

## ENHANCING WRITING PROFICIENCY THROUGH FOUR SQUARE WRITING INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This study explored the theoretical foundations and potential applications of the Four Square Writing Strategy (FSWM) in enhancing writing proficiency among secondary school students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Nigeria. The Four Square Writing Method is an effective strategy for improving writing skills in secondary schools. This structured framework simplifies the writing process by organizing ideas into a central topic with supporting details, enhancing clarity and coherence. Its implementation aligns with constructivist principles, emphasizing active learning, prior knowledge, social interaction, contextual learning, and reflection. Despite challenges such as resource constraints, large class sizes, and teacher training needs, the potential benefits include improved organizational skills, writing confidence, and preparation for standardized tests. Successful implementation requires comprehensive teacher training, provision of resources, ongoing professional development, and integration into the curriculum. Ensuring individualized attention, language support programs, effective assessment mechanisms, and community involvement are essential for sustained effectiveness. Systematic monitoring, evaluation, and collaboration among teachers further foster a supportive environment and continuous improvement. Addressing resource constraints and teacher training through continuous professional development can ensure successful integration and sustained use of FSWM, ultimately improving students' academic success and future prospects.*

**Keywords:** Enhancing, Writing, Proficiency, Four Square, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### Introduction

There are four basic abilities that English teachers should teach their students while teaching a foreign language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sadiku, 2015). Writing is considered the most difficult and sophisticated language skill to learn out of all of these (Grabe & Zhang, 2013). It comprises a student's ability to express their beliefs or thoughts in writing in a clear and efficient manner. These skills can only be attained if the student masters some writing techniques, such as how to gather ideas for what he or she will write about, how to express

them in a series of sentences, how to organize them chronologically and coherently, and how to review and revise the composition until it is well-developed.

Writing as a communicative activity should be promoted and nourished throughout a language learner's academic career (Ganapathy & Kaur, 2014). Teaching writing is a unique act to reinforce learning and reinforce grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary (Zhou, 2009; Dewi, 2020). As a result, it is clear that writing is an important language reinforcing skill and a crucial talent

because it is used to learn, discover, grow, and refine language ability. Students become more engaged with the target language by writing, attempting to convey their thoughts, and continually using their eyes, hands, and brain as a unique flow of activity to reinforce learning. Writing proficiency is a cornerstone of academic success and a vital skill in today's globalized world. In Ekiti State, Nigeria, secondary school students face considerable challenges in mastering writing skills, which hinders their overall academic performance and future opportunities. Addressing this issue requires innovative and effective instructional strategies that can significantly enhance students' writing abilities. One such promising approach is the Four Square Writing Method (FSWM), a structured and systematic writing framework designed to improve students' organization and clarity in writing.

The Four Square Writing Strategy is a graphic organizer that simplifies the writing process by dividing a sheet of paper into four squares plus a central box, each designated for different aspects of the writing task. The Four-square method is used to teach specific paragraphs in an essay (Tijani & Ogbaje, 2013; Puspita, 2015; Febriadi, 2017). A rectangle is drawn with the width surpassing the height and divided into four smaller rectangles of equal sizes to employ this method. In the center of the figure, a fifth rectangle is drawn, taking up some of the space in each of the four rectangles. This results in a total of five rectangles. In the center rectangle, the student composes a complete topic sentence. The student next develops the major topic's thesis by writing sentences in the lower-left, upper-left, and upper-right rectangles. In the lower-right rectangle, the student enters a summary phrase. The

conclusion sentence expresses how the reader should feel about the subject. Four square writing is a technique for teaching basic writing abilities that may be used to a variety of grade levels and subjects (Rofi'ah & Ma'rifah, 2018; Setiawati, 2019; Yunus et al., 2021). It's a simplified visual organizer for teaching learners to write in the classroom. It can be used in narrative, descriptive, explanatory, persuasive, and expository paragraphs and essays. Prewriting and organizational abilities are taught using a four-square graphic organizer. This visual and kinesthetic tool assists students in concentrating on their writing, providing details, and improving word choice. Three supporting ideas or sentences go into three of the outside squares of the organizer, with the theme or topic sentence in the center. The organizer's final box is finished with a wrap-up sentence. This method helps students systematically plan and develop their ideas, ensuring that their writing is coherent and well-structured. The central box contains the main idea or topic sentence, while the four surrounding squares hold supporting details and a concluding sentence. This clear and concise structure aids students in organizing their thoughts and presenting their ideas logically.

In Ekiti State secondary schools, the implementation of the FSWM could address the prevalent issues of disorganized and unclear writing. Poor academic performances of students are traceable to teachers, the learner, parents and government apart from other problems that are caused by environmental factors. Teachers are always at the receiving end of students' poor performance without considering the other factors which also include infrastructural facilities, class size, and students' attitude to learning (Babalola & Ogunlade, 2020). Teachers in these schools often struggle to find effective

methods to teach writing, leading to students' underperformance in this crucial skill area. By adopting the FSWM, teachers can provide a consistent and reliable framework that students can easily follow, leading to improved writing proficiency. Additionally, this method can be tailored to fit various writing tasks, from simple paragraphs to complex essays, making it a versatile tool in the classroom.

Training teachers in Ekiti State to effectively use the FSWM is essential for its successful implementation. Professional development programs should be established to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to integrate the method into their teaching practices. These programs should focus on understanding the components of the FSWM, practical classroom strategies, and assessment techniques. By ensuring that teachers are well-prepared, the transition to this new instructional method can be smooth and effective.

The potential benefits of implementing the FSWM in Ekiti State secondary schools are significant. Improved writing skills can lead to better academic performance across all subjects, as students will be able to articulate their thoughts and analysis more clearly. Enhanced writing proficiency also boosts students' confidence, encouraging them to participate more actively in their education. Ultimately, by addressing the writing challenges faced by secondary school students in Ekiti State, the FSWM can contribute to their overall academic success and better prepare them for future educational and career opportunities.

### **Research Rationale**

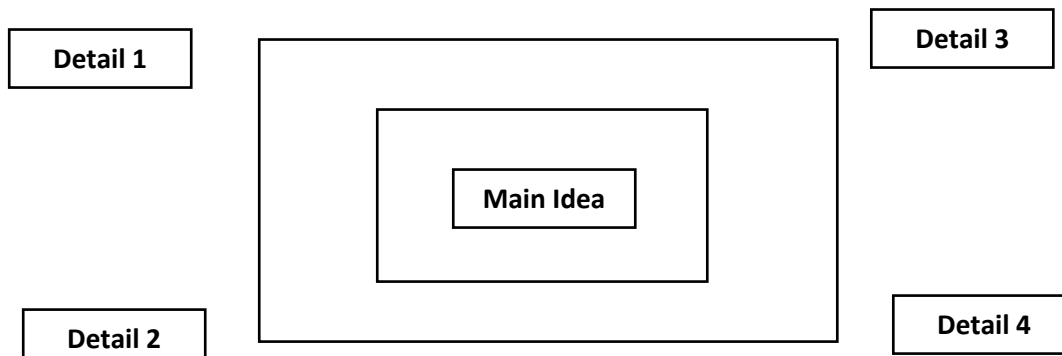
In Ekiti State, Nigeria, secondary school students encounter significant challenges in mastering

writing skills, impacting their academic performance and future opportunities. Effective methods for teaching writing are crucial for addressing these issues, and the Four Square Writing Method (FSWM) has emerged as a promising approach. FSWM uses a graphic organizer to simplify the writing process, potentially enhancing students' organizational and clarity skills. Previous research indicates that FSWM and similar graphic organizers can improve writing by helping students structure their thoughts more effectively (Graham & Perin, 2007; Harris & Graham, 2013). While FSWM is one among several methods for improving writing, its focus on organization and clarity offers distinct advantages over other approaches, such as process-based or genre-based instruction. The emphasis on FSWM is due to its practical application and potential effectiveness in the context of secondary education in Ekiti State. Successful implementation of FSWM requires adequate teacher training and support, highlighting the need for professional development programs. These programs are crucial for equipping teachers with the skills to effectively integrate FSWM into their teaching practices. By addressing writing challenges through FSWM, there is potential for significant improvements in students' writing proficiency, which could enhance their overall academic performance.

### **Concept of Four Square Writing Instructional Method**

The Four Square Writing Method, developed in 1999 by Judith S. Gould and Evan Jay Gould, is an innovative instructional method designed to help students organize their thoughts and improve their writing skills. This method is especially effective for teaching narrative and expository writing, employing a simple,

visual, and graphic organizer to assist students in structuring their ideas logically and coherently.



**Figure 1:** Diagram of Four Square Writing Instructional Strategy

Figure 1 is a visual representation showing how the graphic organizer is structured

1. **Main Idea:** Located in the central square, this is the main topic or thesis of the writing piece.
2. **Detail 1:** In the top-left square, this detail supports the main idea.
3. **Detail 2:** In the bottom-left square, another supporting detail.
4. **Detail 3:** In the top-right square, an additional supporting detail.
5. **Detail 4:** In the bottom-right square, the final supporting detail.

This organizer helps students systematically plan and structure their writing, ensuring they include sufficient supporting details around a clear central idea.

### Structure and Components

The core of the Four Square Writing Method is a graphic organizer divided into four squares with a central fifth square. The central square contains the main idea or thesis statement, while each of the surrounding squares is used to develop supporting details. This layout helps students visually map out their writing in a way that is easy to understand and follow.

1. **Central Idea:** The middle square holds the main idea, topic sentence, or thesis statement. This is the central point around which the entire piece of writing is developed.
2. **Supporting Details:** The four surrounding squares are used to

elaborate on the main idea. Each square contains a key point or supporting detail that relates directly to the central idea.

3. **Transitions:** Students are encouraged to use transition words or phrases to link their ideas smoothly. This ensures coherence and logical flow in their writing.
4. **Concluding Sentence:** At the end of the organizer, students are prompted to write a concluding sentence that summarizes the main points and reinforces the thesis.

Research and practical application have shown that the Four Square Writing Method can significantly improve students' writing abilities. It promotes critical thinking, as students must identify and elaborate on supporting details. Moreover, it encourages students to consider the overall structure and coherence of their writing, leading to more polished and

effective communication. According to Johnson and Street (2013), the Four Square Writing Method helps students transition from basic sentence construction to more complex essay writing. This method not only aids in organizing thoughts but also fosters a deeper understanding of the writing process, making it an invaluable tool in educational settings.

### **Theoretical Foundation of Four Square Writing Instructional Method**

The Four Square Writing Instructional Method is underpinned by several theoretical foundations that inform its design and implementation in the classroom. These theories provide a robust framework for understanding how and why the FSWM can effectively enhance writing proficiency among students. The key theoretical foundations include constructivism, cognitive load theory, schema theory, and the process writing approach. However, this paper was underpinned by Constructivism Theory

Constructivism, a foundational theory in education and psychology, emphasizes the learner's active role in constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving information. This theory has been extensively developed and supported by key theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and John Dewey, whose work collectively underscores the dynamic, social, and contextual nature of learning. The key principles of constructivism are:

1. *Active Learning*: Constructivism posits that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflecting on those experiences (Piaget, 1954). This principle is grounded in the idea that learning is a process of personal interpretation and meaning-making.

2. *Prior Knowledge*: Learning builds on what learners already know. New information is integrated with existing cognitive structures, facilitating deeper understanding (Bruner, 1960). This scaffolding of knowledge allows for a more personalized and effective learning process.
3. *Social Interaction*: Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interaction in learning. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) illustrates how learners can achieve higher levels of understanding with the support of more knowledgeable others.
4. *Contextual Learning*: Constructivist theory argues that knowledge is context-dependent and situated within real-world contexts. Learning environments should provide authentic tasks that mirror the complexities of the real world (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).
5. *Reflection*: Reflective thinking is a critical aspect of constructivist learning. Reflection helps learners make sense of their experiences and develop deeper understanding and critical thinking skills (Dewey, 1933).

### **Application of Constructivism to the use of Four Square Writing Instructional Method**

Four Square Writing is a method used to teach writing skills, especially to young learners, by organizing their thoughts in a structured format. This strategy can be effectively integrated with constructivist principles to enhance learning and writing skills through the following:

*Active Learning*: Constructivism emphasizes active learning where students construct their understanding through engagement and exploration.

Four Square Writing encourages active participation as students brainstorm, organize, and write their ideas within a structured framework. By actively engaging in organizing their thoughts, students are better able to internalize and understand writing concepts.

*Prior Knowledge:* Four Square Writing builds on students' existing knowledge by helping them connect new writing tasks with what they already know. For example, when students are asked to write about a familiar topic, they use their prior experiences and knowledge to fill in the squares. This method leverages their background knowledge to facilitate new learning.

*Social Interaction:* Constructivist theory, particularly Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning, aligns well with collaborative aspects of Four Square Writing. Students can work in pairs or groups to discuss their ideas and provide feedback to each other. This social interaction helps learners refine their thoughts, gain new perspectives, and enhance their writing through peer learning.

*Contextual Learning:* The Four Square Writing method provides a clear context for students to apply their writing skills. Each writing task can be contextualized within real-world scenarios, such as writing a letter, creating a story, or composing an informative essay. This contextual learning helps students see the relevance of writing skills in everyday life.

*Reflection:* Constructivism values reflective thinking, which can be incorporated into the Four Square Writing process. After completing their graphic organizers and writing tasks, students can reflect on their work by reviewing what they wrote, considering

what worked well, and identifying areas for improvement. This reflection helps deepen their understanding and improve their writing skills.

### **Implementing Four Square Writing with Constructivist Strategies**

1. *Interactive Brainstorming:* The teacher should begin with a brainstorming session where students discuss and share ideas related to the writing prompt. This session activates prior knowledge and encourages collaborative idea generation, essential for constructing new understanding.
2. *Guided Practice:* The teacher should use the Four Square Writing graphic organizer to guide students through the process. Provide prompts and scaffolding as needed, gradually reducing support as students become more comfortable with the method. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's scaffolding concept, where support is tailored to the learner's current level and gradually removed.
3. *Collaborative Writing:* Pair students or form small groups to work on their Four Square Writing organizers together. Encourage them to discuss their ideas and provide feedback to each other. This collaborative effort helps learners construct knowledge socially, benefiting from diverse perspectives and peer support.
4. *Contextual Assignments:* Design writing assignments that reflect real-world contexts. For instance, ask students to use the Four Square Writing method to draft a persuasive letter, a narrative story, or an informative article. Contextual assignments make the learning process more meaningful and relevant to students' lives.

5. *Reflective Sessions:* After completing their writing tasks, hold reflective sessions where students can discuss what they learned, what challenges they faced, and how they overcame them. Encourage them to think about how they can apply the skills they learned to future writing tasks. Reflection solidifies learning and promotes self-awareness and critical thinking.

### **Alignment with Principles of Effective Writing Instruction**

#### 1. Clear Objectives and Scaffolding

*Principles of Effective Writing Instruction:* Provide clear objectives and scaffold learning to support student success.

*Four Square Writing Method:* The strategy offers a clear, step-by-step framework for organizing thoughts, which serves as a scaffold. This helps students understand the structure of their writing and provides a clear objective for each section of their work.

#### 2. Explicit Instruction

*Principles of Effective Writing Instruction:* Use explicit instruction to teach writing strategies and skills.

*Four Square Writing Strategy:* Teachers explicitly teach how to use the Four Square organizer, guiding students through each step of the process. This explicit instruction helps students understand and internalize the writing process.

#### 3. Practice and Application

*Principles of Effective Writing Instruction:* Provide ample opportunities for practice and application of writing skills.

*Four Square Writing Method:* Students practice organizing and writing multiple pieces using the Four

Square method. This repeated practice helps reinforce their learning and improve their writing skills over time.

#### 4. Feedback and Revision

*Principles of Effective Writing Instruction:* Offer feedback and opportunities for revision to improve writing quality.

*Four Square Writing Method:* Students receive feedback on their organizers and drafts, allowing them to revise and improve their writing. This iterative process helps students develop better writing habits and skills.

#### 5. Student Engagement

*Principles of Effective Writing Instruction:* Engage students in meaningful and relevant writing tasks.

*Four Square Writing Strategy:* The strategy engages students by providing a clear and manageable way to organize their thoughts. When tasks are contextually relevant, students are more motivated and invested in the writing process.

### **Potential Benefits of Implementing Four Square Writing in Secondary Schools in Ekiti State for Improving Students' Writing Skills**

1. *Enhanced Organizational Skills:* The Four Square Writing Method helps students organize their thoughts logically, which is crucial for effective writing. The method breaks down the writing process into manageable sections, aiding students in structuring their essays and other written work. "The use of graphic organizers helps students structure their writing and can improve the coherence and organization of their work" (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

2. *Improved Clarity and Coherence:* Using the Four Square Writing Method ensures that students' writing is clear and coherent. By focusing on one main idea per section, students learn to stay

on topic and develop their arguments or narratives more systematically. “Graphic organizers help students clarify their ideas, making their writing more structured and logical” (Bromley, DeVitis, & Modlo, 1995).

*3. Increased Writing Confidence:* The structured nature of the Four Square Writing Strategy can boost students' confidence in their writing abilities. Knowing they have a clear method to follow reduces anxiety around writing tasks, helping students feel more prepared and capable. “When students use structured frameworks, they are more confident in their writing abilities, leading to improved performance” (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006).

*4. Support for Diverse Learners:* The Four Square Writing Method can be particularly beneficial for diverse learners, including those who struggle with writing. The visual and structured format provides scaffolding that can help students with learning disabilities or those who are less proficient in writing. “Structured writing strategies, such as graphic organizers, can support students with learning disabilities by providing clear guidelines and reducing cognitive load” (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010).

*5. Enhanced Critical Thinking Skills:* The strategy fosters critical thinking by requiring students to break down their ideas and support them with specific details. This process enhances their ability to think critically and present well-reasoned arguments. “Using structured writing frameworks encourages critical thinking as students must analyze their main ideas and supporting details” (Paul & Elder, 2006).

*6. Consistent Practice and Skill Development:* Regular use of the Four Square Writing Strategy ensures consistent practice of writing skills. Over time, this practice helps students

internalize the principles of good writing, leading to skill development. “Repeated use of structured writing strategies helps students develop and refine their writing skills over time” (Graham & Perin, 2007).

*7. Preparation for Standardized Tests:* The Four Square Writing Strategy can help students prepare for the writing components of standardized tests. The strategy's emphasis on clear structure and logical organization aligns well with the criteria used to evaluate writing on standardized tests. “Structured writing instruction can improve students' performance on standardized tests by providing them with clear frameworks for organizing their ideas” (Hillocks, 2005).

*8. Facilitation of Peer Review and Feedback:* The Four Square Writing Strategy provides a common framework that can facilitate peer review and feedback. When students use the same method to organize their writing, it becomes easier for them to review and provide constructive feedback on each other's work. “Common writing frameworks enable more effective peer review, as students can provide and receive feedback within a familiar structure” (Topping, 2009).

*9. Teacher Guidance and Assessment:* For teachers, the Four Square Writing Strategy offers a clear framework for guiding instruction and assessing student writing. Teachers can more easily identify areas where students are struggling and provide targeted support. “Using structured writing strategies allows teachers to more effectively guide and assess student writing, providing targeted feedback and support” (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015).

*10. Alignment with Curriculum Standards:* Implementing the Four Square Writing Strategy can help align writing instruction with curriculum

standards and goals set by educational authorities in Ekiti State. The structured approach ensures that students are meeting key writing objectives. “Structured writing instruction can help align teaching practices with curriculum standards, ensuring that students meet educational objectives” (Applebee & Langer, 2013).

### **Challenges that may Arise from the Implementation of Four Square Writing Strategies in Ekiti State Secondary Schools**

Implementing the Four Square Writing Strategy in secondary schools in Ekiti State can significantly improve students' writing skills, but it also comes with several challenges.

#### *1. Teacher Training and Professional Development:*

Successful implementation of the Four Square Writing Strategy requires that teachers are adequately trained in its use and benefits. Many teachers in Ekiti State may not have received sufficient training or professional development in this specific writing strategy. Without proper training, teachers may struggle to effectively integrate the strategy into their instruction. “Effective professional development is essential for teachers to successfully adopt and implement new instructional strategies” (Guskey, 2002).

*2. Resistance to Change:* Resistance to change among educators and administrators can pose a significant challenge. Teachers who are accustomed to traditional methods may be hesitant to adopt new strategies. This resistance can slow down the implementation process and reduce the overall effectiveness of the strategy. “Resistance to change is a common obstacle in educational reform, often stemming from a lack of understanding or fear of the unknown” (Fullan, 2007).

*4. Language Barriers:* In Ekiti State, students may come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and may not all be equally proficient in English, the language of instruction. Language barriers can make it challenging for students to fully grasp the components of the Four Square Writing Strategy and apply them effectively in their writing. Recent research indicates that “language proficiency is a critical factor in students’ ability to understand and implement writing strategies” (Baker, 2017).

#### *6. Assessment and Feedback Mechanisms:*

Effective implementation of the Four Square Writing Strategy requires robust assessment and feedback mechanisms. Inconsistent or inadequate assessment and feedback can undermine the effectiveness of the strategy, as students may not receive the necessary guidance to improve their writing skills. Recent research emphasizes that “regular and constructive feedback is essential for the development of students’ writing skills” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

*7. Curriculum Integration:* Integrating the Four Square Writing Strategy into the existing curriculum can be challenging, especially if the curriculum is rigid or already overloaded with content. Teachers may find it difficult to allocate time and resources to implement the strategy effectively within the constraints of the current curriculum. Recent research highlights that “curriculum integration requires careful planning and flexibility to ensure that new instructional strategies can be effectively incorporated” (Baker & Anastasopoulos, 2019).

*8. Monitoring and Evaluation:* Implementing a new writing strategy requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation to assess its impact and effectiveness. Without systematic

monitoring and evaluation, it can be difficult to determine the success of the strategy and make necessary adjustments. “Effective implementation of educational strategies requires ongoing evaluation to ensure they are meeting their intended goals” (Patton, 2008).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Four Square Writing Method improves students' writing skills by providing a structured approach. It is effective for both narrative and expository writing, using a graphic organizer that breaks down ideas into a central concept and four supporting details. This framework helps students organize their thoughts systematically, ensuring their writing is logically coherent and detailed. The method aligns with constructivist theory, emphasizing active learning, prior knowledge, social interaction, contextual learning, and reflection. This alignment, along with consistent practice, feedback, and scaffolded instruction, improves writing proficiency. Implementing this strategy in secondary schools, especially in resource-limited settings like Ekiti State, Nigeria, promises benefits like better organizational skills, clarity, coherence, writing confidence, and test preparation. Successful implementation requires addressing resource constraints, teacher training, and curriculum integration through comprehensive training, necessary resources, and continuous professional development. To effectively implement the Four Square Writing Strategy in Ekiti State secondary schools, it is important to address several key factors: ensuring adequate printed and digital resources, aligning the method with curriculum standards, providing continuous professional development for teachers, utilizing small class sizes

or group work for individualized attention, supporting students with language barriers through specialized programs, establishing effective assessment and feedback mechanisms, involving the community and parents, conducting systematic monitoring and evaluation, and fostering collaboration among teachers to share best practices and enhance implementation.

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