

**Anchor Activity**

# Selecting Struggle Strategies

**Category:  
EFFORT****Background**

Effort by itself is not enough. In commentary titled “Growth Mindset, Revisited,” Dweck (2015) argued that helping students develop growth mindsets requires not just emphasizing effort but also emphasizing the use of good learning strategies. Effort without the use of effective learning strategies doesn’t lead to learning (Dweck, 2015). This Anchor Activity addresses this issue by introducing a set of “Struggle Strategies” students can use when they face academic challenges.

The power of this Anchor Activity is greatly increased if the entire school agrees upon a limited number of Struggle Strategies and then works to reinforce them across the curriculum. It is much easier to accomplish this objective if you also use the same names for the Struggle Strategies. When students have all been introduced to the Struggle Strategies and call them by the same names, teachers can quickly and efficiently suggest that a student use one of the Struggle Strategies when they are stuck or facing a difficult academic challenge.

**Objective**

Students identify several specific strategies they will use when they face an academic challenge that seems too difficult for them.

**At a Glance**

Building on the ideas from previous sessions in this sequence, students learn about Struggle Strategies they can use to help solve different kinds of academic challenges. They select one they will try when they encounter an academic challenge in the future.

**Related Anchor Activities**

The Brain is Like a Muscle

Learning from Failure and Mistakes

Developing a Growth Mindset

**Resources Needed**

- Struggle Strategies Worksheet
- Struggle Strategies Worksheet Facilitators Guide

**Activity Steps**

Students remember two key ideas:

1. The brain is like a muscle.
2. Successful people learn from mistakes and failures.

**Opening Activity**

1. Ask students to recall two big ideas that have been discussed in previous sessions that could motivate students to keep working even when a problem or a task seems too difficult for them.
2. Call on students to answer this question until students make the following two points:
  - If you remember that *the brain is like a muscle*, you will have a reason to keep working because even if you don’t get the right answer you will still be making yourself smarter by creating new connections in your brain.



Introduce the idea of Struggle Strategies.



Introduce specific Struggle Strategies to students.



*Listed Struggle Strategies were developed and used by educators in the schools that Search Institute has partnered with to create the REACH Process.*

- If you remember that many successful people have persevered through *mistakes and failures*, you are more likely to keep working hard because even if you fail you are still likely to improve.
3. Tell students that even though working hard is absolutely essential, by itself it is not enough. You must also know what to do when you are stuck or confused.
  4. Tell students that we call the actions you take when you are confused about how to complete an assignment or understand something in school *Struggle Strategies*, and today we are going to think of some good Struggle Strategies that we can use whenever that happens.
  5. Note that while students probably already have a number of Struggle Strategies they use when they are stuck, it is important to know many different Struggle Strategies because there are so many ways in which students may get lost or confused when doing difficult academic work. That is why we are going to come up with a big list of good Struggle Strategies.

### Main Activity

6. Put a list of Struggle Strategies on the screen or the board or create a handout that can be distributed to students. You can use some or all of the strategies listed below or develop your own set.
7. Here is a possible list of Struggle Strategies:
  - a. **Clarify the Task:** Carefully reread the directions or ask for more information on the assignment to be sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Perhaps underline key words in the directions to be sure you are understand all aspects of the task or assignment.
  - b. **Ask for Help Early:** Don't wait until you are lost and discouraged before you ask for help from a teacher, a classmate, or someone else. Be as specific as you can about what you need help with. For example, rather than saying to a teacher, "I don't get it," you might say, "I understand what we are supposed to figure out, but I don't know which formula to use on this problem."
  - c. **Check Your Steps:** Review the process you used to try and complete the assignment, checking to be sure that you didn't get something wrong or forget something.
  - d. **Think Out Loud:** Talk out loud about what you are doing to solve the problem or why you think your approach is the right one. When you talk out loud, you often listen to yourself like you would listen to another person, and the source of a mistake or problem may jump out at you.

- e. **Break It Down:** Take a large and complex task or problem and break it into smaller steps. As you take these smaller steps, you will move closer to completing the larger task.
  - f. **Write Down What You Know:** Write down what you know or what you can do in order to identify what you do not know how to do. When you have identified the gaps in your knowledge or skills, seek help to fill in those gaps.
  - g. **Use Another Method:** If you know more than one way to complete the task or assignment, try a different method. Even if the new method isn't successful, trying a new approach may help you better understand the task or the assignment.
  - h. **Make a Plan:** For tasks and assignments that will take a significant amount of time to complete, develop a plan that identifies the steps that need to be taken to complete the task and when you will take those steps.
8. Go through each Struggle Strategy and probe to be sure students understand what each one means.
  9. Ask students if they want to add to the list any techniques that they have found effective.
  10. When you have a complete list of Struggle Strategies, distribute the Struggle Strategies Worksheet to students.
  11. Ask students to work with a partner to complete the Struggle Strategies Worksheet. Explain that their objective is to match each student described in the left column with a Struggle Strategy on the right. Tell them that after they complete the sheet, you'll discuss it as a full group.

Let students know that there is no right answer and that many of the strategies could be used to solve more than one problem.



Students select a Struggle Strategy to try.

### Closing Activity

12. Ask students to briefly explain to the group the reasons for their answers. Highlight differences between students' answers to convey the idea that multiple strategies can often be used to complete the same challenging academic task.
13. Ask students to look back over all of the Struggle Strategies and choose one that they are going to try to use sometime in the next week if they encounter a difficult problem or challenge.

## **REACH Technique: Teach students to use effective Struggle Strategies**

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**Encourage students to use effective Struggle Strategies when they have difficulty with an academic task.**

### *Suggestions for Getting Started*

1. Create a master list of struggle strategies (including students' ideas) from the Anchor Activity. When students face a challenge, give them a copy of the list. Coach them to identify one or two that may help them overcome the difficulty. They might think of these as the "exercise routine" they will use to exercise their brain muscles.
2. Occasionally tell students about struggle strategies you've used to solve problems and overcome challenges in your own life. Your self-disclosure will not only reinforce the value of using good Struggle Strategies; it will also help you build stronger relationships with your students.
3. "Think out loud" about challenges students face in school or other areas of their lives. Explicitly talk them through the struggle strategies they could consider and use. Sometimes we do this quickly in our heads and just share the solution. That can be efficient, but it doesn't help students learn to apply the struggle strategies.

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## Struggle Strategies Worksheet

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Each student listed on this worksheet is struggling with a difficult academic task. Please help each student complete their task by writing the letter of the Struggle Strategy that you think he or she should use in the blank space below the description of the student.

### Struggle Strategies

- A. Clarify the Task
- B. Ask for Help Early
- C. Check Your Steps
- D. Think Out Loud
- E. Break It Down
- F. Write Down What You Know
- G. Use Another Method
- H. Make a Plan

### Sydney

Sydney just received an essay back from her English teacher and now she needs to revise the essay to correct the mistakes and make other changes that her teacher marked on her paper. Sydney knows she can fix the grammar mistakes her teacher wrote about, but she isn't sure what to do about this comment: "It's not clear what you are really trying to say in this essay. Decide on the things you want your reader to know and then say them clearly." Unfortunately, Sydney isn't exactly sure what she wants the reader to know because she has so many different ideas in her head.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Sydney use?*

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### Carter

Carter has to write a research paper that must be 10 to 15 pages long, which is much longer than anything he has written before. He isn't sure how he will keep track of all the things he needs to do to finish the assignment.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Carter use?*

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### Robert

The directions on Robert's social studies assignment said to write an essay about the major factors that caused the Civil War. He has written about three paragraphs but as he writes, he realizes that he is not entirely sure what his teacher means by the word "factors."

*Which Struggle Strategy should Robert use?*

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### Lauren

Lauren is working through a set of problems in her math book, and when she checks the answers in the back of the book she finds that she is getting most of them wrong. She doesn't understand why that is happening because her class has spent a lot of time on those problems and they have been taught to solve them in several different ways. Usually her favorite method works but that doesn't seem to be the case today.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Lauren use?*

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**Zainab**

Zainab is doing an experiment in science class. Before the class started the experiment, the teacher told them the result they are supposed to get. Unfortunately, Zainab and her partner did not get the right answer and now they aren't sure what to do.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Zainab use?*

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**Alan**

Alan is getting ready to start his final project in art class. The assignment is to paint a painting that demonstrates all of the important skills they have learned over the semester. Because they have learned so many skills, Robert doesn't know how he is going to manage to use all of them to do his final project and he is feeling very overwhelmed.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Alan use?*

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**Luis**

Luis is working on a page of math problems that are designed to help students practice a new skill. There are 15 problems on the worksheet, all of which focus on the new skill. Luis does the first problem and isn't sure he did it right but he thinks he did, so he goes on to the second problem.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Luis use?*

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**Hang**

Hang is reading the questions her teacher gave her to get ready for a test in social studies. She thought she understood the material, but the questions are hard and make her wonder if she knows anything at all. She is starting to feel like she has no chance of doing well on the test and that studying for it would be a waste of time.

*Which Struggle Strategy should Hang use?*

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## Struggle Strategies Worksheet (Facilitator Notes)

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Each student listed on this worksheet is struggling with a difficult academic task. Please help each student complete their task by writing the letter of the Struggle Strategy that you think he or she should use in the blank space below the description of the student.

### Struggle Strategies

- I. Clarify the Task
- J. Ask for Help Early
- K. Check Your Steps
- L. Think Out Loud
- M. Break It Down
- N. Write Down What You Know
- O. Use Another Method
- P. Make a Plan

### Sydney

*Which Struggle Strategy should Sydney use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is D: Think Out Loud

### Carter

*Which Struggle Strategy should Carter use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is H: Make a Plan

### Robert

*Which Struggle Strategy should Robert use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is A: Clarify the Task

### Lauren

*Which Struggle Strategy should Lauren use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is G: Use Another Method

### Zainab

*Which Struggle Strategy should Zainab use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is C: Check Your Steps

### Alan

*Which Struggle Strategy should Alan use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is E: Break It Down

### Luis

*Which Struggle Strategy should Luis use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is B: Ask for Help Early

### Hang

*Which Struggle Strategy should Hang use?*  
Facilitator Note: Preferred answer is F: Write Down What You Know