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# Encouraging Student Independence in Solving Problems in Research Report Writing

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This article describes a technique used to encourage students to reflect on their writing experience and to help themselves. Perhaps others may wish to try a similar technique and/or include the student-generated portion of this paper as an introduction in a research report writing course as a supplement to formal materials used to teach report writing skills.

## Rationale and Procedure

ESL students in a research report writing course (7 weeks) had just turned in their rough drafts of their term papers. Their problems in writing were still fresh in their minds. It was decided to have the students share their problems and solutions so they could get some perspective on their problems (they're not the only ones who had that problem) and to develop some solutions for the future.

It was felt that by such an approach students are encouraged to become more independent in solving their own problems and to realize that they can offer valuable assistance to each other. This might be a more effective approach than having the instructor lecture on what they should have done. It was also felt that the students needed a change of pace after pushing themselves through their papers.

Students each wrote down 3 problems that they had had while writing their research report. They worked with a

partner to come up with solutions. Then the papers were circulated to the next pair. They added other solutions, indicated if they had had that problem, too, and added other comments if they felt like it. Papers were passed on for three rounds of comments. The papers were then returned to the original writers. The pairs then selected one of their six problems to illustrate with a cartoon.<sup>1</sup>

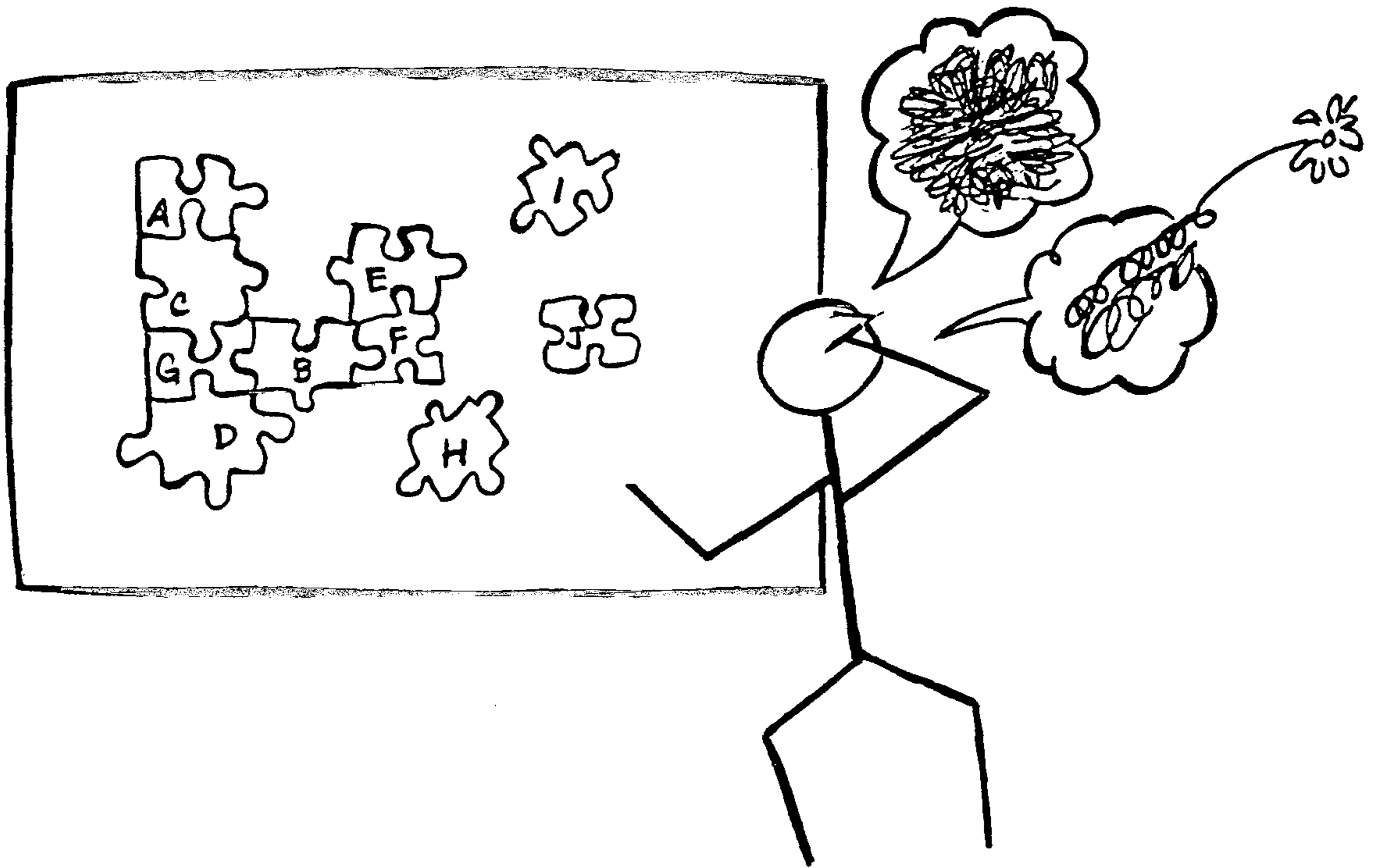
The problems, solutions, comments and cartoons were then compiled by the instructor. The instructor grouped common problems and did some minor editing for grammar and mechanics, but did not change their ideas. (Some repetitions in problems, solutions, and comments have been deleted in this version of the students' work to save space.)

## Problems, Solutions, and Comments

**Problem 1:** Organizing the paper. When I would like to write a research paper the most difficult thing is how to organize what I want to explain. Transition problem. The theory does not flow smoothly.

So do I! I do, too. The same as me. (See cartoon #1.)

**Solution 1:** You don't have to do it strictly according to your first outline. You can change it.



Cartoon 1

**Solution 2:** If you concentrate on your topic, it will be easy to organize your paper.

**Solution 3:** Use "brainstorming" to organize your ideas.

**Solution 4:** Try to start working on a paper as early as possible.

**Solution 5:** Start working on it instead of spending 5 hours talking on the telephone.

**Solution 6:** Try to read *Research Matters*.<sup>2</sup>

**Solution 7:** Read again your text, *Research Matters*.

**Comment:** No. What is this person saying? It will still be difficult even though we read that one book.

**Solution 8:** I think when you get stuck you just have to find something else to

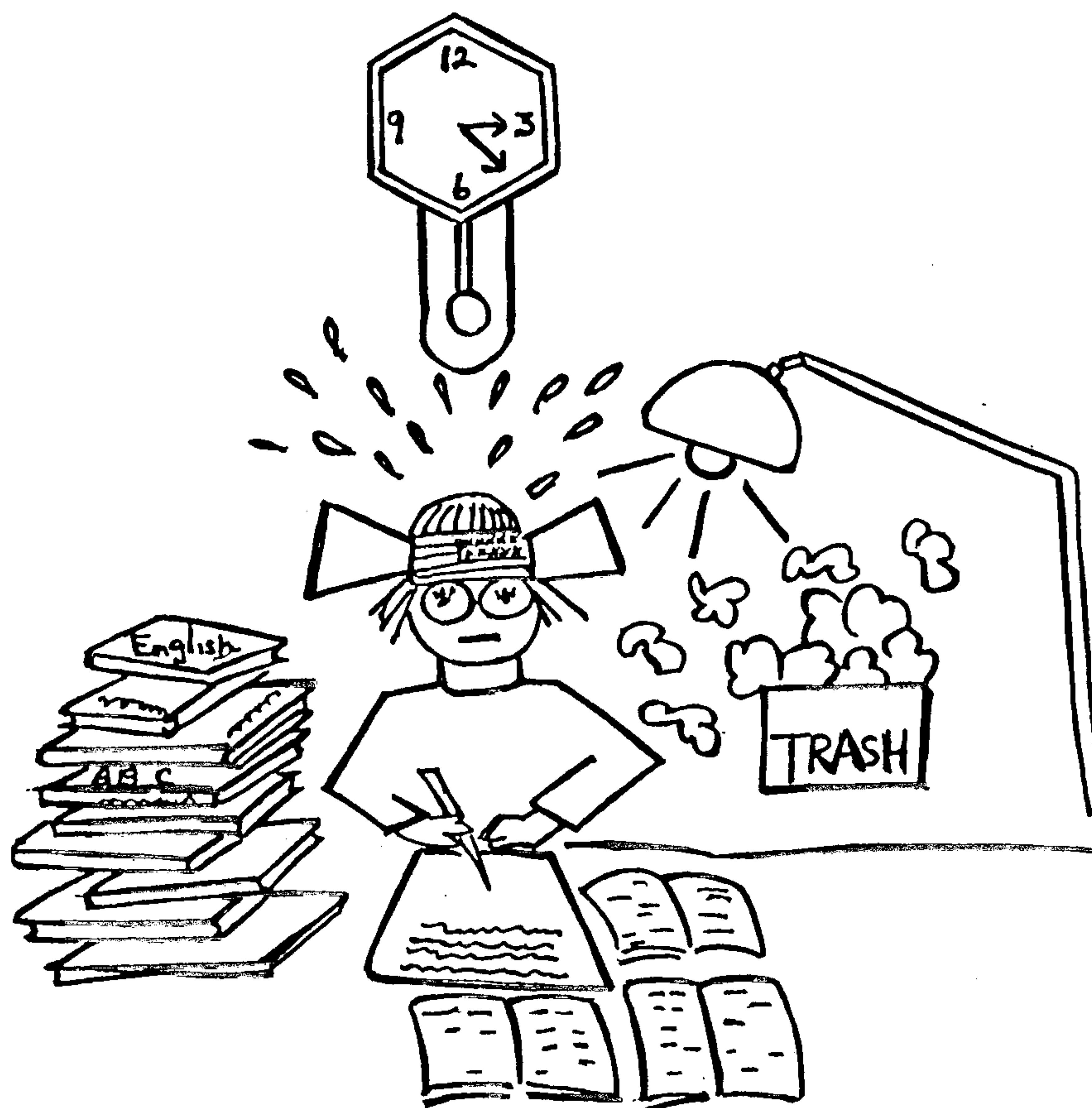
do. Forget about the paper for awhile and just relax. Then start again.

**Problem 2:** Organization of the ideas in an English way. Difficulty in thinking and writing down the ideas in English. I'm not a native speaker in English so it's very difficult for me to think something in English and write it down in English at the same time. So do I. Yeah!!! True.

**Solution:** You had better try to think like an American and forget about your nationality and your language. Don't make your paper a translation. Try to make it like you are an American and are writing your research paper in your own language (English).

(See cartoon #2. Note the American "brain cap.")

**Problem 3:** My first outline wasn't great. I had to change it completely. Same problem.



Cartoon 2

**Solution 1:** You should complete your outline first. Otherwise you can't complete your paper!

**Solution 2:** Try to "brainstorm" again and ask for help.

**Comment:** And wish very strongly that you had had a teacher in your early high school who had been an "outline addict." They are so picky.

**Problem 4:** Managing my time

**Solution 1:** Next time it will be better for you to begin earlier.

**Solution 2:** Stop thinking you're a "time victim." It's a question of will. (By the way, I seem to have the same problem.)

**Solution 3:** Never postpone any work. Do everything in its time.

**Solution 4:** I think we had enough time for the paper (6 weeks!!).

**Problem 5:** Time & concentration (See cartoon #3).

**Comment 1:** I think we had enough time to finish the paper.

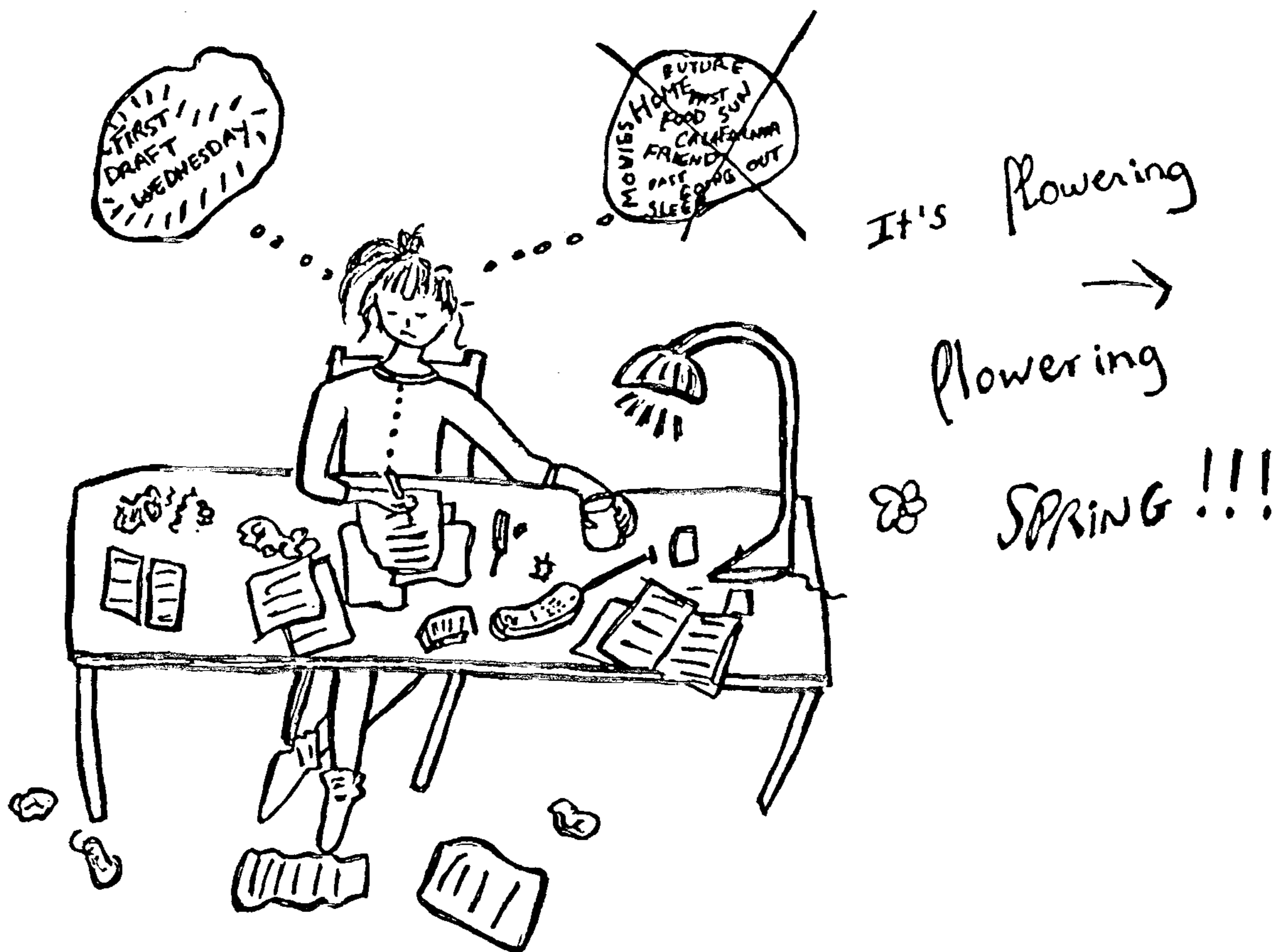
**Comment 2:** Thank you for saying that (Comment 1).

**Comment 3:** It is difficult. You never know what will happen.

**Comment 4:** I have the same problem. Don't worry.

**Comment 5:** Same problem so I can't give you any advice.

**Solution 1:** Try not to let things bother your spending time on a paper.



Cartoon 3

**Solution 2:** Sit down and work on it. Stop only when something is coming out on the paper. Don't eat until then. Don't talk to anybody. If someone asks you to go somewhere, pretend flu. Flu with visible germs, high temperature, green and red pimples!

**Problem 6:** Word choice. Vocabulary to use—certainly difficult. Language problems (economic and political terms). There are too many English words, too much vocabulary whose meaning I don't know, so when I'm writing or reading some sentences. I have to look for the words in a dictionary. It takes so much time.

**Comment 1:** I think this is the hardest one. Unfortunately it takes time to improve your vocabulary.

**Solution 1:** Increase your vocabulary.

**Comment 2:** Sometimes there is no precise synonym.

**Solution 2:** Use a dictionary or a book called Roget's Thesaurus where you can find synonyms, words.

**Solution 3:** Make a summary of each part of the book that you are using for your research.

**Solution 4:** I think it is very hard for us to find proper words. You can ask a native-speaker.

**Solution 5:** Choose a subject you're familiar with.

**Solution 6:** Search the books about your subject and write down some special

words that you can use in your paper, "vocabulary storm."

### Notes

1. Bernard Mohan, University of British Columbia, uses student-generated cartoons to have teacher trainees focus on the essence of materials projects they do. These become book covers. Personal communication.

2. Hamp-Lyons, Liz and Karen Berry Courter. (1984). *Research Matters*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House.

3. Cartoon #1 is by Jun Matsuoka. Cartoon #2 is by Chiseko Nakai. Cartoon #3 is by Tina De Vos. Used by permission. Ideas are by students in the 1989 Spring II Session of Writing 700, English Language Program for Foreign Students, University of Pennsylvania: Musa Al-Hassan, Ergin Arslan, Tina De Vos, Yuko Gamoh, Berrin Daraoguz, Saiko Matsumura, Jun Matsuoka, Chiseko Nakai, Denise Pinto, Jose Rosas, Hideya Shionoya, Goichi Tanaka, Takashi Matsuo, and Shingo Terazawa.