

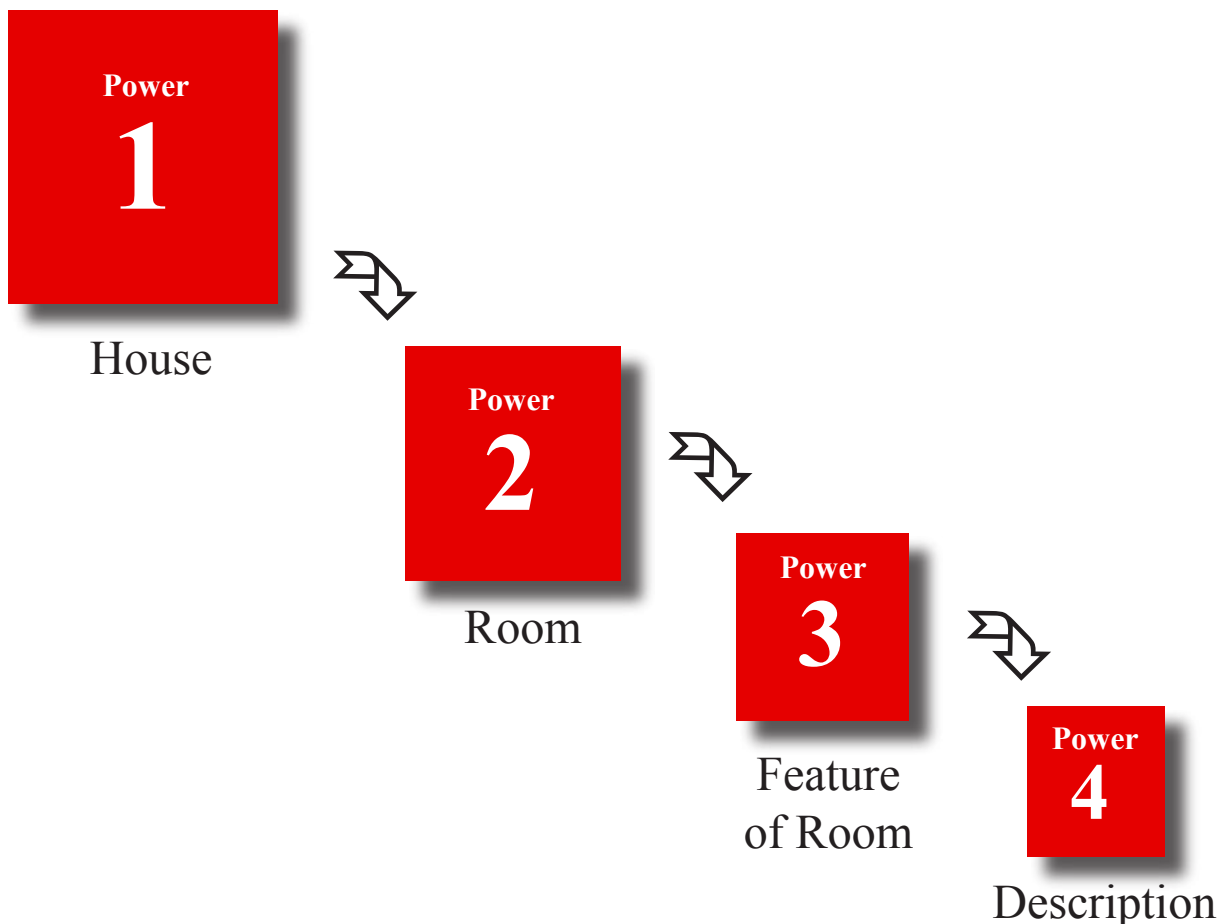
# SHARING <sup>Super</sup> STRATEGIES

## POWER THINKING Boxes

The idea came to me at a Level I training in 2000. While Master Trainer Don Meints was speaking, I was doodling in my notebook—not because of the speaker, but because I am a visual learner. I doodle—I learn. And that’s when inspiration hit: Power Thinking and the boxes in my notebook connected. Remember the Russian nesting dolls you may have played with as a child? One opened up to reveal another and another. What if students could SEE the levels of Power Thinking opening up like a series of nesting boxes, each one containing a more specific example of the topic above?

“Boxes!” I said aloud in eureka fashion. Startled tablemates inched their chairs away at first, but as I explained, the application for classroom use took shape.

Our reading specialist at Naperville Central High School, Debbie St. Vincent, invested in several sets of nesting boxes and labeled them, the largest being Power One. Now students could observe how a general topic “contained” several sub-topics. My first application of the concept came as I introduced my freshmen to a descriptive essay: “The Dream House Project.” Each student draws a floor plan of a budget-less dream house and then writes an essay giving readers a tour. On the board, I drew the following pictures to assist visually with Power Thinking.



One goal of the assignment was to challenge students to be as descriptive as possible on their house tour. Each paragraph would leave a lasting impression of showing, not telling, and would naturally incorporate transitions as readers moved from room to room or floor to floor of the house.

**Here is a sample paragraph I wrote on the board:**

My kitchen provides the best possible snacks. In one corner of the kitchen, you'll find a refrigerator; it is as large as one you'd find in a grocery store. Snacks like my favorite cheese sticks and red dipping sauce always stay fresh. Coinless vending machines line another wall of the kitchen . . . .

Each paragraph's topic sentence, a Power 2, generates subsequent supporting details in Power 3 and Power 4 sentences. With real boxes in the classroom to manipulate, students could physically reach into the Power 2 box and imagine all the possibilities of its contents. By opening the Power 3 box, even more minute details begged discovery. Below is a sample paragraph from a student's final paper:

When we go down the stairs and to the left, you will see four different restaurants for my guests' enjoyment. After your meal, you can enjoy a movie in the theater from the comfort of the hot tub. Next to the theater is a virtual-reality room where you can imagine anything you want, such as soaring like an eagle or climbing the highest mountain. To the right and behind this room is a stereo room with a karaoke system and my own recording studio. When you get over this high-tech stuff, you can go to my cozy living room and sit on my black Italian leather couches and enjoy watching my big-screen TV while my servants wait on you.

Drew, grade 9

Now do you think without the challenge of digging for descriptive details, I ever would have read about black, Italian leather couches in his essay? Yes, Power Thinking worked to produce an organized essay in varying degrees of detail, but the added visualization of nesting boxes aided students in "seeing" the concept.

## Other Uses for Boxes

One of my colleagues, Joanne Sapadin, developed a displayable use of Power Thinking boxes for her Romeo and Juliet unit. In groups, students selected a significant scene from within the play, a significant quote from within that scene, and then explained the lines in more detail. Students then decorated the outsides of the boxes and hung them from the ceiling. Here is a sample product:

**Power 1:** Romeo and Juliet: Act II (written on outside of box, with pictures)

**Power 2:** Act 2, scene 2, Romeo and Friar Laurence (written, with pictures)

**Power 3:** Lines 90-92: In one respect I'll thy assistant be  
For this alliance may so happy prove  
To turn your households' rancour to pure love.  
(Written, with pictures)

**Power 4:** Contains a detailed explanation of how this quote is significant in the larger scope of the play.

## Other Subjects

Once students caught onto the idea of nesting boxes for organization and levels of detail, we discussed the application in other subject areas. Would “box-thinking” help in science when classifying genus, family, and specie of animals? What about History? Math?

Civil War → Union → Famous Generals → Grant  
Confederate → Famous Generals → Lee

Human Body → Nervous System → Brain signals → response time

For each string of ideas, we peer down into the box and ask: in the whole realm of the Power 1 topic “Sports” what would you like to pick out? Tennis? Lift out box 2. Okay, looking into the box that contains everything about tennis, what would you pick out? Equipment. All right. Lift out box 3 from within 2. In this next box of tennis equipment, what interests you? And on goes the thinking process of reaching in and pulling out.

With labeled nesting boxes in your classroom, students can become engaged in exploring the potential vastness of the box, manipulating a representation of their thoughts, and discovering a wealth of details (black, Italian leather couches!) previously untapped and unpublished.

**About the Author:** John Hayward taught high school English in Naperville, Illinois, for twelve years and introduced many CRISS strategies to his students. He has a Masters degree in English from St. Xavier University in Chicago. He currently lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with his wife and five children and is working on a Master of Divinity degree at Oral Roberts University.



NOTE: This article first appeared in the Spring 2007 *Comments from CRISS*<sup>®</sup> newsletter. All material is copyrighted. Permission is granted to photocopy or print this article in its entirety, as long as all credits remain intact with the article and the Project CRISS<sup>®</sup> copyright appears on the materials. This article may not be used in any other publication in any medium, without the express, written permission of Project CRISS<sup>®</sup>.

©Project CRISS