A New TRICK for the Trade:
A Strategy for Keeping an Agenda Book
for Secondary Students

VICTORIA G. SCOTT AND LORI COMPTON

Many students, especially those with disabilities, have difficulty in middle and high school with assignment organization and completion. This article presents a learning strategy to assist students in keeping a calendar or agenda book. The strategy presented cues students to specific actions they must take in order to remember assignments, study for tests, complete projects, and organize their materials.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 have placed an increasing focus on student achievement. Many students in general education use a wide variety of strategies that allow them to approach the learning process efficiently and make adequate progress. Among many other strategies, these successful learners use such strategies as predicting, self-questioning, visualizing, self-checking, and monitoring progress.

The same is not true for many students with disabilities. These students often have fewer strategies and are inefficient using those they do have (Protheroe, 2002), placing them at risk for limited progress and school failure. Fortunately, strategy instruction can assist these students, many of whom spend the majority of their time in the general education classroom (Beckman, 2002; Casareno, 2002). Learning strategies allow students with disabilities to approach numerous academic tasks with a plan for success. Developed to help students succeed in reading, math, written language, social skills, and test taking (to name just a few), learning strategies use direction instruction to present a set of steps generally linked to a mnemonic that help students accomplish a task. A substantial number of these strategies have been developed and validated at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning.

In order for students with disabilities to be successful in the general education classroom, we must take a critical look at the task demands placed on those students. One of the most important task demands on middle and high school students is the necessity to organize and complete assignments within a specific time frame. Students at these levels are often asked to keep agenda books or calendars to help them remember assignments and due dates for projects.

Agenda books typically consist of a list of classes and a place to write notes under a calendar or schedule. Students write down homework assignments, tests, assigned reading, and important information in the date matrix, and often schools ask students to have their parents’ sign the agenda book nightly. There may also be a place in the agenda book for teacher and parent comments. Agenda books are important because they provide a communication link between home and school. Many students with
disabilities have difficulty with organization, which interferes with their ability to use agenda books successfully. This is unfortunate as it can result in limited success across the curriculum.

Many students entering middle or junior high school have used agenda books in elementary school but do not use them independently. These students wait for teachers to tell them to write down the homework for the day. If the teacher fails to mention writing down assignments, the student often tries to rely on memory alone to organize their work. TRICK BAG is a learning strategy developed to help middle and high school students with disabilities organize their homework assignments and materials independently. This cognitive learning strategy gives students a tool to recall the steps needed to record assignments in their agenda book independently.

Description of the Strategy

The following mnemonic is used to cue the students to a specific action they must take to organize and maintain an agenda book containing subjects and class assignments. Each letter in the mnemonic TRICK BAG stands for a step to be taken (see Figure 1).

**Introductory Activities to Teach the Mnemonic**

- The day before introducing the mnemonic, ask students to bring in a magic trick to show the class.
- Start class by performing a simple magic trick yourself, and then have the students perform their own tricks.
- After the tricks, start a discussion about magicians. Ask the students what materials are required for the tricks discussed. For example, it would be hard to pull a rabbit out of a hat if you forgot to bring your hat to the magic show.
- Using that analogy, ask the students about materials they use at school to be successful.
- Ask if the students have any tricks that help them remember their materials or homework. Discuss the use of their agenda book and how effectively they are using it.
- Introduce the strategy TRICK BAG as another way to remember assignments and materials using an agenda book.

**Figure 1.** TRICK BAG strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>Take out your agenda book.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Record the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Insert the important details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Circle the materials you need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Keep materials in your homework folder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Be sure you can read it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Ask a partner to check it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Go put it in your backpack.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Discuss the mnemonic TRICK BAG and each of the cue words associated with the phrase.
• Discuss the actions to be taken, and model how to use the mnemonic with a particular agenda book or calendar.

TRICK BAG

T – Take out your agenda book. Discuss where to keep agenda books. Have students identify why it is important to always keep their agenda books in the same place so they can easily be found.

R – Record the assignment in the correct space. Give examples of agenda entries for students to evaluate in small groups. Ask the groups to evaluate whether the entry is clear. Discuss the importance of checking page numbers and directions carefully. The class could brainstorm what should go into an entry and why. Have students practice writing down assignments on an overhead sheet and evaluating them. Figure 2 shows a sample agenda book sheet.

I – Insert the important details. Try a “what’s missing” activity. Present an agenda entry for the class to evaluate. Take away important details and ask the group to identify what is missing. Brainstorm what details are important in an entry for a homework assignment and why. The students could make a poster for the classroom identifying helpful details and unnecessary details.

C – Circle the materials you need. Introduce and describe the key on the agenda sheet (see Figure 2). Give the students agenda entries and have them find and circle the materials they need to complete the assignment.

K – Keep materials in your homework folder. Have the students identify where homework folders are kept and what types of materials might be necessary to complete assignments. Have the students list materials that should always be kept in their homework folders, such as pencils, paper, calculator, and so on. Have students identify special materials that might be needed for specific assignments, such as worksheets, math charts, or a specific colored marker.

B – Be sure you can read it. Have the students write agenda entries in various ways: tiny, large, left-handed, messy, neat as a pin, with markers, with pencils, or with colored pencils. Then ask the class to evaluate each mode of writing to determine the easiest to read, the most practical, and the time saver.

A – Ask a partner to check it. Discuss appropriate times and ways to ask a partner to check your agenda book. Talk about using positive comments instead of insensitive or hurtful ones. Students could use the list generated in the I step and look at a partner’s entry. Have the students check page numbers, worksheet numbers, problems assigned on the page or worksheet, readability, the circling of correct materials, and due dates.

G – Go put it in your backpack. Set up an obstacle course in the room and hold a relay race to see who can maneuver the course and get the agenda book and materials in their backpacks to go home within the shortest time. This is a fun way to reinforce the importance of getting your agenda book and materials home.

Using the Mnemonic

Once the students understand the mnemonic and the actions related to each associated cue word, it is time to start making the recall of the mnemonic automatic. For example, students must be able to associate automatically the G in TRICK BAG with the related action sentence “Go put it in your backpack.” An automatic association between the letter and the corresponding action allows students to spend their energy performing the task instead of trying to remember the mnemonic and the phrase.

The following activity will help the students remember the mnemonic and its steps: Using a top hat, have students pull out letter cards that spell TRICK BAG and post them on the board. Write action sentences that correspond to the letter cards on sentence strips (see Figure 3). Have the students organize the letters to spell out TRICK BAG. Next have the students place the action sentences on the board next to the correct letter.

Check for understanding of the mnemonic by using a think–pair–share. Ask the students to divide into groups of two or three and name each letter of the mnemonic and what it stands for. Then ask the students to discuss how they could use the strategy and why it is important. Have each group share their ideas with the whole class.

Strategy Evaluation

To evaluate students’ use of the strategy, students could have a laminated cue card made from an index card attached to their agenda books (see Figure 4). Because the card is laminated, it may be marked with overhead markers. The students would be able to evaluate their own use of the TRICK BAG strategy on a daily basis. Such self-evaluation would make each student accountable for monitoring his or her use of the strategy. In keeping with the validated model of learning strategies, the focus on self-evaluation emphasizes student ownership and facilitates generalization of the strategy (Clark, 1993).

Although this strategy was designed for use in a particular school, it is flexible in its design. Teachers could
substitute the word *calendar* or *schedule* in place of *agenda* in the mnemonic to maintain consistency in terms used at a particular school. In addition, teachers can emphasize the parts of the strategy that would work well for their students in their own teaching situations. The consistent use of an agenda book or calendar is an important functional skill for many adults. This strategy lends itself to the use of the electronic date books or personal organizers that are becoming increasingly popular. The hope is that students with disabilities will become better at task organization and completion and rely less on external assistance from teachers and parents. These small successes

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**Figure 2. Sample agenda sheet.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mon.</th>
<th>Tues.</th>
<th>Wed.</th>
<th>Thurs.</th>
<th>Fri.</th>
<th>KEY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Arts</strong></td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Studies</strong></td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
<td>B WS</td>
<td>F N P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES**

- Book (B)
- Worksheet (WS)
- Folder (F)
- Notebook (N)
- Project (P)
- TEST (T)
- X = none
- ☑ = finished
can dramatically increase students’ feelings of success and lead to improved academic achievement across the curriculum.

**About the Authors**

Victoria G. Scott, EdD, is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education and Communications Disorders at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. She has coauthored two case study textbooks featuring cases involving individuals with disabilities. She has also written an instructional manual on phonemic awareness. Her research interests include instructional methods, assessment, and assistive technology. Lori Compton, MS, is a sixth-grade special education teacher at Liberty Middle School in the Edwardsville District 7 school district. She received her master’s degree in special education from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, in 2005. Her interests lie in creating learning strategies, differentiating instruction, and adapting curriculum for learners with special needs. Address: Victoria G. Scott, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Department of Special Education and Communication Disorders, Campus Box 1147, Edwardsville, IL 62625; e-mail: viscott@siue.edu

**References**


