

# ***AAC & TOPIC-SETTING: Getting the Most Bang for Your Buck!***

(Musselwhite, 2001 [www.aacintervention.com](http://www.aacintervention.com))

The ability to initiate a topic is a crucial skill in terms of communicative competence. For augmented communicators, this discourse skill is particularly important, as topic initiation promotes **power** and **conversational control**.

## **Research on topic setting:**

Research on interaction between augmented and natural speakers has shown that topic setting is difficult for many augmented communicators.

- Augmented communicators often have a *respondent role*, with few initiations, compared to their speaking partners (Culp, 1982; Harris, 1982; Light, Collier, and Parnes, 1985).
- Furthermore, *turntaking patterns are unequal*, with the natural speaker taking the majority of turns (Farrier, Yorkston, Marriner, & Beukelman, 1985; Light, et al., 1985).

## **Why do augmented communicators have such difficulty in initiating and maintaining topics?**

Culp (1988) suggests the following factors:

- vocabulary constraints
  - rate & timing of message delivery
  - physical effort required
  - limited environmental experiences
  - partner behaviors

## **Communication Agendas or Social Purposes:**

Light (1988) has identified four agenda that are fulfilled within communicative interactions:

- 1) Expression of needs/wants
- 2) Information Transfer
- 3) Social closeness
- 4) Social etiquette

Successful topic setting is crucial to these agenda, particularly for users with limited symbols.

## **Types of Topic Setting:**

Musselwhite (1985) identifies both generic and specific approaches to topic setting.

*Generic Topic Setting* refers to initiating topics that speakers have in common, such as: preferences in music, T.V., or movies; general information concerning personal topics such as pets or collections; and newsworthy topics such as sports teams or politics.

*Specific Topic Setting* refers to initiating topics reflecting events in the user's life, permitting partners to learn details about those events.

## **Generic Topic Setting and Communication Agendas:**

A generic topic setting approach can support the information transfer and social closeness agendas. For example, the generic topic setter, "I love rock music. How about you?" can contribute to the following social purposes identified by Kraat (1985). 1) Help the user acquire a feeling of belonging (*see? I like the same music you do!*); 2) Reflect aspects of the user's personality (*these are my interests*); 3) Create/change the perceptions of others regarding the augmented communicator as a person (*observe — this person is way cool!*)

## **Specific Topic Setting and Communication Agendas:**

Specific topic setting approaches are particularly well-suited to achieving the information transfer agenda, with partners learning of important events such as a haircut, a new baby brother, or a trip to McDonald's with grandparents. In the process of this information transfer, it is highly likely that social closeness will also be increased.

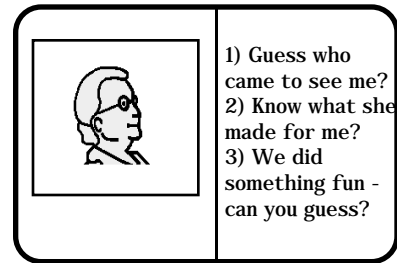
## SPECIFIC TOPIC SETTING

David Beukelman (1985 NCACA Conference) suggested developing *topic setter books* that can be used to help augmented communicators communicate across boundaries. We have used this concept with many individuals having differing communication needs and with a wide range of cognitive levels. Topic Setters should meet these criteria:

- High interest to user (favorite pet, collection)
- Opportunity for at least two turns per partner before interaction is completed (e.g., use of follow-up questions or guessing)
- Promote conversation by partner on topic specified by user.

### Sample Topic Setter Materials:

- Momentos from outings (napkin from Wendy's, "dead" circus balloon)
- Tidbits suggesting events (swatch of hair from haircut, new shoes tag)
- Instant photographs
- Simple pictures (Mazola pic from magazine, Pokemon characters from catalog)
- Line drawings (hand on computer, specific pair of funny glasses)
- Conventional symbols (DynaSyms, PCS)



### Instructions for Communication Partners

It helps to have questions written on PostIts, with answers on the back. An "instruction block" also helps partners know how to communicate, and be more comfortable in their interactions. The user's communication displays should also have references to the Topic Setter (TAKE A PICTURE OF THIS FOR MY TOPIC BOOK; LOOK IN MY TOPIC BOOK)

Hi, I'm Matt. When I look at a picture, it means I want to talk with you. Please ask me questions that I can answer by looking at something or answering YES (by blinking my eyes) or NO (by looking away. REMEMBER - let me have a turn every time you have a turn!

Hi, I'm Katie. I have some neat things to show you. Ask me the questions on the PostIt notes, or other questions I can answer by signing, answering yes/no questions, or answering "wh-" questions.

### PostIt Questions and Prompts

- 1) Guess who took me to the circus?  
(choices: Mommy, Aunt Carolyn, Nana & Boppy)
- 2) Guess who spilled their drink on the man in front of us?
- 3) Guess my favorite act.  
(choices: clowns, lions, tightrope walker)

### Answers (on back)

- 1) Nana & Boppy
- 2) Boppy - boy was the man mad!
- 3) Tightrope walker

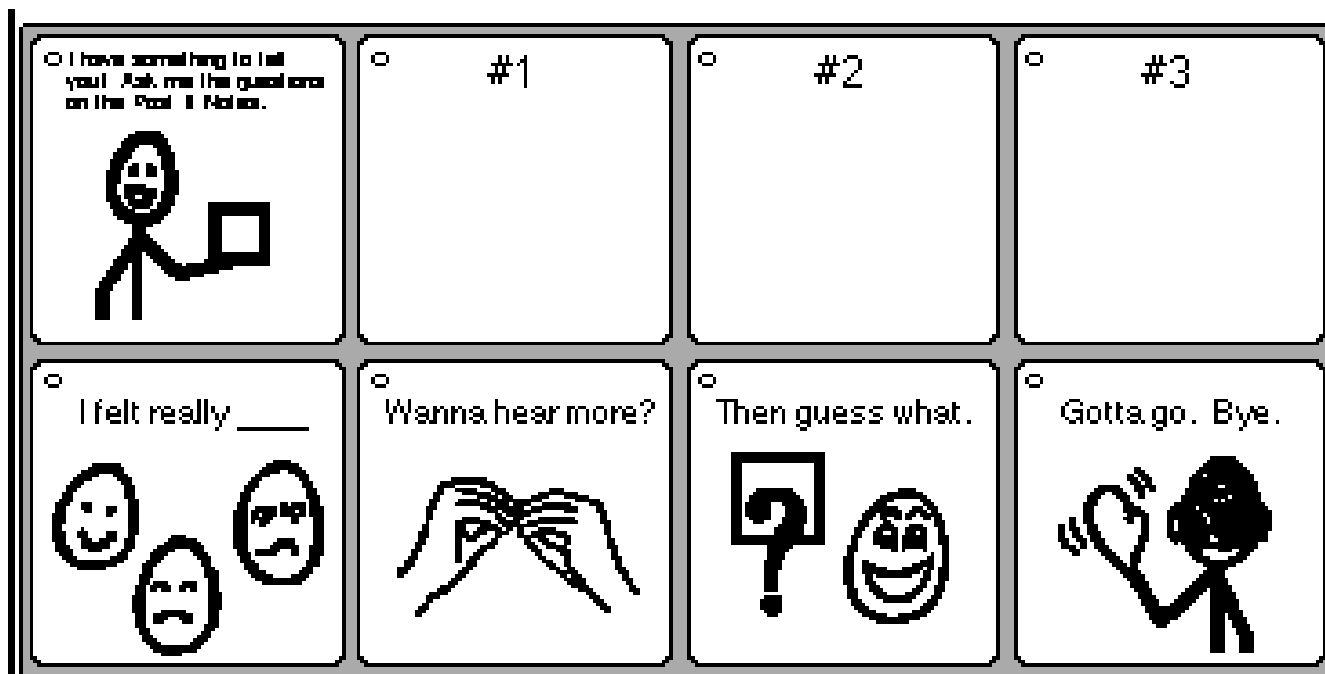
### Training In Use of Specific Topic Setters

Observation indicates that topic setter notebooks are used more frequently and more interactively if a sequenced partner training is used:

- 1) The individual who places the topic setter does so in cooperation with the user ("How about this question - 'Who spilled their drink?' ")
- 2) The topic placer should next role play topic initiation and question answering. With young children, a puppet or third party may be necessary. ("When Sandy comes over, point to LOOK IN MY TOPIC BOOK. Now pretend I'm Sandy: 'Who spilled the drink? You?. . . Boppy?. . .")
- 3) The topic placer now brings in the third person and facilitates the interaction only as needed
- 4) That third person is now asked to facilitate an interaction with another person ("Sandy, when the bus driver comes in, I think Katie wants to show this to her.")

Through this sequenced approach, the user becomes familiar with the topic setting process across a variety of partners, with the aid of facilitators. Equally important, partners learn how to better interact with the user, in a carefully structured situation.

## Specific Topic Setting Using a Communication Device



*Specific Topic Setter (Mussewhite, 2000)*

Use a communication device to set up a simple conversation. Here are the parts:

**Attention-Getter / Starter:** I have something to tell you . . .

**Event Statements:** #1, # 2, # 3 (ex: I played a really cool game today . . . it was on the computer . . . it's called Switch Wars, and I won!

**Maintainers:** Wanna hear more? Then guess what. Also personal comments: I felt really (partner would provide a new page of emotions, or would call out emotions)

**Closing:** Gotta go. Bye.

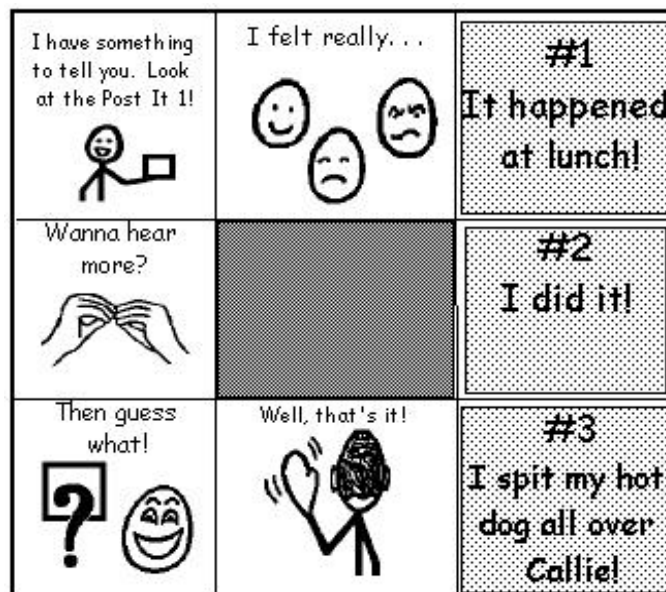
## Specific Topic Setting Using Eye Gaze

This sample has the same conversation parts, but can be used with a student who uses eye gaze for communication.

**Materials:** Use a 'trade-card holder'. This is the plastic card holder used to store baseball cards, Pokemon cards, etc.

**Strategy:** Cut out the center square so you can read the student's gaze more easily. Double-side symbols, so you'll know what the student is looking at. Change Post-Its when the story changes.

**Tip:** Be consistent about how you hold the eye gaze board. Ex: "If you're sitting, center it over Mustafa's nose."



# GENERIC TOPIC SETTING

The idea for generic topic setters came from a SEAAC presentation by Arlene Kraat. She expressed concern that persons with limited symbol base needed access to highly interactive symbols (e.g., TAKE ME) rather than merely request-for-needs symbols (EAT/DRINK/TOILET). Subsequent brainstorming and practice yielded a strategy for developing / using generic topic setters.

## Goals of Generic Topic Setting:

- **INITIATE CONVERSATION** : For persons with limited symbols, this may be rare
- **SELECT A TOPIC**: This will be a topic of interest to the user (no more weather talk!) Samples:  
Share info about likes & dislikes (*My favorite TV show is \_\_\_\_\_. What's yours?* )  
Provide info about home (*My dog's name is Buster. Do you have any pets?* )  
Initiate general interest topics (*How about those Tar Heels?* )
- **PROMOTE MULTIPLE TURNS**: Topic setters must be designed with multiple turns in mind,; follow-up questions can support this opportunity.
- **ENHANCE PARTNER TRAINING**: Potential communication partners are often uncomfortable because of lack of familiarity with augmented communicators, and with the skills of specific users. This strategy can offer training regarding: 1) user's means of indicating; 2) user's yes/no; 3) appropriate types of questions to ask.

## Sample Generic Topic Setters with *Follow Up Questions*

GOLF: On weekends I go golfing at the Country Club with my Dad. *What do you do for fun?*

GAME: Let's play a game! *Please let me choose — Hide 'n Seek, Locomotion, Memory, Cootie*

PETS: I have two pets — Lucky and Leroy. *Can you guess what they are? Do you have any pets?*

T.V. My favorite shows are Wheel of Fortune, Simpsons, and Seinfeld. *What do you watch?*

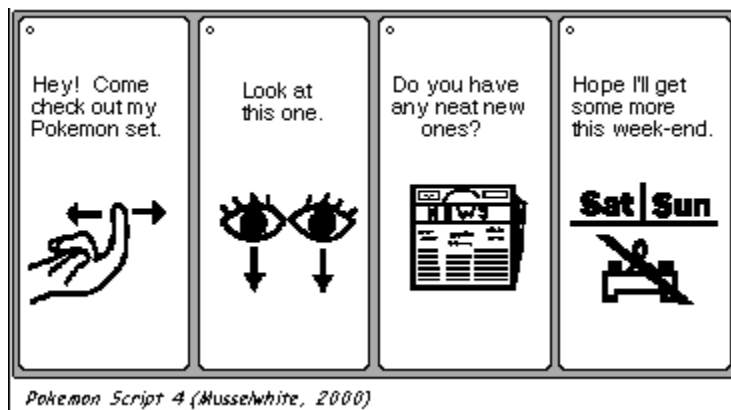
POLITICS (pic of elephant/donkey): Well, what do you think about the happenings in Washington  
*I've decided to vote for Homer Simpson next time!*

SPORTS (pic of mascot of team): How about those Suns! *Have you been to any games lately?*

BOWLING: I'm a champion bowler. *What's your sport?*

## Set-Up for Generic Topic Setters

A set of generic topic setters should be developed, either on cards, or on a page or theme of a communication device. Users should select the desired topic setter. Practice should be given in initiating and responding to conversation using the topic setter, such as role-playing using a partner or a puppet.



# TOPIC SETTING

## For Young or Cognitively Young AAC Users

(Musselwhite, 2000 www.aacintervention.com)

Topic setting with persons who are cognitively young but chronologically above the age of seven can be both challenging and fun. Individuals can set topics such as: *likes and dislikes* (e.g., "My favorite T.V. show is \_\_\_\_\_. What's yours?"); *information about home* (e.g., "I have three cats, a goldfish, and a hamster named Mr. Belvedere. Do you have any pets?"); and *general interest topics* (e.g., "How 'bout those Tar Heels?" or "Hot enough for you?"). These topics will hopefully demonstrate that the person has something to say, and will elicit follow-up conversation from the partner. Indeed, a primary goal for these topic setters is to begin a conversation that will last for multiple turns.

For young or cognitively young individuals, traditional "conversation" may be an unrealistic early goal. Therefore, different purposes may be identified for topic setting:

- 1) **Initiate interaction on topics of interest to the student:** interests that may be observed include music, bookreading, having the back or neck massaged, or having lotion applied. A "topic setter questionnaire" may help identify topic starters for an individual student. For this purpose concrete topics with hands-on follow-up work best.
- 2) **Ensure that the student begins the interaction:** this can be accomplished by making topic setters easily accessible and training partners in the strategy of *expectant time delay*.
- 3) **Provide for obligatory follow-up turns:** early topic-setters should be chosen to encourage multiple turntaking (e.g., decide where to apply lotion, what book to read, what song to sing).

### SAMPLE EARLY TOPIC STARTERS

This listing suggests early topic starters, with potential follow-ups to promote multiple turns.  
**MUSIC:** Lead-in symbol message: *Hey! Let's sing. I can pick the song.* Follow-up symbols: *Nobody Loves Me, Gopher Girls, Austrian Yodeling Song,* and other crazy songs.

**TICKLING or LOTION:** Lead-in symbol message: *I'd like some lotion, please. Guess where?*  
 Follow-up symbols: *arm, leg, neck, hand, face, etc.*

**BOOKREADING:** Lead-in symbol message: *Can we read a book? I have some in my backpack.*  
 Follow-up symbols: *Not necessary — hold up books for choosing.*

**HAND CLAPS:** Lead-in symbol message: *Let's play hand claps. I wanna pick the best one.*  
 Follow-up symbols: *Pease Porridge Hot, Way Down Yonder, Cinderella, etc.*

**GOING TO THE MOON:** Lead-in symbol message: *I'm going to the moon! Guess what I'm gonna take?* Follow-up symbols: noun symbols, such as: *toys, animals, people.*

**WHEELIE:** Lead-in symbol message: *I love wheelies! Let me pick how many.* Follow-up symbols: hold up *fingers* (2 fingers on right hand, 4 on left) or *number cards.*

**EVERYBODY DO THIS:** Lead-in symbol message: *Let's play "Everybody Do This." I'll be IT first.* Follow-up symbols: *raise your hands, clap your hands, make a noise*



Topic Setter Actions B (Musselwhite, 2000)