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**Building idea density: Using Lego to scaffold narrative writing
with students who struggle**

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Some students, especially those who have been identified as special education students, have difficulty composing alphabetic texts. The purpose of this study was to support students with special needs by giving them concrete manipulatives to scaffold the pre-writing story development. The study aimed to answer the research question: How does the use of manipulatives impact the writing process of 5th to 8th grade students with special needs? Working from a constructionist pedagogy (Papert, 1980), teachers introduced Lego StoryStarter sets to support the writing process of 19 middle-grade students who had been identified as having learning disabilities. Students constructed their stories with Lego before writing using a "beginning, middle, end" framework. The researchers used a T-unit analysis of idea density and pre/post design to determine whether the use of manipulatives during the writing processes resulted in student compositions with more idea density. T-units, or minimal terminal units of language, measure the smallest group of words that could be considered as a sentence, or complete thought. In a pre/post design, students increased in both volume of writing and idea density.