



Metacognitive Skills

Seeking Incremental Steps

Secondary



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SEEKING INCREMENTAL STEPS

Seeking incremental steps is a skill that helps students take on complex tasks using small incremental steps so they do not become overwhelmed by the task as a whole.

Introduce the skill of seeking incremental steps using the video lesson or an introduction of your own design that covers the same content. The text of the recording is below:

Video script -- Have you ever looked at a big assignment or task and felt unsure about where to begin? You may be writing a multi-page research paper, working through a long reading assignment, preparing for your driving test, or budgeting and saving up for something you really want. When a task has many parts or feels confusing, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

This is when the skill of Seeking Incremental Steps becomes especially helpful. This skill involves noticing when a task is too big to handle all at once and choosing to break it into smaller, more manageable pieces. Doing this helps you stay organized, keeps you from feeling overwhelmed, and gives you a clear path for monitoring your progress as you move forward.

Here's a strategy that can guide your thinking as you seek incremental steps.

1. Ask yourself whether this is a situation where working in small steps would be useful.
2. If yes, then identify the first small step you should take and try it out.
3. Based on what you have accomplished in your first small step, identify the next small step to take and try it out.
4. Keep trying small steps until you are done with the task.
5. Ask yourself how well it turned out and what you learned about yourself.

Here's an example of someone using this strategy.



Dante has a long reading assignment to finish by the end of the month. The book has a lot of characters, long descriptive passages, and vocabulary that make it tough to read quickly. When he first looks at the text, he feels overwhelmed and isn't sure if he can finish it in time. But then he asks himself if breaking it up into smaller steps would be helpful. Since the assignment is long and feels like too much to handle all at once, he believes breaking it down into chunks will help.

He identifies the first small step he should take. He decides to read the first chapter and write down the characters who appear and what he learns about them. After finishing that step, he figures out the next one. He finds a list of tricky vocabulary online and writes down the meanings of the words he doesn't know. He then decides to read one chapter at a time and write a quick one-sentence summary to help him remember what happened. Dante keeps taking small steps until the assignment is complete. He finishes on time and truly understands the text.

After he's done, he asks himself how well it turned out and what he learned about himself. He realizes that breaking the assignment into small chunks helped him stay focused and made the whole task less overwhelming. He also notices that he understands the material better because he took the time to work through it step by step.

Seeking incremental steps is useful outside of school, too. For example, JT has his eye on a new guitar. It is really expensive, and he isn't sure how he'll ever save enough. He decides it's something he can tackle by breaking it into steps. He starts by finding out exactly how much the guitar costs and how much money he already has. Then he figures out how much he can realistically save each week from his part-time job. He also lists a few expenses he can cut back on to put more money toward the guitar. By checking his progress every couple of weeks and adjusting when needed, JT slowly gets closer to his goal. Breaking the process into smaller, manageable steps helps him stay focused and makes saving feel possible.

Seeking incremental steps helps you break big or confusing tasks into smaller pieces so they feel manageable rather than overwhelming. As you get better at this skill, you can recognize on your own when a task is too large to tackle all at once, choose helpful



small steps to move forward, and reflect on how those steps helped you succeed or what you might adjust next time.



Once students have been introduced to the skill of seeking incremental steps, emphasize the following points with them:

- Seeking incremental steps means recognizing when a task feels too large, confusing, or overwhelming to handle all at once and choosing to break it into smaller, manageable pieces. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How can you tell when a task feels too big to tackle all at once?”
- This skill is especially useful in situations that involve many parts, long timelines, or unclear starting points, such as big assignments, long-term goals, or complex personal tasks. Discuss with students using prompts like, “What kinds of tasks make you feel unsure about where to begin?”
- Feeling overwhelmed is often a signal that breaking a task into smaller steps may help. Discuss with students using prompts like, “What thoughts or feelings usually tell you that a task feels overwhelming?”
- An important part of this skill is deciding whether working in small steps would be useful before jumping into the task. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How do you decide whether breaking something into steps would actually help?”
- Seeking incremental steps involves identifying one clear, manageable action to take first rather than trying to do everything at once. Discuss with students using prompts like, “In the reading assignment example, what was the very first small step Dante chose to take, and why was that helpful?” or “What is one small step you could take right now to get started?”
- After completing one small step, the next step is chosen based on what you learned or accomplished, not planned all at once in advance. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How did Dante’s first step help him decide what to do next with the book?” or “How can finishing one step help you figure out what to do next?”
- Continuing to work step by step helps you stay organized, focused, and less overwhelmed as you move toward completing the task. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How does working in smaller pieces change how the task feels?”
- Monitoring progress as you complete each step helps you see improvement and stay motivated. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How did JT check his progress while saving for the guitar, and why did that matter?” or “How can checking your progress after each step help you keep going?”



- Reflection after completing the task helps you evaluate how well breaking it into steps worked and what you learned about yourself. Discuss with students using prompts like, “After finishing a task, how can you decide whether working in small steps helped?”
- Over time, seeking incremental steps builds confidence in handling complex tasks and helps you approach future challenges in a more organized and manageable way. Discuss with students using prompts like, “How might using small steps change the way you approach big tasks in school or outside of school?”



LEVELS OF COMPETENCE

There are specific levels of competence for this skill against which students can be evaluated (see **Table 1**). It is important to note that the levels of competence are articulated as a scale that can be used to make judgments about students' status and growth. That scale has score values that range from 0.0 to 4.0. At the 0.0 level, the student cannot demonstrate any part of the skill even with help. At the 1.0 level, the student can perform some of the foundational aspects of the skill with help but not independently. At the 2.0 level, the student can independently demonstrate the foundational aspects of the skill but not the behaviors described at the 3.0 level. The 3.0 level on the scale represents proficiency in the skill. When students can independently demonstrate these behaviors, they have reached the desired status for the skill. At the 4.0 level, the student demonstrates everything at the 3.0 level AND goes above and beyond expectations by adding useful adaptations to the skill. Finally, the scale describes half-point scores that indicate partial progress toward the next level of the scale.

Periodically evaluate students' status relative to these levels of competence using the assessment activities in **Table 4**.

It is also important to note that **Table 2** and **Table 3** contain versions of the scale that can be used by students to rate themselves. These scales are both stated in an "I CAN" format. Periodically, students evaluate themselves relative to the levels of competence using the Full-point or the Half-point self-evaluation scales.



Table 1: Levels of Competence

4.0	The student can articulate specific situations (in school and outside of school) in which they should seek incremental steps, set goals to do so, and evaluate progress.
3.5	In addition to score 3.0 performance, partial success at score 4.0 content.
3.0	The student will recognize when they are not seeking incremental steps, and respond by executing a complex strategy involving self-analysis.
2.5	No major errors or omissions regarding score 2.0 content, and partial success at score 3.0 content.
2.0	<p>The student will recognize or recall vocabulary associated with self-analysis as it relates to seeking incremental steps (for example, <i>integrating, manageable, monitoring</i>) and perform basic processes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Describe a complex strategy involving self-analysis for seeking incremental steps (articulated by the class or the teacher in the form of a standard operating procedure [SOP]): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask yourself if this is a situation in which it would be useful to work in small steps. ○ If yes, then identify the first small step you should take and try it out. ○ Based on what you have accomplished in your first small step, identify the next small step to take and try it out. ○ Keep trying small steps until you are done. ○ When you are done with the task, ask yourself how well it turned out and what you learned about yourself. ● Understand what an individual might think and feel while seeking incremental steps (for example, feeling overwhelmed at first; thinking about what small step can be taken right now).
1.5	Partial success at score 2.0 content, and major errors or omissions regarding score 3.0 content.
1.0	With help, partial success at score 2.0 content and score 3.0 content.
0.5	With help, partial success at score 2.0 content but not at score 3.0 content.



0.0	Even with help, the student demonstrates no success.
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Table 2: I CAN Student Assessment Form (Half-point scale)

4.0	I can articulate specific situations (in school and out of school) in which I should seek incremental steps, set goals to do so, and evaluate my progress.
3.5	In addition to score 3.0, I can do some of what is required at the score 4.0 level.
3.0	I can recognize when I am not seeking incremental steps, and respond by executing a complex strategy involving self-analysis.
2.5	In addition to score 2.0, I can do some of what is required at the score 3.0 level.
2.0	<p>I can recognize or recall vocabulary associated with self-analysis as it relates to seeking incremental steps (for example, <i>integrating, manageable, monitoring</i>) and perform basic processes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I can describe a complex strategy involving self-analysis for seeking incremental steps (articulated by the class or the teacher in the form of a standard operating procedure [SOP]) (for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask yourself if this is a situation in which it would be useful to work in small steps. ○ If yes, then identify the first small step you should take and try it out. ○ Based on what you have accomplished in your first small step, identify the next small step to take and try it out. ○ Keep trying small steps until you are done. ○ When you are done with the task, ask yourself how well it turned out and what you learned about yourself. ● I understand what an individual might think and feel while seeking incremental steps (for example, feeling overwhelmed at first; thinking about what small step can be taken right now).
1.5	On my own, I can do some of the things at score 2.0 level.
1.0	With help, I can do some of the things at score 2.0 level and 3.0 level.



Table 3: I CAN Student Assessment Form (Full-point scale)

4.0	I can articulate specific situations (in school and out of school) in which I should seek incremental steps, set goals to do so, and evaluate my progress.
3.0	I can recognize when I am not seeking incremental steps, and respond by executing a complex strategy involving self-analysis.
2.0	<p>I can recognize or recall vocabulary associated with self-analysis as it relates to seeking incremental steps (for example, <i>integrating, manageable, monitoring</i>) and perform basic processes such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I can describe a complex strategy involving self-analysis for seeking incremental steps (articulated by the class or the teacher in the form of a standard operating procedure [SOP]) (for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ask yourself if this is a situation in which it would be useful to work in small steps. ○ If yes, then identify the first small step you should take and try it out. ○ Based on what you have accomplished in your first small step, identify the next small step to take and try it out. ○ Keep trying small steps until you are done. ○ When you are done with the task, ask yourself how well it turned out and what you learned about yourself. ● I understand what an individual might think and feel while seeking incremental steps (for example, feeling overwhelmed at first; thinking about what small step can be taken right now).
1.0	With help, I can do some of the things at score 2.0 level and score 3.0 level.
0.0	Even with help, I cannot do any of the score levels.



Table 4: Assessment Activities

4.0	Ask students to document specific situations in and out of school when they've used the skill of seeking incremental steps. They should be able to describe the goals they set for themselves, what they did, and how well they performed.
3.0	Have students document a time they used the skill of seeking incremental steps. They should be able to provide a detailed description of the event and a critique of their own behavior.
2.0	<p>Ask students to explain the following terms: <i>integrating</i>, <i>manageable</i>, <i>monitoring</i>. Their answers should be generally accurate but not necessarily detailed or complete.</p> <p>Ask students to describe a basic process that has been provided to them for seeking incremental steps. Their descriptions should include explicit steps such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Ask yourself if this is a situation in which it would be useful to work in small steps.○ If yes, then identify the first small step you should take and try it out.○ Based on what you have accomplished in your first small step, identify the next small step to take and try it out.○ Keep trying small steps until you are done.○ When you are done with the task, ask yourself how well it turned out and what you learned about yourself. <p>Ask students to describe some of the self-talk and thinking that should occur when someone is seeking incremental steps. Their answers should include things like they are feeling overwhelmed at first but decide to start working on small steps.</p>

