

# Think-Tac-Toe, a motivating method of increasing comprehension

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Many researchers agree that student choice plays a pivotal role in motivating pupils to complete tasks assigned at school (Bender, 2002; Wilson & Conyers, 2000). When students have the power to control what they will be doing, they tend to put more effort into the assignment and take responsibility more seriously (Obenchain, Abernathy, & Lock, 2003). Sample (2005) agreed that students, especially those with reading difficulties, need sufficient practice in meaningful tasks to remain motivated to read. A Think-Tac-Toe board is a comprehension strategy that provides students with meaningful tasks that motivate them and make them accountable for revisiting important literacy skills.

The Think-Tac-Toe board is a nine-square grid that the teacher fills with tasks related to a specific skill being taught, such as comprehension. The students read over the nine tasks and choose three they will complete. I will describe the concept of Think-Tac-Toe, explain how to create Think-Tac-Toe grids using examples, and review the benefits of using the strategy.

Think-Tac-Toe allows students to experience and practice a skill or learn about a topic without using mundane worksheets. Many of my preservice teachers reported that while completing their field experiences, they see boredom and frustration among students who are completing reading worksheets. Most students are expected to complete the same assignment, which may be unrelated to the literature they have read. Many teachers seem to find it difficult to meet the needs of varying ability levels in their classes (King, 2003; Vaidya, 2000).

Tomlinson (1999) said that teachers can choose to differentiate instruction by changing the content, process, or product according to students' readiness levels, interests, or learning styles. I wanted to combine more authentic practice with cooperative groupwork and differentiated instruction, so I introduced my preservice teachers to the Think-Tac-Toe strategy. My preservice teachers used the Think-Tac-Toe board with their students and reported that their students were highly motivated. Many supervising inservice teachers requested copies of the strategy, claiming they would

now incorporate it with their classes. The Think–Tac–Toe strategy is successful because it reinforces skills by having students complete three authentic tasks instead of mundane “one-size-fits-all” worksheets.

## Examples of Think–Tac–Toe activities

The teacher’s planning process is crucial to provide activities that practice the skills and concepts being focused on for a given unit or lesson. The teacher thinks about the skill or concept (in the two comprehension examples here, the skills are developing story grammar and teaching main idea, sequencing, and summarizing) and brainstorms nine possible activities for the students to complete. The Think–Tac–Toe board can be as generic or as specific as needed. Figure 1 shows how the teacher may create a board that covers story grammar for any piece of literature. Story grammar refers to the components of a story such as the characters, setting, plot, resolution, tone, and mood. Understanding story grammar benefits students because it allows them to see the organizational pattern of books, thus making better sense of what they read (Vacca et al., 2003). The first row in the

Think–Tac–Toe example invites students to think about personality traits of the characters in the story. The second row asks them to re-create the setting in the story. The third row allows students to think about the sequential events in the story and to interact with those events in a concrete way.

Figure 2 illustrates how a teacher may choose specific comprehension skills his or her students need to practice. When students have a chance to respond to the author’s story or message, their reading skill and thinking ability are enhanced (May & Rizzardi, 2002). In this case, I have chosen the skills of main idea, sequencing, and summarizing for students to use in their responses. In the first row of Figure 2, students may choose a visual, kinesthetic, or artistic activity to practice finding the main idea. The second row practices sequencing through tactile, visual, and spatial activities. In the third row, summarizing is addressed with activities for tactile and auditory learners.

It is the teacher who determines if a student needs to actually complete an entire Think–Tac–Toe board or just do three activities. The tasks on the board should be interesting enough to generate a response and be cleverly disguised so students are not aware that the teacher is differentiating by ability level, interests, or learning style (Tomlinson, 1999). As students become accustomed to working with the

**FIGURE 1**  
**Story grammar Think–Tac–Toe (differentiated by learning style)**

**Directions:** Choose one box from each row (a row is horizontal) to complete. Initial the boxes after you have completed them. You do not have to complete three in a row or column.

Pretend you are an artist and sketch a drawing of the main character. Be sure your drawing reflects the personality of the main character (turn in a list of traits along with the drawing).	Name and draw a person who reminds you of the main character in the book. Explain in a few sentences what similarities the two possess.	Use magazines to create a collage describing the emotions of the character you liked the best. On the back of the collage, list the emotions and how they are represented in the pictures.
Draw a picture of a stage setting for the story. Include details listed in the story or add your own in a different color.	Re-create the setting from the story in a drawing or diorama. Indicate the title of the story.	Make up a song or poem about the setting of the story.
Draw a timeline or sequence chart to describe the events in the story.	You are the author and have decided you want to change the story. Write a new beginning or ending to the story.	Use construction paper to create a game board and game using the events of the story.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Comprehension (main idea, sequencing, summarizing) Think-Tac-Toe (differentiated by learning style)**

**Directions:** Each person in your group chooses one activity to complete with the help of the group. Here's the catch: Once an activity is chosen it cannot be completed again. The person with the brightest shirt goes first with the person to the left following.

Use a graphic organizer to record the main idea and show how the details support the main idea.	Pretend you are an actor. You've been hired to present the main idea to the class. Create a dramatic presentation for your audience.	You are an artist. Draw a picture that depicts the main idea of the story or text.
Write down the main events in the story or text. Cut them apart and have a friend put them in the correct order.	Pick an event in the story or text. Make a list of past and future things that might happen because of that event.	Create an original timeline for the story or text. You may choose if it happens throughout a day, week, month, or year.
Using three sizes of sticky notes, summarize the story or text on the biggest note, then again on the medium-sized note, and finally on the smallest note (each time deleting more of the details).	Retell the story or text in five sentences. Challenge: Now retell it again, this time using three sentences.	Use a tape recorder to retell the story or text. Critique your retelling, listing at least one positive aspect and one improvement to be made.

Think-Tac-Toe board, the teacher can use student creativity to invent new tasks for future Think-Tac-Toe boards. The possibilities are endless.

Teachers may already realize the benefit of offering activities that appeal to varying learning styles. The Think-Tac-Toe strategy is attractive to many students because of its gamelike quality that maintains students' interest. Students benefit from and are motivated by this type of activity because it gives them more responsibility and control over their own learning (Atkinson, 2000). Students also have a chance to socialize and learn from one another (King, 2003). Tankerson (2003) said that effective learners are able to summarize, discuss, and demonstrate comprehension of the text or material. The Think-Tac-Toe activities allow for students to practice these vital skills.

In conclusion, using Think-Tac-Toe as an alternative to worksheet practice is a highly motivating and creative way to promote student interaction and participation in the skill or concepts being focused on in a given lesson. Although time-consuming in the planning process, it allows teachers to be facilitators and mentors during class time. Students gain a better understanding of the objectives because they are allowed to choose activities

that best fit their learning style, readiness level, or interests.

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