

# Effects of College Entrance Essay Exam Instruction for High School Struggling Writers

## Introduction

### Research Questions

1. What is the effect of SRSD instruction for college entrance test writing on the quality of students' advanced plans, overall ACT writing scores, number of argumentative essay elements, number of words written, and number of transition words?
2. Did SRSD instructed students view this instruction as valuable?

### Rationale

- Writing is an important skill for college.
- Despite the importance of writing, mastery of this skill presents a challenge for many students.
- Colleges currently view writing as a gateway skill to college entrance.
- While admission decisions are based on many components, the high-stakes college entrance exams, including the written assessments, are an important part of the process.

### Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)

- SRSD, a framework for teaching instructional strategies, has been researched for over 30 years.
- SRSD helps students develop powerful writing strategies and critical self-regulation strategies for the writing process.
- SRSD self-regulation strategies include goal setting, self-instructions, self-reinforcement, and self-monitoring.
- SRSD Six Recursive Stages
  1. Developing and activating background knowledge
  2. Discussing the strategy
  3. Modeling the strategy
  4. Memorizing the strategy
  5. Supporting the strategy
  6. Performing the strategy independently

### Instructional Strategy Used in this Study

- HIT SONGS<sup>3</sup> is a strategy for the argumentative essay writing task on the ACT exam.

**For More Information**  
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## Methods

- **Design:** multiple baseline across participants
- **School:** Catholic college preparatory in the Phoenix metropolitan area
- **Participant Selection:** (a) recommendation by English teacher, (b) produced less than 8 argumentative elements on pretest, and (c) scored below 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on WIAT-II essay
- **Participants**
  - Dominic: 10<sup>th</sup> grade, male, Hispanic
  - Gabrielle: 10<sup>th</sup> grade, female, Hispanic
  - Kevin: 10<sup>th</sup> grade, male, Caucasian
  - Mark: 10<sup>th</sup> grade, male, Caucasian
- **Intervention**
  - Argumentative writing strategy represented by the mnemonic HIT SONGS<sup>3</sup>.
  - Strategy was designed to help students successfully complete the newly modified ACT writing test (ACT, Inc., 2015b) and improve their scores on this assessment.
  - Self-regulation strategies were taught to students as they learned to use the strategy.
  - The argumentative writing and self-regulation strategies were taught using the SRSD instructional model which includes six stages of instruction (Harris & Graham, 2014).
- **Fidelity**
  - Instructor checklist and observation of over one-third of the lessons.
  - Treatment fidelity across each of the lessons was 100%.
- **Writing Prompts and Scoring**
  - Prompts were from practice ACT writing tests designed to be relevant to adolescents.
  - All essays were scored independently by the first author and a trained rater.
  - Essays were scored for planning quality, overall ACT score, number of argumentative elements, number of words written, and number of transition words utilized.

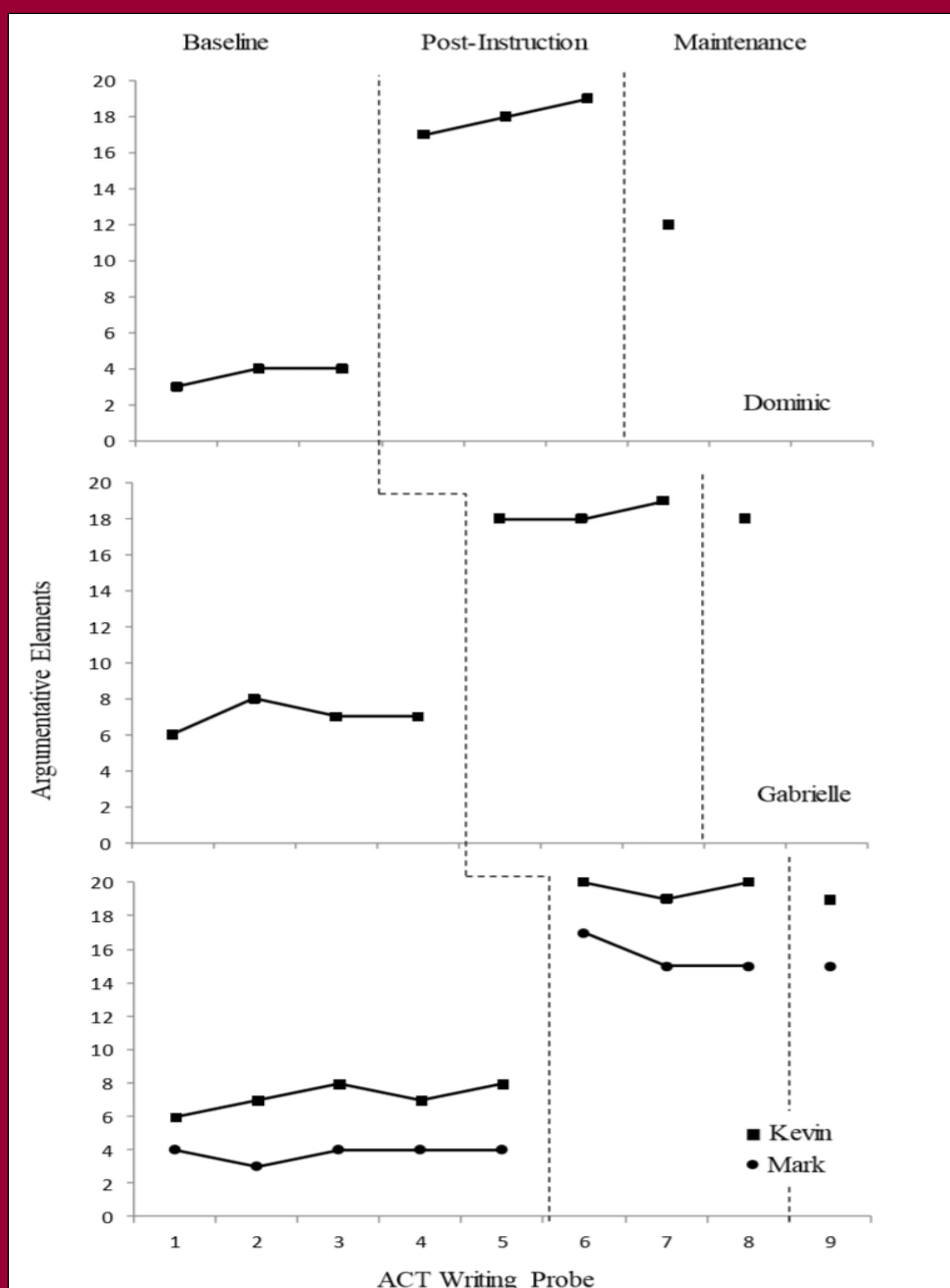
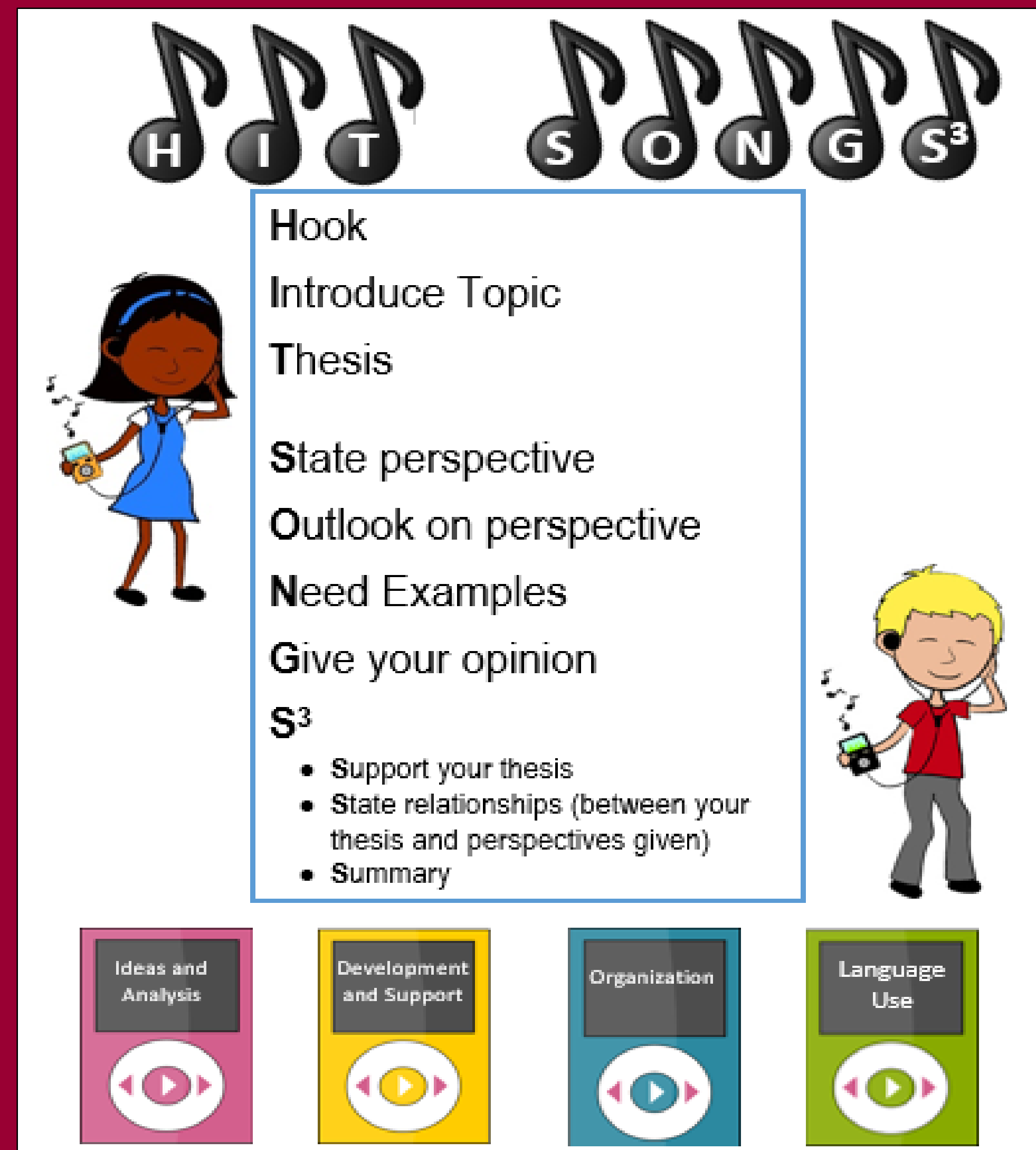


Figure 1. The effects of SRSD writing instruction for the ACT writing test on the number of argumentative elements included in an ACT essay across four high school struggling writers.

## Results

### Percent of Non-Overlapping Data Across Students

- Elements: Post-instruction 100%, Maintenance 100%
- Planning: Post-instruction 92%, Maintenance 100%
- ACT Writing Scores: Post-instruction 100%, Maintenance 100%
- Length: Post-instruction 75%, Maintenance 75%
- Transition Words: Post-instruction 75%, Maintenance 75%

### Treatment Fidelity

- Treatment fidelity was 100% across all students
- 36% to 42% of the lessons for each student were observed

### Time Spent in Instruction

- All lessons were 30 minutes in length
- Number of lessons ranged from 10 to 14 (totaling 5 to 7 hours)

### Social Validity

- All of the students enjoyed learning the strategy HIT SONGS<sup>3</sup> and felt that it helped them improve their ACT essay writing.
- "The strategy helped me organize my paper better. It really helped me focus on those parts more. I would skip the thesis before. My body paragraphs are now more organized." – Gabrielle
- "It was fun!" – Mark

## Discussion

### Students obtained initial competence in writing argumentative essays for the ACT exam.

- Students produced higher quality plans, enhanced their ACT score, and increased the number of argumentative essay elements, words, and transition words.

### The results of this study

- Add to the evidence supporting that SRSD instruction is effective for less skilled high school writers.
- Reveal that struggling writers can make meaningful improvements on their ACT essay writing abilities, when provided with test preparation on writing an argumentative essay for the ACT, through strategies instruction.

### Future Research

- Randomized control trial with larger sample size
- Students with disabilities
- Small group instruction
- Students at a variety of grade levels (10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup>)
- Students from diverse populations
- Strategy taught by classroom teachers

## Student Post-Test Notes and ACT Essay

**Planning Your Essay**  
Your work on these planning pages will not be scored.

Use the space below and on the back cover to generate ideas and plan your essay. You may wish to consider the following as you think critically about the task:  
Strengths and weaknesses of the three given perspectives  
• What insights do they offer, and what do they fail to consider?  
• Why might they be persuasive to others, or why might they fail to persuade?  
Your own knowledge, experience, and values  
• What is your perspective on this issue, and what are its strengths and weaknesses?  
• How will you support your perspective in your essay?

Right now there is an ongoing battle between freedom and health. Society is trying to find the best solution to whether freedom outweighs health. There are a lot of supporters on both sides. I believe that the health outweighs their freedom because people should be able to have the right to health.

To start off perspective one states that our society should strive for the greatest good for the greatest amount of people. It shows that freedom cannot interfere with that. This is a strong perspective because benefit is the greater good. For example, someone who drives recklessly creates risks for themselves and others. If that person was able to drive that way, that would cause health risks that could harm others. I agree with this perspective because it benefits the greater good.

Next, in perspective two, it tells that freedom should be the greater good. This is a weak argument because it only can benefit one side. For instance, someone who wants to drive a car that pollutes the air greatly can be able to. It disagrees with this perspective because it does not show any regard for other's health.

Finally, in the last perspective, it tells how people have the right to avoid health risks and that it is a freedom. This is strong because it calls our freedom but shows regards to others. An example would be that smokers risk other's health and therefore their freedom and cannot smoke. I agree with this because it keeps in mind the health of others.

As stated earlier, health should be the top priority. People can have freedom as long as it doesn't interfere with other's health. My thesis goes mostly with perspective three because it shows how avoiding a health risk is a freedom. Ultimately, health and freedom is hard to find a correct median but it should favor health. It's wise chose freedom over health, our future could prove worse health risks.