumption only. The transformation of such thoughts to align with prescribed writing conventions necessarily involves effort and knowledge of the protocols with which the community operates. This may elucidate many students' persistent problems in transferring ideas in their mind, often in spoken mode, in fragments and most of the time in Cantonese (his mother-tongue), to well-formulated arguments to conform to the required writing format.

### The Four-Step Structure

Specifically, a four-step structure (Fig. 1) concentrating on a different aspect of writing at a time is proposed to help weak students examine and address essay writing problems at both the local (e.g., grammar and sentence structure formation) and global (e.g., coherence, relevance) levels.

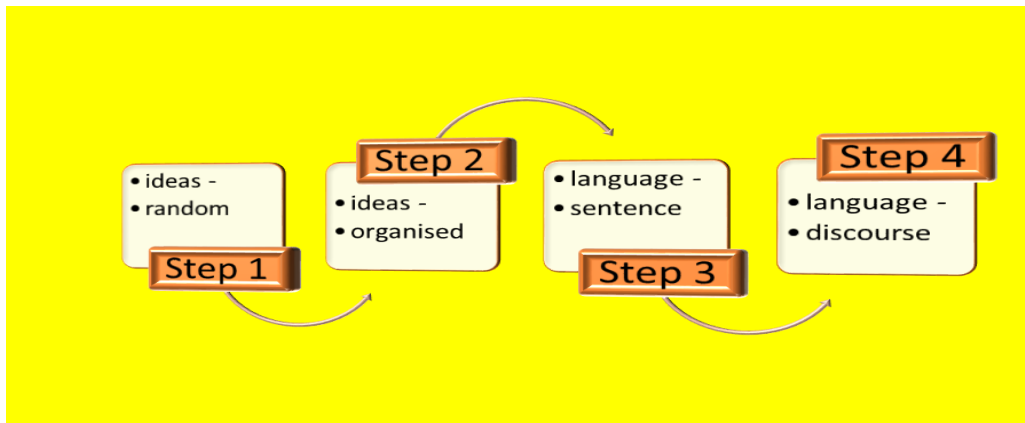


Fig. 1 The Four-Step Structure

#### Steps 1 and 2 - Ideas

The structure in Figure 1 represents a 'skeletal framework' aimed at reducing unease about grammatical and lexical accuracy in getting started. Step 1 is mainly concerned with gathering random ideas for a chosen topic, regardless of how or whether or not they are related or organised. Students can use pictures, symbols, single words, fragmented expression, and even Cantonese or Chinese (mother tongue as a *mental resource* rather than a deficit) to express themselves, without being encumbered by the need to produce fully-fledged statements in a coherent manner at this stage. Also, validating a student's mother tongue is believed to contribute to self-confidence and foster positive transfer of already developed cognitive abilities to English. Below is an illustration of the proposed structure.

**Topic:** The Advantages and Disadvantages of Introducing a Sugar Levy

*Step 1: Ideas - random*

health; fat people **超重**, no die; good for hospital; less crowded; income for government; no good for supermarkets; freedom to eat anything; silly...more tax?



No government control; what to eat; unhappy ...

After gathering ideas for the topic and selecting health as the first main argument, the student can now attempt to substantiate his/her thesis statement with support details. As can be seen in Step 2, the student can deploy a variety of tools - symbols (✓, →), pictures, fragments (no sugar, harm) - to convey intended meanings.

*Step 2: Ideas - organised*

**Main Point:** Good✓ - health

Support1 - few fat people → less harm, healthier



Support 2 - less ill; die; less crowded hospital

Support 3 - survey, like healthy food → no sugar

**Steps 3 and 4 - Language**

Based on the ideas listed in Steps 1 and 2, the student can begin to construct simple sentences (Step 3). The highlighted words represent those previously used in the list. For example, converting 'harm' to 'harmful' (2<sup>nd</sup> sentence) demonstrates the student's knowledge of parts of speech, and the use of the verb 'shows' and 'enjoy' (last sentence) seem to reflect appropriate vocabulary choice, grasp of 'that-clauses' and word order respectively. Such uncomplicated sentence formations facilitate checking and possible revision of inter-sentence links in Step 4.

*Step 3 - Language (sentence)*

**Topic:** The Advantages and Disadvantages of Introducing a Sugar Levy

**Main Point:** Good✓ - health

Support1 - few fat people → less harm, healthier



Support 2 - less ill; die; less crowded hospital

Support 3 - survey, like food healthy → no sugar

Introducing a sugar levy is good for one's health. Sugar is harmful. There are fewer fat people, and more people living a healthy life. Hospitals will be less crowded. Survey shows people enjoy healthy food with no sugar.

(sentential)

Before attempting to add cohesive devices, the student needs to examine whether or not the support details are appropriately sequenced. Once satisfied with the logical progression of the text, changes in lexis (e.g., 'overcrowding' in 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence), in register (e.g., 'may be', 'can live', tentative language, 2<sup>nd</sup> sentence), in structure showing causality (e.g., 'since', 1<sup>st</sup> sentence), in referencing (e.g., 'a recent survey', identifying source, last sentence) can be made (Step 4).

#### Step 4 - Language (discourse)

<p>Introducing a sugar levy is good for one's health. Sugar is harmful. There are fewer fat people, and more people living a healthy life. Hospitals will be less crowded. Survey shows people enjoy healthy food with no sugar.</p> <p>(sentential)</p>	<p>Introducing a sugar levy is good for one's health <i>since (causal)</i> sugar is harmful. There <i>may be (tentative)</i> fewer fat people, and more people <i>can live (tentative)</i> a healthy life. <i>Overcrowding (lexical)</i> at hospitals can benefit patients <i>(lexical, reordering)</i>. A recent survey <i>(referencing; reinforcing)</i> shows many <i>(qualifying)</i> people enjoy healthy food with no sugar.</p> <p>(discoursal)</p>
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#### Evaluation and Reflection

The four-step structure allows students, especially the weaker ones, to:

- concentrate on one aspect at a time (i.e. idea development → language use at the sentence level first, followed by discourse);
- be less encumbered by grammatical or lexical correctness initially;
- start small- a paragraph rather than a full-length essay;
  - in order to*
    - create more room for developing ideas;
    - enjoy more freedom in trying out a variety of structural patterns;
    - facilitate the checking and revision of inter-sentence (subsequently inter-paragraph) links - less complicated, more efficient; *and*
    - sequence steps in progression of complexity.

It is understood the best tutoring approach is one that reflects and responds to the needs and learning styles of individual student-writers. Over-correcting (the didactic mode) may result in a benign neglect of the affective aspect of learning. The four-step structure can help students to expand their ability not only to critique the mechanics of writing, but review discourse coherence through discrete writing steps, thereby promoting increased awareness of meaning-oriented text revision. Further inquiry into the approach is desirable and necessary to ascertain and establish its potential value. One possibility of

achieving this is through enhanced systematicity in the documentation of the different stages of writing development and strategies employed (e.g., comparison of original and revised texts; impact of instructional approaches on outcomes; choice of strategies). Students from a range of educational settings in different geographical locations can be invited to participate in a large-scale study to obtain sufficiently reliable and valid data.



**About the Author**

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Dr. Chau is the recipient of five major awards: two President's Awards for excellence in teaching and services, two Faculty Awards for outstanding teaching and services, and one DARE Award for outstanding research. Her main research interests comprise second language learning and technology-enhanced learning. She has a strong research record, with publications in international peer-reviewed journals, including the *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, and *English Language Teaching Journal*. She has played an active role in leading and co-ordinating research projects that have made a significant impact on many aspects of teaching and learning at the English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and in the wide academic community.