Adult Learners in SLW (Part 2): Using Graphic Organizers
by *Joy Kreeft Peyton*

In the first article in this series, Rebeca Fernandez provides guidance on designing a course that provides adult English learners with multiple opportunities to use writing toward personal, academic, and professional goals. (See also discussion of these in Fernandez et al., 2017). The list of what learners need to be able to do in writing is long; mastering these skills is not easy; and students often feel anxious, alone, and unsupported as they seek to fulfill writing assignments which the teacher, often a native speaker of English, will read and judge (Martinez et al., 2011; Minahan & Schultz, 2015). In order to support them, teachers need to

- develop and implement activities that connect oral language, reading, and writing that is related to the content that is the focus of instruction;
- develop topics and structure for the writing;
- align these with the writing standards followed in the program; and
- ensure, through ongoing observation and assessment, that learners are developing these skills and abilities.

Providing *many* opportunities for learners to engage in academic and professional writing and providing clear, specific, visible supports for developing this type of writing is critical. Ferlazzo (2017) and Lee (2017) argue that the ability to produce written products at this level is achievable when students have appropriate supports of teacher guidance and scaffold-rich curricula.

Providing Scaffolds for Writing

There are a number of perspectives on ways to help learners be successful writers through supported interaction, scaffolding in the zone of proximal development, and apprenticeship. Vygotsky (1962, 1968) described the process of learning in the space or "zone of proximal development," in which the learner is working to solve a problem or accomplish a task, and the teacher or a more competent peer "scaffolds" the learning by working collaboratively with the learner and demonstrating ways to move forward.

One type of scaffold and support that can help adult learners develop proficiency with academic writing is graphic organizers, which provide a framework for shaping key ideas in a written piece. Also known as a knowledge map, concept map, story map, cognitive organizer, advance

organizer, or concept diagram, a graphic organizer uses visual symbols to represent knowledge, concepts, thoughts, or ideas in a text and show the relationships among them.

Using Graphic Organizers in Instruction

Jiang and Grabe (2007) conducted research on the use of graphic organizers in reading instruction and concluded that they are an effective way to facilitate text comprehension because they make the structure of texts visible. Here, we focus on the use of graphic organizers to develop ideas for and approaches to writing an academic text with learners at different levels.

Wrigley and Isserlis (n.d.) provide examples of graphic organizers that can be used in adult English as a second language (ESL) literacy classes at many different levels of ability, fluency, and comfort with reading and writing. They argue that graphic organizers provide opportunities for basic-level literacy learners (in any language) to contribute content and information and to raise topics and questions of interest as part of the process of developing oral and written language (e.g., getting to know one another, listing languages that they speak, listing favorite activities). LINCS and KET Education also have helpful resources for using graphic organizers with adult learners.

Two commonly used graphic organizers are a KWL chart and a Venn diagram, which are widely used in K–12 and adult education. Here, I give an example of how each one could be used in an adult education class, with the focus and vocabulary of a specific lesson topic. In the next sections, I describe less commonly used graphic organizers.

Table 1 shows a KWL chart developed by a class that is studying, thinking about, and using vocabulary related to climate change.

Table 1. Example KWL Chart – Climate Change

Know	Want to Know	Learned
Earth's temperatures are getting warmer.	What are all of the causes of climate change?	Climate change is caused by both natural changes to the earth and oceans and by human activity.

Another topic that a class might focus on is key features of the countries of origin of the students in the class. Students might work in pairs and complete a Venn diagram, each focusing on their country. They would write the name of one country at the top of one of the circles and the other country at the top of the other circle. Working together, they would list features of their countries that are different, in the outer part of the circles, and features that are the same in the center section. This activity could lead to a considerable amount of discussion, reading, and writing. If the entire class then came together to consider the countries of origin of all of the students in the class, the Venn diagram would have as many overlapping circles as the countries involved (see Figure 1). The result could be writing informational pieces (about one's own or another person's country), comparative writing (describing how the two countries are similar or different), or

argumentative writing (making a statement about the key features of the two or more countries and defending it with data).
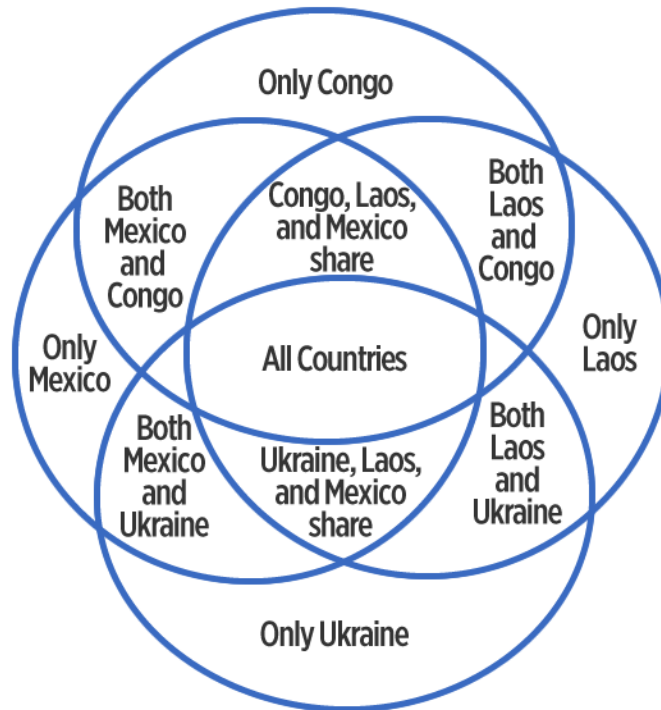

Figure 1. Example Venn diagram: countries students are from.

Using Graphic Organizers With Students at Different Levels

Graphic organizers can be used with adult English learners at different levels, from low beginning and beginning to advanced. (Some of these examples come from interviews that Kirsten Schaetzel, Rebeca Fernandez, and I did with adult ESL teachers about ways that they teach writing. The approaches are described in more detail in Peyton & Schaetzel, 2016.)

Scaffold 1: Writing Support
Beginning Literacy and Low Beginning Proficiency Levels

One teacher whom we interviewed works with adult learners who are beginning writers. She scaffolds their writing as they move from writing a single sentence to a paragraph. The writing support that she provides is a simple statement on the board each day with the date, which the learners copy in their notebooks:

➢ Today is Monday, February 19, 2018.

After a few weeks, she adds a second sentence, like one of these:

➢ Today is Presidents' Day.
➢ The weather today is cold.

The students copy both the date sentence and the new sentence. Later, without having written on the board, she asks them to write two sentences in their notebooks; students have their previous writing in their notebooks to use as models. It is easy to see how this simple writing support could develop over time, until the students are continually writing topic-focused paragraphs about the content on the board or in their notebooks.

Scaffold 2: Conversation Grid
Beginning Literacy and Low Beginning Proficiency Levels

Another writing support that a teacher we interviewed uses is a conversation grid. Each student has a piece of paper with four student names across the top and four questions in a column down the left side of the page. Each student goes to four different students, asks *one* of the four questions of each student, and writes the answer in the appropriate space in the grid. Table 2 gives example questions and the answers for one student.

Table 2. Conversation Grid Example: Asking About Backgrounds and Interests

	Name: Juan Morales	**Name:**	**Name:**	**Name:**
Question: What country are you from?	Juan is from Venezuela.			
Question: When did you come to the United States?	He came to the United States in 2019.			
Question: Why did you come to the United States?	He wants to be with his family and find a job.			
Question: What do you want to do after you finish this class?	He wants to work in a car dealership.			

This simple exercise can build over time, to more and more complex writing. Students might start by writing a few words (e.g., Juan, 2019, family and job; cars) and gradually move to writing phrases and then sentences, as this student did. They might move to asking each student they talk with all four questions, writing the answers in the spaces in the grid, and then writing summaries of the responses, comparing the responses, and sharing with others (orally or in writing) a summary of what they have learned. Like the previous examples, this can lead to informative/descriptive writing, comparative writing, and argumentative writing. That is, a teacher can start with a relatively simple activity and build it over time.

Scaffold 3: RAFT
Intermediate Levels and Multilevel Classes

Students at intermediate levels are often part of multilevel classes, which can present challenges for teachers seeking to facilitate the writing of students with different background knowledge and language proficiencies.

One graphic organizer that students can use alone or in groups, at their proficiency level, is RAFT, in which they think about a piece of writing from different perspectives and fill in a chart, answering these questions, before they begin to write a paper.

> **R**ole: Who am I as a writer?
> **A**udience: To whom am I writing?
> **F**ormat: What form will the writing take?
> **T**opic: What is the subject or focus of the piece of writing?

Calderón et al. (2018) give an example of what these components might look like in different writing activities. See Table 3 for an example I've created in a similar format. These components would be adjusted by the teacher and the students, depending on students' interests and proficiency levels and the focus of the class, unit, or lesson.

Table 3. RAFT Example: Global Warming

Role	**A**udience	**F**ormat	**T**opic
News reporter	College-educated adults	News article	Causes of global warming
Teacher	First graders	Story about the earth to read aloud	The beauty of our earth
Teacher professional developer	Middle and high school teachers	A text to use to learn about global warming and increase vocabulary	Causes of global warming
Political advocate	Senators and Representatives	Office visit with arguments/asks	Actions we might take to limit global warming

Completing the RAFT chart for different writing pieces gives students opportunities to explore different genres, styles, and tones and to consider different points of view on a topic. It also helps students to frame what may seem like an overwhelming assignment, to begin thinking about what they will write, and to lessen their anxiety in completing the assignment.

Here is an example of a blank chart that students might fill in. Students would complete each section, alone or in pairs or small groups, and then develop their piece.

Role	Audience
Format	Topic
Writing Piece	

Scaffold 4: Force Field Analysis
Advanced Levels

Finally, students at advanced levels need to be able to enter fully into the endeavor of writing academic texts. While they bring a considerable amount of language proficiency and personal resources to the task of writing, now they need to complete more high-stakes writing assignments.

One graphic organizer for doing this that has been adapted and used by an adult English as a foreign language educator is Force Field Analysis (Van Bogaert, 2017). It was created by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the 1940s as a guide for individuals to make a decision or a change in their lives by analyzing the forces for and against a particular topic or proposed change and considering or communicating the reasons behind the decision. Using this graphic, individuals or groups in a class can consider both "driving" forces (that would promote change) and "restraining" forces (that would inhibit change). (See Figure 2.)
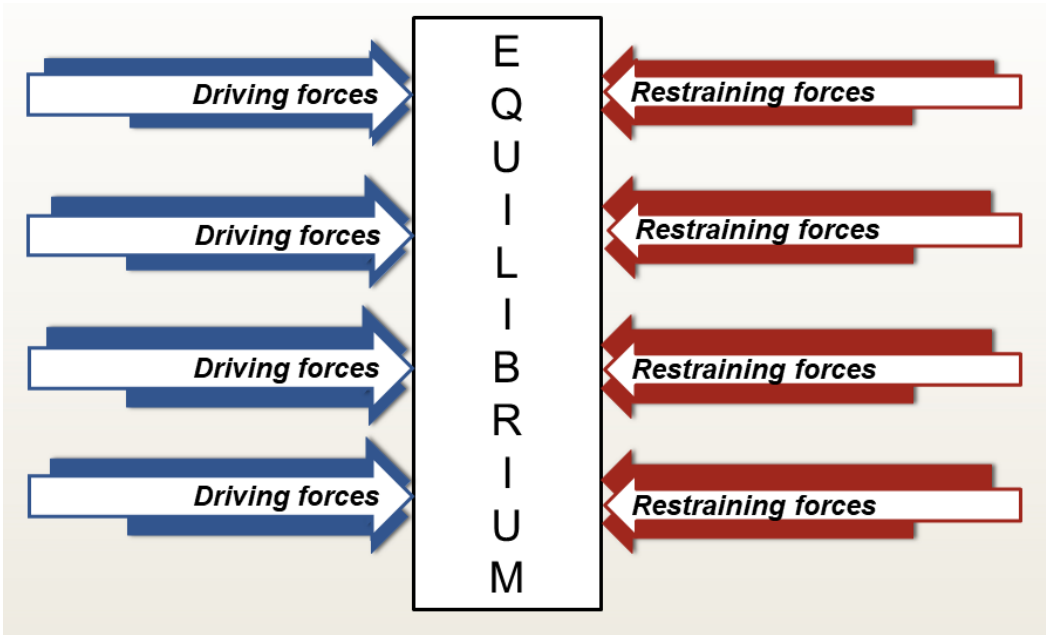

Figure 2. Force field analysis example.

In life generally, this can be a helpful way for students to think through personal decisions, life goals, and responsibilities. When used to support writing development, it can be a way to "unstick thinking":

- visually represent different views about or approaches to a topic,
- organize those views in a systematic way,
- generate ideas and develop a thesis or opening statement,
- support the ideas generated, and
- explore perceptions or opinions of opposing parties.

With her university students, Van Bogaert (2017) used this graphic to generate and organize points that were relevant to papers they were writing. For example, working together, they generated ideas for a paper about why action on climate change has been limited, articulating driving forces (some people are pushing for industry changes) and restraining forces (some industries do not want to change), which includes recognition of different perspectives on its reality and its impact on different individuals and sectors of society.

Conclusion

We have been able to see that students engaged in academic writing need not only continuous practice with writing and effective feedback on the writing they produce, they also need *supports* that place them in a community of writers and help them to generate and organize their ideas *before* they begin writing and *while* they are developing ideas or expressing them in a piece of writing. In the final article of this series (Part 3) on teaching adult learners second language writing, Kirsten Schaetzel discusses the use of test prompts to guide the teaching of academic writing.

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