

Helping Students to Add Detail and Flair to Their Stories

Pooja Patel and Leslie Laud

ABSTRACT: This action research case study measured the effectiveness of a writing strategy designed to enhance imagery in stories that 3 students with severe writing difficulties (2 were identified as learning disabled, 1 was undergoing assessment) produced during their resource room sessions. The authors combined the use of the self-regulated strategy development approach with N. Bell's (1991b) visualizing and verbalizing (V&V) structure words to elicit greater detail in student writing. Although Bell designed V&V to be a reading comprehension technique, results showed that it can enhance student writing when used to support students in articulating their self-created images for stories they write. Of 3 students, 2 made marked improvements, according to measures that included length, number of story elements included, number of images, and a holistic rating of overall writing quality. The holistic rating of the student who did not make marked improvements remained the same; her mechanics score decreased by 1 point, and her organization score remained steady. Further editing instruction may have raised these scores because that was the area in which all 3 students showed the least improvement.

KEYWORDS: *middle school, narrative writing, self-regulated strategy development, visualizing and verbalizing, writing*

MOST MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS are required to write stories, yet those with learning difficulties struggle with the following issues when doing so: planning, generating ideas, revising, monitoring themselves as they write, motivating themselves, and transcribing words onto paper (Graham, 1990; Graham & Harris, 1989; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Schwartz, 1991; MacArthur & Graham, 1987; Troia, 2006). As a result, they often receive poorer evaluations because in comparison with their peers' stories, theirs are usually shorter, less well-organized, and contain a greater number of mechanical errors (Dockrell, Lindsay, Connelly, & Mackie, 2007; MacArthur & Graham). Furthermore, many students with learning difficulties lack knowledge of the different components in stories, making their stories more brief and more difficult to follow (Graham & Harris).

Fortunately, such students have been shown to benefit from self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), a model in which self-regulatory behaviors are developed to strengthen students' writing skills (Chalk, Hagan-Burke, & Burke, 2005; Graham & Perin, 2007; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). Research on a specific story-writing strategy, "Who When Where What 2 How 2" (WWW, What = 2, How = 2), that is taught through the SRSD model showed that it is emerging as one of the most effective and widely validated story-writing strategies available. With this specific strategy, students answer the following questions as a structured way to ensure that they include all major components in their stories: "Who are the main character(s) and character(s)?" "When does the story take place?" "Where does the story take place?" "What does the main character want to do?" "What happens when he or she tries to do it?" "How does the story end?" and "How does the main character feel?"

Developed by Graham and Harris (1989), the strategy, when taught through the SRSD model, has been validated repeatedly (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Harris et al., 2006; Patel & Laud, 2007; Reid & Lienemann, 2006; Saddler, 2006; Saddler, Moran, Graham, & Harris 2004; Sawyer, Graham, & Harris 1992). Each of these validation studies showed that the students' stories became more complete, longer, and more comparable to those of their typically developing peers.

However, Patel and Laud (2007) found that although this strategy increased story content, as one of their students' English teachers commented, the students' overall stories lacked "spark."

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Bell's (1991a) visualizing and verbalizing (V&V) technique, which was designed to strengthen the images students create mentally while reading, offered a strategy that we hypothesized may add such spark to students' stories. In this technique, students practice visualizing stories mentally as they read through them, extensively creating images, then verbalizing what they see in a structured format (Bell, 1991b). Instead of using the strategy as a reading comprehension support technique, students in the present study learned to use the same structures to enable them to articulate what they saw as they imagined their stories and to use this articulation to craft richer images in their stories.

Regarding where to teach this technique in the WWW, What = 2, How = 2 framework, Mason, Harris, and Graham (2002) suggested first teaching the format of POW (pick my topic, organize my notes, write and say more) to strengthen the WWW, What = 2, How = 2 technique. Therefore, we taught the V&V technique during the W phase of POW because this was where Mason et al. recommended the teacher model adding details and better word choices.

Our research questions were the following: "How would adding both details and better word choices during the W phase of POW, combined with the visualizing and verbalizing technique, influence our students' story writing?" "Would the stories become longer?" "Would there be more images?" and "Would the stories be characterized overall as better developed?"

Method

Participants

The 3 students in this case study—Kerry, Sabra, and Mali—were in the seventh grade in an urban independent school in northeastern United States. All 3 received an average of 55 min of classroom support three times per week. They entered the resource program because their teachers felt that these students were performing far below their peers on literacy-related assignments. This resource class was taken during the foreign-language time slot, so that this requirement was waived for these students.

Kerry was formally diagnosed with a language-based learning disability, which affected the mechanics of her writing and ability to generate ideas, and attention deficit disorder, which further affected her ability on higher order tasks of comprehension, organization, and writing. She had been receiving resource support for more than 1 year.

Sabra was new to the school and also formally diagnosed with a language-based learning disability similar to Kerry's disability. However, Sabra's foundational weaknesses were more severe. Sabra had been receiving resource-room support both during the school year and during summers since elementary school. Her weakness in phonetic knowledge affected her decoding and spelling skills. In addition, Sabra

struggled with higher order skills such as comprehension and writing.

Mali had attended the school since kindergarten. Although he had never been diagnosed with a formal language-based learning disability, he regularly transposed letters during spelling, was unfamiliar with common spelling patterns, was below average on word-attack skills and reading speed, had disorganized writing, had poor attention to mechanics in writing, and generally avoided literacy-related tasks. He had received resource support for 2 years and intermittently during elementary school.

Kerry and Mali were familiar with the SRSD framework because they were taught the strategy while writing myths the previous year. This time, they were introduced to the V&V portion of the strategy. Sabra was introduced to both parts because she was new to the school.

Procedure

We used the following six stages to teach this writing strategy. These stages are based on SRSD (Harris et al., 2006), which is a comprehensive, structured, and sequenced routine for writing instruction.

Stage 1: Develop background knowledge. Before beginning the strategy instruction, we introduced the subject of Arabian tales to the students by reading modified Arabian tales because this was the topic of their current unit in their English class. The students wrote and discussed their observations. Collaboratively, the group generated a list of observations and characteristic traits of Arabian tales, drawing from their own observations and discussion with the other members of the group. Students generated the list without any assistance or feedback from the teacher to ensure that no guidance was given before the administration of the pretest. Once students read a few Arabian tales and discussed the stories with their peers, they wrote an original Arabian tale in 15 min in the resource room.

Stage 2: Discuss it. During this stage, students recalled the steps of the writing strategy. We changed the "WWW, What = 2, How = 2" mnemonic to "www.what2how2" because the students found that its similarity to a Web address made it easier to recall. They also reviewed the purpose of the mnemonic and the genre of writing that it is used for. Kerry and Mali were reintroduced to www.what2how2 because they had used it the previous year, whereas Sabra was introduced to it for the first time. We made a classroom chart and individual charts with each of the following questions: "Who are the main character(s) and character(s)?" "When does the story take place?" "Where does the story take place?" "What does the main character want to do?" "What happens when he or she tries to do it?" "How does the story end?" and "How does the main character feel?"

In addition to reviewing the mnemonic, the students read a short story and were asked to identify all of the different parts of the mnemonic on a graphic organizer and make an evaluative judgment of the story. A story was considered good if it contained all of the components. Upon completion of the story writing, the teacher and students together reviewed the graphic organizer to ensure that all of the parts had been correctly identified.

Classroom charts and student charts on the five-step writing process modified from Graham and Harris (1989) were introduced to the student:

- Step 1. Look at picture (in mind or actual) or assignment.
- Step 2. Clear your mind and focus.
- Step 3. Write out mnemonic and relevant story grammar question.
- Step 4. Answer the story grammar questions using detail.
- Step 5. Write your story, answering all the story grammar questions and making sure it makes sense.

We told Kerry, Sabra, and Mali that they were going to build on the mnemonic and learn how to write with more detail. We introduced the students to “POW + www.what2how2.”

Students reviewed the story and identified all of the places in the story where the author illustrated the prompt “a windy day.” They circled different details that showed how the author portrayed the concept of *windy*. The teacher and students discussed the importance of details and how the details help to elicit appropriate pictures.

Next, students looked at a picture and described it in writing without assistance from the teacher. When the students completed the assignment, the teacher read two descriptions of the different picture: The first one had minimal detail, and the second emphasized detail. The students compared the descriptions and discussed why the second description was better. For example, the second description better enabled them to create mental images of the written description accurately and easily. We emphasized the images created from detailed writing and the need to write with details so that the reader can accurately mentally picture what the writer envisioned.

Then, we introduced the students to Bell’s (1991b) structure words—*what, size, color, number, shape, where, when, background, movement, mood, and perspective*—to help categorize the essential descriptive elements in writing. We defined each structure word and presented an example from a story that illustrated the structure word.

At this point, the students identified details using different structure words in the description that the teacher provided in their initial description of pictures and in a separate excerpt from a story. Once the students had reached a level of mastery of understanding the definitions of each structure word and could identify them in stories, they rewrote

their initial description with details so that the reader could create the picture mentally from their written descriptions.

Once students had practiced identifying and generating detail using structure words, they looked at their pretest sample and identified places where more detail was necessary. Then, using the structure words as a guide, they rewrote two sections that were identified as areas that lacked detail. Next, students presented the before-and-after writing samples to the group. In this step, we discussed which structure words were used and how it improved each piece of writing. Also, students identified all of the elements of *www.what2how2* in their pretest samples. If students missed any elements, the elements were highlighted, discussed, and added to the story.

Stage 3: Model it. Students were given models from stories (including Arabian tales) and were asked to highlight evidence of details and categorize them according to the structure words they represented. In addition, they were given pictures and asked to write a detailed description of one aspect of the picture. Once they were able to successfully complete the picture task independently, they added more detail—using structure words—to other excerpts. The students completed this activity on a daily basis once the structure words were introduced to ensure that they were able to readily add detail and understand the purpose of the structure words. Initially, the teacher modeled how to elaborate the writing and—eventually, with practice—the students were able to elaborate on their own.

Once Kerry, Sabra, and Mali understood the structure words and how to use them to elicit detail in their writing, the students were asked to plan and write stories, using picture or topic prompts. Initially, the teacher modeled the entire process by using the mnemonic five-step writing strategy and self-statements.

Kerry and Mali were already familiar with the self-talk statements and were able to explain the purpose and significance of the self-talk statements to Sabra. They helped Sabra understand that they used self-talk to motivate themselves using positive self-reinforcement or by finding a solution to continue to write when they got stuck while thinking of ideas. Kerry, Mali, and the teacher were able to successfully model examples of self-statements such as “I am stuck, it’s okay, look back at my planning to help me come up with an idea”; “You are doing a great job, keep on working”; or “I am stuck right now, let me walk around and take a break for a few minutes and then come back when I am refreshed.”

To facilitate the brainstorming portion, the teacher introduced a graphic organizer that required the students to answer each question from the mnemonic where each initial question word was listed. In addition, the graphic organizer asked the students to come up with different phrases or

words that they would use to elaborate and add further detail in each of the boxes underneath the appropriate initial question word. The structure words were along the edges of the graphic organizer to help prompt the students with ideas when necessary (see Figure 1).

During the modeling, the teacher focused on adding details in the story and accurately portraying the images “we pictured in our head while writing.” We worked on making the story flow and connecting all of the story grammar elements to the details that we added to the story. In addition, we worked on various ways to handle errors and situations of writer’s block.

Stage 4: Memorize it. During the strategy instruction, students memorized the different steps of the SRSD and the five-step strategy. The students participated in daily quizzes and other games such as Hot Potato to memorize each step in consecutive order. For games such as Hot Potato, each student recalled the correct step when the

ball was tossed to him or her. Students familiarized themselves with the structure words and were able to identify examples in writing.

Stage 5: Support it. Once the teacher modeled the entire process, the students wrote stories individually, with support where the group planned the stories together, adding detail together with the assistance of the graphic organizer; and then each student wrote the stories on his or her own. Next, the students completed the five-step writing process on their own, with the support of the graphic organizer and the individual charts.

Stage 6: Independent performance. When students were fairly secure with both of those tasks, they wrote a story without the support of the graphic organizer or the charts.

We taught the strategy over a 5-week period during which the students attended resource room about three times per week for 55 min each. During this period, the

Color : Number : Shape : Where : When : WWW.WHAT2HOW2 : Background : Movement : Mood : Perspective : Size :					
Shape : Where : When : Background : Movement : Mood : Perspective : Number	WHO	WHEN	WHERE	Background : Movement : Mood : Perspective : What : Size : Color : Number	
	WHAT	WHAT	HOW	HOW	
Number : Shape : Where : When : Background : Movement : Mood : Perspective : What : Size : Color : Number : Shape : Color					

FIGURE 1. Graphic organizer.

students also received support on classroom material and other foundational skills support. However, we spent the majority of the time for each session on SRSD instruction.

Assessments

We collected a pretest sample and a posttest sample before and after the intervention, respectively. We scored each of the stories on four criteria: word count, story grammar elements, number of images, and holistic scores. In accordance with Graham and Harris's (1989) study, the learning specialist who taught the strategy and an outside learning specialist scored the stories for all measures.

Word count. We counted the number of words in each essay. Interrater reliability was 99%. We averaged any discrepant word counts, which ranged from one to six words.

Story grammar elements. We used an assessment scale based on one that was used in Graham and Harris's (1989) study for measuring the quality of each of the following story elements: main character, locale, time, starter event, goal, action, ending, and reaction. A full description of the scoring criteria is provided in the Appendix. We resolved any discrepant scores through discussion.

Number of images. In addition, we counted the number of developed images included in each story, in contrast to counting simple images. A reader could create simple images from almost any noun or verb, but the writer may not have intentionally created the rich image for the reader. Therefore, an *image* was any noun or verb. In contrast, a *developed image* contained intentionally placed descriptors (usually adjectives or adverbs) of nouns, verbs, or phrases. A noun or verb in isolation was not a developed image; it needed to be connected to a clause or another part of speech to be considered a developed image.

A developed image formed a mental representation of a physical sense. As described in Bell's (1991b) article, images can represent qualities such as size, color, number, shape, movement, mood, background, perspective, time, and sound. If an image could be broken down into two separate images, then it was counted as 2. However, if an image was elaborated on with a metaphor, it was still counted as 1. Movement needed to be out of the ordinary or to use an adjective or another literary device (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification), and so it was counted when it was developed, which meant it was in the form of an unusual verb or paired with an adjective. Otherwise, most verbs would imply movement. Regarding mood, the student should have consciously included details that created a sense of a feeling so that the reader could make images. A *mood image* used intentionally placed descriptors that create a clear and specific sense of the feelings the characters were experiencing. Because perspective was one element

of that, images that described foreground or background were also counted. Last, personality can convey an image; therefore, personality descriptors were counted when they were clearly described with less frequently used words. When scores were discrepant, we resolved differences through discussion.

Holistic scores. Last, we used a holistic scale that Tindal and Hasbrouck (1991) developed to score the general overall quality of the stories. The holistic scores looked broadly at three major categories: story idea, organization, and writing conventions. The first area (story idea) addresses the essential elements of plot, the believability or creativity of events, and word choice. The second area (organization) looks at indications of a clear beginning, middle, and end as well as the coherence of events, transitions between ideas, and orderliness of the sequence of events. *Writing conventions* cover the mechanics of writing such as sentence structure, spelling, use of dialogue, handwriting, punctuation, and accurate word use. We resolved any discrepant scores through discussion. Holistic ratings had an 83% interrater reliability.

Results

Mali's word count increased from 192 to 478. The number of images that Mali included in his story increased from 4 to 16. His score on the story grammar elements scale increased from 9 to 17. Last, his holistic ratings increased from 11 to 13, with story idea and organization subscores each increasing by 1 point and conventions remaining the same.

Kerry showed a similar pattern. Her story length increased from 256.5 to 350.0 words. In her first story, she included 10 images, which increased to 18 after learning the strategy. Her score on the story grammar elements scale increased from 8 to 15. Last, her holistic scores were similar to those of Mali, increasing from 11 to 13.5, with 1 point gained for story idea and organization, and 0.5 gained for conventions.

Sabra's story length rose from 277.5 to 470.5 words. In her first story, she included only 1 image; in the second, she included 13. She scored 9 points on the pretest story grammar elements scale and 16 in the posttest. However, although Sabra's holistic score remained the same at 9.5 points, she first scored 3 for story idea and rose to 4 in her second story. Sabra's organization score was 4 for both stories. Yet, her conventions score decreased from 2.5 to 1.5. Table 1 shows a summary of the findings.

Discussion

We evaluated how adding details and better word choices during the W phase of POW, combined with the V&V technique, influenced our students' story writing. Specifically, we assessed whether the stories would become longer,

TABLE 1. Summary of Pre- and Posttest Results of Four Measures for Mali, Kerry, and Sabra

Measure	Mali		Kerry		Sabra	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Number of words	192.0	478.0	256.5	350.0	277.5	470.5
Number of images	4	6	10	18	1	13
Story grammar elements scale score	9	17	8	15	9	16
Holistic rating score	11.0	13.0	11.0	13.5	9.5	9.5

contain more story elements, contain more images, and be characterized as better developed. The stories improved according to the measures used for each area. This case study shows that when teachers clearly identify and target a student's specific difficulty in writing and use the best validated strategies available, students with writing difficulties can improve. In addition, this study also suggests that V&V, which is a comprehension strategy, can be effectively modified and used to enrich writing.

In the previous year, Mali and Kerri were introduced to *www.what2how2* and succeeded in improving the organization and completeness of their stories. However, on the basis of their English teacher's feedback, we wanted to achieve more improvements in elaboration, word choice, and details. Because we were aware of the effectiveness of V&V for strengthening reading comprehension, we felt that this strategy could be manipulated and used by writers rather than only by readers. With the scaffolding that the structure words provided, the students were able to understand how images are created and their significance in stories. With the focus on the images, the students began to take the time to understand what they were going to be writing about. Their brainstorming and planning stages were not done passively or even moderately actively, but rather they were done with a significant amount of energy and thought because the students were required to elicit images from what they planned to write. They began to invest more time in comprehending what they wrote and checking that their word choices matched the images in their head. This investment not only helped them to create more vivid stories but also helped with the overall flow, organization, and content. For example, in one pretest story, one student wrote the following: "I told you going camel riding in the sand storm," Shecemomosko said. 'Now we are stranded and one of our camels died so we have to share, as we're lost.'" After learning the strategy, this same student then wrote the following:

The two brothers took the vase off of the shelf and stared at it hope that sheen and beautiful shades of green and brown would make them forget about their loss. When Miltaba

brushed the dust off of the vase, all the dust seem to make a figure of a man in the air. Then right in front of there eyes a most powerful jinni flouted out of the vase.

Both examples elicit images. However, the second example shows the heightened skill at creating images in a story. As a result, the reader is able to get a firmer understanding of the setting and a deeper comprehension of the story. It also makes the story more enjoyable to read because it adds literary devices and flows better.

The convention scores did not rise on the holistic scale. However, our strategy instruction did not address editing, possibly suggesting why the students did not improve in this area. Perhaps the scores decreased because the students invested so much of their mental resources in enriching the details of their stories, interfering with their attention to conventions. Once the strategy becomes more automatic, this automaticity may free up their resources to again attend more carefully to conventions. Therefore, we encourage teachers to do the following:

1. Have students practice the strategy as many times as needed for it to become automatic so that they may focus more on mechanical issues and do not need to think carefully about this strategy. Teachers should have students practice this strategy in varied ways such as orally, in group stories, or with different pictures to avoid demotivating students with repetition.
2. Teach students to attend more closely to conventions after learning this strategy. The students could go through a second round of the six stages of self-regulated strategy development previously described, but with revision techniques in lieu of imagery techniques. We recommend these two issues not be addressed simultaneously because focusing on both detail enrichment and attention to conventions may overwhelm students.
3. Plan on spending much time on modeling describing pictures with good word choice. Students should begin to understand that there are many ways to describe a picture, but some ways, depending on better word choices, may be more effective. Model more and less effective ways to

describe a picture and have students reflect on why one way is more effective. (We were surprised at how long it took for students to recognize and then generate effective images.)

4. After modeling how to use more detail in creating images, highlight the images in model stories and reflect on why they are effective.
5. Students should be given the opportunity to add more detail to their previously written work so that they can see the effects of using the structure words to add more detail to their writing. Pre- and posttest writing samples enable students to effectively see their gains, which is tremendously motivating. This is also important so that teachers can identify the gains and move on once students have shown repeatedly that they have mastered the skill of using them. Do not move on too quickly because students with learning disabilities often believe they have internalized a skill before they actually have.
6. Do not expect students to use every structure word for each image. Place greater emphasis on careful word choice to elicit fewer quality images rather than merely a greater quantity of images. Most good models of stories do not overdo the images; rather, they have a few images that are exceptionally well-worded and carefully placed.
7. Last, some students need additional supports such as being given a definition of an image versus a well-developed image. Some students argue that they can create an image from any noun or verb, so they need to be encouraged to use exciting adjectives and adverbs at first to liven up the images they create. However, adjectives can easily be overused; thus, this step requires tremendous craft. Be prepared to spend much initial time on students' generating and evaluating images daily because this is one of the most challenging tasks for them in learning this strategy.

As learning specialists, our research and data are always confounded. For example, the study may not have a large number of participants, a vigorous process of screening participants, and a highly developed research design with a control group, because educators must work with the children who are in their classes. Therefore, a limitation of this study is that we used a convenience sample. In addition, the teacher scored the students' work, perhaps being biased, and we did not measure maintenance or generalization. Overall, the results of this research showed that using V&V and SRSD instructions are promising techniques for improving students' writing. Although the strategy may seem cumbersome, it is easy to implement, is time efficient, and effectively offers the kind of extensive support needed. Students are able to write with more detail and create more visual images in their stories. We encourage the replication of this study that addresses these limitations and uses

a more rigorous research design. Nevertheless, this case study shows preliminary promising results and illustrates what should be a favored method of teaching students to add more detail when writing stories.

AUTHOR NOTES

Pooja Patel is a learning specialist who teaches middle school English at the United Nations International School. She is also an instructor at Bank Street College. **Leslie Laud** has taught middle and elementary school for almost 2 decades and has taught graduate courses on education.

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APPENDIX
Story Grammar Elements (Adapted From S. Graham & K. R. Harris, 1989)

Main character

0 = Not present

1 = Just names person and what his or her powers are or what he or she rules

2 = Well described early on with several adjectives such as physical traits (e.g., appearance, size) and personality traits (e.g., confident, guarded, nervous, amused, disappointed) or conveys personality (e.g., "He smiled")

Locale

0 = Not present

1 = One or two words to name the place

2 = Use of specific adjectives (e.g., colors, aromas, and objects); more than one or two words to name the place

Time

0 = Not present

1 = Long ago; one day; once upon a time; early or general

2 = More specific date and time description

Starter event

0 = Not present

1 = Opponent and his challenge described simply and not extremely well detailed

2 = Very well detailed and worded; original and creative; more than just an ordinary sentence and more clever than simple theme of opponent challenges main character; must be unified or cohere in that parts hang together well or are clearly related

*If several, only count first***Goal (main character reacts to starter event)**

0 = Not present

1 = Predictable, unsurprising, fights opponent

2 = Creative and original

If the character witnesses a full event, such as a person being killed, this is not considered multiple goals, so give a score of 2

3 = More than one goal (e.g., one goal may be in a dream; opponent transforms and fights again; multiple variations)

Action

0 = Not present

1 = Present but simple, not highly developed

2 = Highly developed

Give only for very high-quality work; give carefully

3 = Multiple episodes (e.g., problem resolved and new problem or subplot with separate problem to be resolved introduced)

*Usually same points as goal***Ending**

0 = Not present

1 = Brief, simple, and one-dimensional trick that is not very believable; does not tie back to opponent's weakness or new weakness suddenly introduced at end

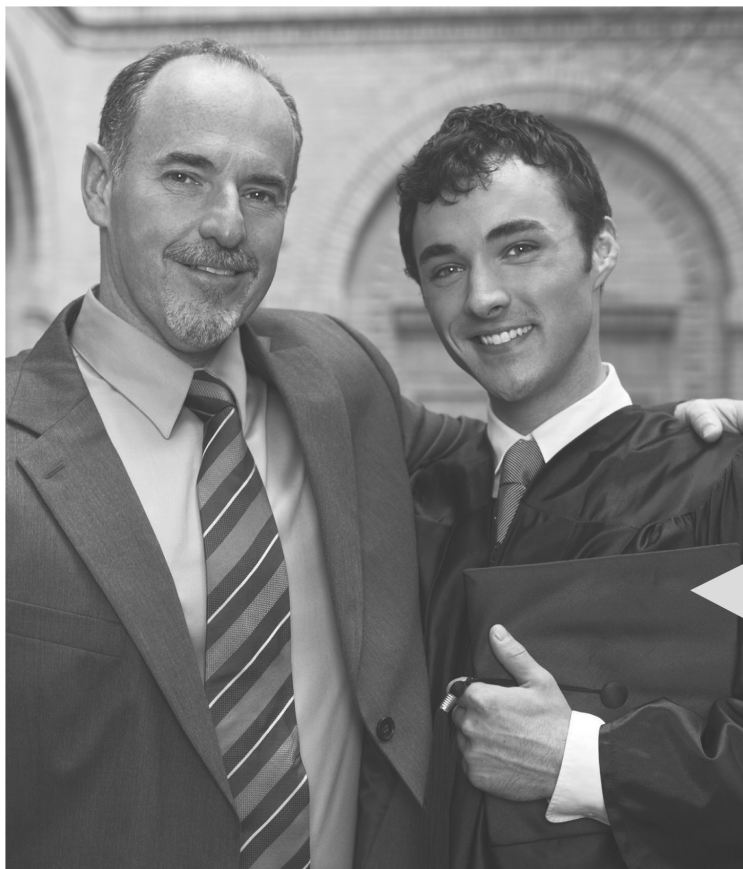
2 = Surprising; unexpected; very clever and well related to initial problem; well worded

Reaction

0 = Not present

1 = After ending, emphatic statement or a final response of a character to the consequences of the action

2 = Main character does or says something very clever, humorous, or unexpected, or related to problem; rich moral or explanation



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