

The Sticky Note Method: A Project Planning Tool for Student Writing Projects

Makenzie Neves

Graduate Assistant

806-742-2816

mneves@ttu.edu

Dr. Courtney Gibson

Associate Professor

806-834-8766

courtney.d.gibson@ttu.edu

Hannah Ford

Graduate Assistant

806-742-1505

hannford@ttu.edu

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University Box 42131

Lubbock, TX 79409

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Introduction - New Innovation Testing

Creating an outline before writing an academic report allows a writer to organize their thoughts in a systematic manner (Beard et al., 2009). To ensure students enrolled in an undergraduate scientific communications course practiced creating outlines, educators required students to learn and use the *sticky note method*, a form of project planning that helps reduce levels of uncertainty and increases project success (Dvir et al., 2003). This method served as the students' primary outline for their final research report. Literature supports that students who create outlines prior to writing an essay are more successful than those who do not (Salija, 2017). Educators wanted to ensure students would successfully complete their course and used the sticky note method as an innovative tool to provide support for students on their final research report.

How it Works

A total of 24 undergraduate students enrolled in an online scientific communications course were asked to utilize the sticky note method to plan their final research paper. This was a fast-paced five-week course. Students were provided with an instructional video on Blackboard detailing the process and were asked to create a sticky note outline before starting their final project.

Sticky notes were utilized rather than a traditional outline to provide students with a holistic view of major project deliverables (Confonto & Amaral 2010). The sticky note method requires a large blank space – either a wall, a large poster, or a desk. It also requires sticky notes in two different sizes and a writing utensil. Students were instructed to write the title of their project at the top of their blank space. Under the title, students used the larger of their sticky notes to write out and outline the five main sections of their research report – introduction, literature review, methods, implications, and references. Beneath each section, students utilized their smaller sticky notes to write out what they should include in each section of their report. By the end, students had a complete outline that allowed them to visualize what they needed to include in their report, what they needed to accomplish in each section, and how their information should be organized.

Following the completion of each student's sticky note outline, they were asked to post a photo of it on the online discussion board for the course. A total of 21 students (87.5%) participated in the online discussion. Students also reflected on their final project topics and the process of creating an outline using the sticky note method.

Results to Date

Through their online discussion, most students in this course noted the sticky note method allowed them to brainstorm and plan for their final research reports more than they normally would. A majority of students found the method to be helpful in some way. Student A said,

“Overall, I found the concept behind the sticky note method to be pretty helpful in that I created an outline to follow when I go to write my report.” Student B added, “The method also helps to have a brief summary to easily know which reference is which.” In concurrence, Student C said, “It helped me focus on the most important parts of the projects, and I was able to make sure that I have every piece necessary to begin work.” However, a number of students noted they preferred to complete this process virtually through stickies on their computer or a Word document to save time. There were also a number of students who found the activity to be time-consuming and preferred to do their project planning in their head. Student D explained, “I thought that the sticky note project was a bit time-consuming but overall helpful in the process of writing a research paper.” Student E agreed, writing,

I appreciate how this helps to organize everything neatly; however, my personality is more go with the flow as I write and prepare. I am typically not an organized person, so when forced to organize, I am out of my comfort zone.

Despite this, all students felt the method helped prepare them for their final research report, and most students said they would use this method, or a similar variation, in the future. This form of project planning challenged students to think ahead, get organized, and focus on the necessary aspects of their project. Student F said,

I found that it forced me to dig a bit deeper than what I am usually comfortable researching. It did help me gather the information I need to properly address each point I may need to make by having multiple sides to the research to analyze the data from every angle. I would use this method again because, with practice, I feel I would quicken my researching ability and have my points in detail.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Educators plan to utilize this method for students’ final projects during in-person sections of this course in coming semesters when it is taught with a much larger enrollment of students during a full-length semester. After receiving student feedback, they also plan to offer instruction on how to use this method on a virtual platform, like a computer’s note feature or virtual whiteboards like Lucidspark. The sticky note method can be utilized for any project that could benefit from project planning; however, researchers suggest creating a detailed instructional video specific to the project students will be asked to use this method for to help them best understand how to plan out their project. Researchers also plan to investigate what impact the sticky note method has on students’ success on written assignments in future classes.

Costs/Resources Needed

For this study, participants needed two different-sized sticky notes, a writing utensil, and a blank space. While participants were asked to utilize physical materials for this study, this method could also be done virtually utilizing the sticky note feature on any computer or a free virtual whiteboard like Lucidpark with no additional resources needed. Time is also needed for in-class instruction or to create an instructional video for students.

References

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