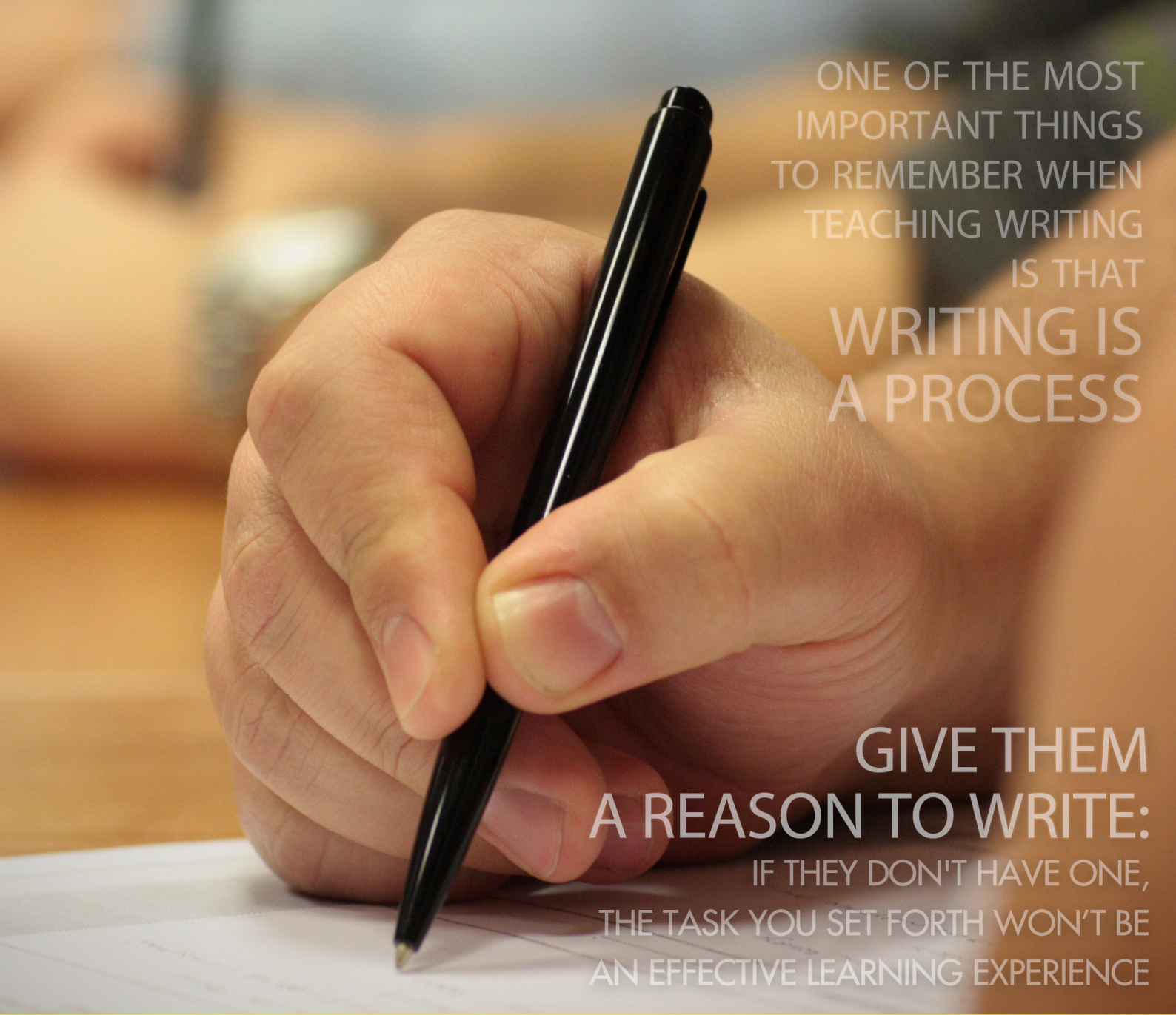


HOW TO TEACH WRITING

LIKE A PRO

45 TOP SECRETS EVERY WRITING TEACHER SHOULD KNOW



ONE OF THE MOST
IMPORTANT THINGS
TO REMEMBER WHEN
TEACHING WRITING
IS THAT
WRITING IS
A PROCESS

GIVE THEM
A REASON TO WRITE:

IF THEY DON'T HAVE ONE,
THE TASK YOU SET FORTH WON'T BE
AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

🔧 WRITING IS ONE OF THOSE SKILLS THAT DEEPLY REQUIRES STUDENTS TO BE MOTIVATED

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13 Strategies for Helping ESL Learners Through the Writing Process

Writing does not exist in a vacuum. It is a natural extension of listening and speaking, true in any language, but no less true for speakers of other languages and those in the process of learning English.

Because of that spoken-written word connection, engaging these skills in your ESL students when they write will help them move smoothly through the writing process. By helping your students engage the oral and aural skills they have acquired in their studies of English, they will find that writing is not as impossible as it might otherwise seem.

PREWRITING

Prewriting is the stage of the writing process when the writer generates ideas for his writing. For ESL learners, this is also an opportunity to generate vocabulary and grammatical structures that will be necessary for writing on a particular topic. At times, your students will be more successful in groups. Other times they may need your assistance as they generate their ideas. You may find at times your direction is enough to set them going in the right direction, and then they will be able to work independently. The key is to be flexible and read your students. Here are some things you can do to get the writing process started.

1 ASK QUESTIONS

Ask questions to help elicit vocabulary or grammatical structures from your students. This will engage their speaking abilities as it gets them thinking, too.

2 CREATE A WORD BANK

Work together as a class to create a word bank that relates to the topic on which they will write. You may choose to display these word banks in your classroom or encourage your students to keep them in a vocabulary notebook.

3 DRAW PICTURES

When lower language proficiencies may inhibit your students' ability to articulate ideas, sidestep the issue by asking

students to draw pictures of their ideas. They will later use these pictures, rather than notes, when they write.

4 GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Giving your students a blank template to organize their writing ideas may be just enough to get them going. Model filling one out, and then see what they can do as they make a plan for what they will write.

5 PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Doing research on the web, in books or with interviewees may be what your students need to find useful vocabulary or to determine the correct format for answering a question. Give your class time to prepare before they sit down to write especially if you are giving essay questions on content material they have learned.

ORGANIZING

In the second stage of the writing process, students will take the ideas they generated in the first step and start putting them into their logical positions in what will become their composition. Again, giving your students a chance to speak and prepare for writing is the key. Try any of these strategies in the organization phase.

6 TOPIC SENTENCES

Ask your students to choose one or more ideas they generated in the prewriting stage. Then have them write one sentence that introduces that idea to their readers. Explain to them that this is a topic sentence, which they can use to start a paragraph in their written pieces. Then have them organize any information about that topic under that sentence. When it is time to write, they will include that information in the paragraph with that topic sentence.

7 GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Let your students think outside the words and put their ideas into place on

the physical page. Using a flow chart, bullet point lists, bubble map or other organizers that show the relationship between ideas, have your students lay out their thoughts on the physical page. When it is time to write, they simply follow their ideas along the page.

8 OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

Asking your students leading questions or open ended questions will help them flesh out their ideas before they begin to write. When students have chosen a topic, penguins for example, challenge them to answer questions that begin with the journalistic words (who, what, where, when, why, how). Who studies penguins? What do penguins eat? How do they spend their time? Where do they live? Why do penguins do the things they do? If you have pairs of students ask each other these types of questions, they will get the double benefit of conversation and grammar practice while they are organizing their ideas.

WRITING

When your students enter the writing phase of the five step writing process, make sure they understand that a draft is not the final composition. When students strive for perfection in a written draft, the result is often paralysis. Instead, remind your class that writing is a process, and they will have an opportunity to find and correct their errors later in the process. Right now, their goal is to get something written out on the page.

9 FILL INS

Using a fill in the blank template for topic sentences, thesis statements and transitions may help your students as they write the first draft of their essays. When you give them the grammar and the organization, they can put all of their energy into the content as they write.

10 ORGANIZERS

Similarly, students working off the graphic organizers and templates they used in the organization stage will

have a more thorough grasp of the vocabulary and content that they will need to write at this stage.

EDITING

In the editing process, writers look for major communicative gaps in their essays. When your students edit their compositions, encourage them to pay attention to writing elements such as thesis statements, content development, introductions and conclusions.

WHEN YOU ENCOURAGE SPEAKING, LANGUAGE USE, VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT, AND GRAMMAR EXAMINATIONS, YOUR STUDENTS WILL FIND THAT THE PROCESS OF WRITING MAY NOT BE AS INTIMIDATING AS THEY ONCE THOUGHT IT WAS!

11 PEER EDITING

Peer editing is one of the best resources for ESL students at this point in the writing process. Assigning a partner to each student and asking that person to look for specific issues in the essay can be a priceless experience for your students. Encourage each person to look for any breakdown in meaning, confusion in organization, or topics that are not fully addressed in the composition.

REWRITING

Rewriting is just as important as the rest of the steps in writing a complete piece. Here your students will look for errors in grammar, sentence structure, word choice, spelling and punctuation.

12 DICTIONARY USE

Dictionaries are a tremendous resource for ESL students. Whether they use a bilingual dictionary or an English only version, checking for spelling and misuse of words or word forms can be done here.

13 SENTENCE COMBINATIONS

This is also a good time to look at the sentence structure your students are using most often. Likely, they will be relying too heavily on simple sentences, so a quick grammar review on combining sentences with coordinating conjunctions and using relative clauses is perfect to introduce here.

Your students will find that the best compositions they write take them through each of these 5 steps, and some more than once.

How to Effectively Teach English Writing Skills

Writing is one of those skills that deeply requires students to be motivated. If they're not involved in the writing task, in other words, if they don't have a reason to write, the task you set forth won't be an effective learning experience.

WHAT POSSIBLE REASONS COULD THEY HAVE?

- Adult ESL students most likely need to write letters, email, or faxes in English and in a business context.
- Teens may also be interested in contacting peers in English-speaking countries on the Internet.
- But what about children? They probably won't have a general, long-term reason to learn to write, but they can relate to a particular task, especially if it's fun, or if they'll be rewarded with a writing sticker.

Moreover, as a teacher, you also have a reason to teach English writing: there is a set of skills you wish your students to develop, and in case you haven't yet, your first step, above all else, is to define these skills. Then, you decide which teaching strategies, exercises, or activities will help them develop these skills. Finally, you choose a specific topic to ensure that students will participate with enthusiasm.

1 CHOOSING THE SKILLS YOU'LL FOCUS ON

Ask yourself these questions:

- What level are my students?
- What is their average age?
- Why are they taking this course?

Do they need writing skills for specific reasons? (business correspondence, college application letters, etc.) What do you expect them to produce? (a short email for beginners, an essay for an international exam) Once you're clear on the skills your students need to develop, move on to the next step.

2 CHOOSING YOUR ACTIVITIES OR WRITING EXERCISES

There is a wide variety of writing tasks you may assign your students to help them hone their writing skills, but careful consideration of the questions you answered

above should help you narrow down your options. Here are some examples:

- **Business email writing:** This is a skill that more and more ESL students require these days as they apply for jobs in international or multinational companies, or move to English-speaking countries. There are several sub-skills that go into effective email communication, and you should cover as many as possible in your ESL classes.

These include: requesting information, replying to emails, responding to conflicts/problems/issues, formal vs. informal email, and even email writing etiquette or netiquette. You may cover as many points as you wish or have time to cover, but make sure you cover a wide range so your students are better prepared.

To introduce the task, provide them with a sample email to read. Then, for practice, set up a situation or context: "Write a brief email to all team members to remind them of tomorrow's meeting." Correct any mistakes in grammar, as well as tone and style.

- **Essays/letters/stories for international examinations:** Some students may be preparing to sit for international exams, like the First Certificate in English (Cambridge ESOL) or the TOEFL, which require students to write essays that meet specific requirements. Let's take the FCE writing test as an example:

- Provide students with plenty of samples of the different types of written tasks they may be required to complete. For Part 1 of the test there is a compulsory task: they are required to write an informal or formal letter of 160 words for a specific audience and purpose. For Part 2 students are required to choose one of out six tasks: essay, report, article, review, letter or story of up to 180 words.
- Students must practice for each of these possibilities: the more they practice the better. In-class writing is ok, but you may also ask them to do some writing for homework.

- **Descriptions:** A very simple writing task is to supply something that students may describe. This is adaptable to any level and age group. From a written description of a photo or a recent summer vacation

spot, you may request students to make them as detailed as you wish, from 50 to 200 words.

- **Writing prompts:** Writing prompts are tremendously useful, great triggers for a writing task. Here are some examples of some great writing prompts:

- *Who is your favorite actor/actress and why?*
- *What are the three items you'd take to a deserted island and why?*
- *Write about one of your favorite movies and why you liked it so much.*
- *What is the best gift you've ever gotten?*

- **Journal writing:** Ask students to bring a blank notebook that will from then on be referred to as their "Journal". Assign topics on a weekly basis, or every two weeks, whichever you prefer and depending on their level. You may use the writing prompts from above, or suggest any other topic: their thoughts on a recent current event, what they did over the winter holidays, what items are on their Christmas wish list, etc. Journal writing is a great way to get students to write on a regular basis, plus keep track of their progress as far as writing skills are concerned.

3 CHOOSING YOUR TOPICS

Even if you choose an engaging writing activity, it should be accompanied by a topic, or context, that will motivate your students to write. In some cases your choices should be obvious: in a business English course, students will handle all types of business situations. Teens relate to pop stars, sports, fashion, TV, and movies. Though limited in the length of their writing, little ones may write about the things that are a part of their daily lives, like their families, friends, and school.

YOU CAN HAVE THEM WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING THAT INTERESTS THEM, JUST MAKE SURE THEY WRITE, AND MAKE SURE IT'S A REGULAR ACTIVITY.

Some of us make the mistake of focusing only on the writing of answers in activities or exercises, and once in a blue moon have them write something longer. Whether it is creative writing, business writing, or guided writing, teach them by example first, and then let them have free reign in the way they express themselves in writing.

How to Teach a Perfect Writing Lesson

IN AN ESL CLASSROOM, THE EMPHASIS SHOULD BE AND OFTEN IS ON SPEAKING BECAUSE BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE IS THE GOAL OF LEARNING ANOTHER LANGUAGE.

On the other hand, the ability to listen, read, and write in English is significant as well. Lesson plans should include all these English acquisition methods as much as possible even while focusing on one in particular.

Here is an example of how you might conduct an effective writing lesson.

HOW TO PROCEED WITH TEACHING A WRITING LESSON

1 WARM UP

Students will be spending a significant amount of time sitting at their desks working quietly for this lesson so, especially if you teach children, it is a good idea to get them moving and speaking during the beginning portion of your class. You can play Crisscross to get them out of their seats but perhaps a short interview activity based on the lesson's theme or as a review of the previous lesson would be better. This way, students can maximize the amount of time they spend speaking and moved around the classroom interacting with other students.

2 INTRODUCE

Start out by asking students to say what they know about the lesson's topic, for example horoscopes, to get some related vocabulary on the board. When they have run out of things they already know, introduce any additional material and do some pronunciation practice of the new words they will be using in the lesson. For some vocabulary ask students to give you a synonym or use it in a sentence. This is a good way of seeing how familiar students are with certain words or how comfortable they are using them. While it is important to focus on the target language you prepared, be sure to include some of the

material students contributed in these exercises as well.

3 PRACTICE

At this point you should introduce some key structures. A couple sample questions and answers will give students an idea of how to use these. Before giving an explanation, ask students to translate or explain the examples to you in order to see if they can guess the meaning without being told. Before having students practice this material independently, do some choral repetition for pronunciation practice.

4 PRACTICE MORE

At this point students should think of their own answers to the questions following the structure of the example sentences. They can do this by interviewing one another. Allow students to interview several students as the answers will vary from person to person. Students could also write their answers on a worksheet and then share their answers with one another. This will make them a little more confident when talking with their peers because their answers have already been composed and written down. Hearing the answers that others have come up with, students may have more ideas and want to expand on their own answers so this kind of interaction can be quite beneficial. Before students move on to the significant writing portion of the lesson, ask them to share some of their responses aloud. This will give another opportunity for students to speak and share ideas while allowing you to clear up any remaining confusion.

5 PRODUCE

After all this preparation, students are finally able to begin writing. They have been given a topic, some useful vocabulary, and thought of some answers to related questions which will form the framework of their written work. Ask students to write a certain number of sentences related

to the topic you've chosen. If students take longer than expected, the homework assignment can be to finish writing.

6 REVIEW

After making corrections and returning the writing assignments to students, have volunteers read their answers aloud. This way they will practice the corrected material and not reinforce mistakes. If you notice that students struggled with something in particular, do a short activity focused on that point before moving on to the next topic.

THERE ARE MANY OTHER WAYS TO FOCUS ON WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM.

You may not have particular structures that students need to use or even a very specific topic. Students could do writing assignments based on readings or with prompts like "Tell a story about when you were younger." This example just shows one of the many ways you can give students the opportunity to improve their writing skills.

Written Communication in the New Millennium

Written communication today is not what is used to be. In the past, letters were the best way to communicate with friends and family, but that is no longer the case. In today's age of information, texting, emailing and social media posts have taken over as the choice means of communicating.

Additionally, where a letter may have been written to one person, many of today's written communication is targeted to large groups of people. Facebook and Twitter are prime examples. What do your students need to know about the English used in these communication channels?

WHAT YOUR STUDENTS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

1 SPELLING IS A WAY OF THE PAST

With texting functioning as some people's main form of communication, spelling has gotten creative. In fact, some would say text is abbreviated and symbolic rather than spelled at all. When an ESL student reads "Gr8" traditional spelling rules obviously will not apply. Some abbreviations such as LOL have even made their way into the dictionary. Your students should be aware that spelling and representative spelling is subjective, and even varies from one individual to another at times. Encourage them that most text abbreviations can be found online with a simple search!

2 GRAMMAR IS NOT STANDARD

Though it may reflect descriptive grammar more than prescriptive grammar, some rules do not apply in the new written millennium. Of particular note is the lack of pronoun agreement. Spoken English today com-

monly uses they (third person plural) to refer to he or she (third person singular) particularly when the gender of the person is not known. Perhaps this natural change will affect the future of the English language. Perhaps it can be attributed to the overly conscious politically correct habits in which we have gotten. Regardless, students should know that they and their are commonly used to refer to a singular person in casual speech. As for formal or academic writing, however, using they as a singular is still unacceptable.

3 SUBJECT DROPPING

Subject dropping is another creative grammar habit in today's written world. Because speed is of the essence, texters will often eliminate the subject of the sentence, a no-no in English though perfectly fine in other languages such as Spanish. Your students who read these texts will have to do a little deciphering to determine the implied subject of the sentence. Other languages give clues from the verb conjugation, but English will not be of help in that area. Your students should be aware of the context of the message and make logical assumptions as to who is performing the action in the sentence. In addition, they should know that it never hurts to ask if you just are not sure who is being talked about.

4 EMOTICONS

What on earth can a colon and one parenthesis mean? Emoticons are an important part of written communication through today's electronic channels. In some cases, smiley faces and the like will appear in picture form, but often they are symbolically represented by the characters the keyboard has to offer. Being aware that these unique combinations may come through in the midst of text will help your ESL students identify them for what they are. Remind your students that seemingly random punctuation may be more than it appears, and your students should be ready to

identify these inserts as pictorial representations, something the English language does not typically contain.

5 SPAM

Spam is more than just the canned ham we all love. Our favorite junk emails are forever filling up our inbox trying to catch our attention or lure us into some harmful scheme, and your students are getting all this stuff, too. Some ESL students may not be familiar with the frequent mass spam attacks that come through email accounts and sometimes through text messages. Help your students be aware that these messages exist, and make sure they know what a spam folder and filter are for. By ignoring and deleting the daily serving of spam coming through the electronic system, your students will have more time to focus on what is most important, their language learning.

6 WHEN & WHERE

Finally, your students should know the time and the place to use the type of writing that frequents texts and emails. Academic and business standards remain the same, even though what people most frequently write is something all together different. Remind your students that they should not use text abbreviations or casual grammar in their academic papers and business communications. Unfortunately, some will nonetheless. Even though language is an ever changing entity, expectations for more formal or official writing remain the same, at least for now.

THOUGH IT IS BENEFICIAL TO YOUR STUDENTS FOR THEM TO HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH TEXTING AND EMAIL, BEING AWARE OF ITS DIFFERENCES FROM TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE USE IS IMPORTANT.

When your students know the time and the place for formal writing and textese, they will be better communicator as well as better participants in U.S. culture.

The Secret to Facilitating Good Writing is in the Sharing

THERE ARE MANY CREATIVE WAYS OUT THERE TO MOVE STUDENTS TO WANT TO WRITE, BUT OFTEN IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO FACILITATE INTERACTIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES.

Writing is such a solitary activity and students can sometimes be very inhibited about their writing abilities or the topic they choose to write about. These are some beneficial tips to facilitate not just writing activities, but great ways to encourage sharing and communicative forums.

SECRETS TO FACILITATING GOOD WRITING

1 MAKE ACTIVITIES INTERACTIVE

Often we don't think of writing as a group activity, but you can easily adapt writing prompts into more interactive activities. Think of ways in which you can have students play off of one another and write spontaneously.

One great example is the chain story. Provide one sentence as a jumping off point. It can be anything from something simple like "Gail looked out the classroom window." to something a bit more creative, "As the moon turned from white to purple, all movement in the world stopped." The first student in the group writes a sentence to follow the beginning one, and then hands it to the next person in the group to continue the story.

You can vary this activity in several ways and take it as far as you would like. Sometimes you may even want to type up each of the finished stories and have students illustrate them and then share with the class as a whole. Thinking up ideas like this one and putting your own spin on it will keep writing fresh and alive for students who might otherwise dread hearing, "and now write about ... for five minutes."

2 PROVIDE A FORUM FOR STUDENTS TO SHARE

When thinking of writing activities for students, take it one step further and construct ways for them to share their writing. Depending on the level, you can give students weekly or monthly writing assignments that they could spend quite a bit of time on—editing, rewriting, and perfecting. Students may feel more encouraged to work on their writing if they know in advance that they will have a chance to share it.

One way to do this is simply have them do some kind of presentation which includes handing out copies of sections or whole writing activities.

Another way to do if you have a technologically savvy group is to create a bulletin board on their class website where they can post, read and comment on each other's writing.

You can also do story exchanges, in which a pair of students exchange work and discuss each other's writing. If you give them time in class to share their writing, you'll find that it will become more and more natural for them to consult one another.

3 TRY OUT JOURNAL WRITING

Journaling is an excellent way to facilitate writing, and there is any number of ways you can structure journal activities. You can make it so it is a daily routine to write for five minutes with or without a writing prompt. You could make it a weekly homework assignment and give very pointed prompts that reflect a particular grammar point from the week. You can also leave it more open-ended and assign them X number of writing assignments in a term with journals being collected at one or two specific times in the term.

You can work with the students to craft one or more journal entries into something they would like to present

to the class. The point of journal keeping can be to keep track of great ideas and good writing. Give students time in class to edit their work and to ask questions about writing in general. This way, even if they are journaling on their own, they are still exposed to some interactive activities around their journal entries. As with any journaling assignment, set all the perimeters ahead of time with your class. Will you correct their grammar or only their spelling? Will you make comments or not? Will there be multiple collection days or is journaling an in-class activity only?

4 UTILIZE PEER CORRECTION

The last secret to facilitating writing is to have students spend some time getting used to reading each other's work, and correcting it. There are several ways to do this so that students don't feel intimidated about the exercise. One way to take the pressure off is to provide perimeters for the exercise. Some examples are: find X number of mistakes and then offer possible corrections for those errors, find X number of words you would change and then explain why you would change them, find X number of grammar errors and explain how to correct them. These perimeters give students some options and some targeted ways to look over each other's writing. It really does facilitate a feeling of mutual trust and accomplishment.

The secret to facilitating good writing really is in the sharing.

YOU WILL FIND THAT THE MORE THE STUDENTS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHOWCASE THEIR WORK, THE MORE MOTIVATED ABOUT WRITING, THEY WILL BE. THEY WILL ALSO LEARN FROM EACH OTHER'S STYLE AND CREATIVITY WHICH WILL PRODUCE LONG LASTING RESULTS!

Brilliant Brainstorms: How to Use Mind Maps to Jump-Start Writing

Writing is intimidating enough for second language learners, so why not simplify the process for them. Using mind maps to organize thoughts, brainstorm ideas, and synthesize information will surely jump-start your students' writing.

HOW TO USE MIND MAPS IN YOUR ESL CLASSROOM

1 EXPLAIN MIND MAPPING

Mind mapping is a wonderful tool to present to various levels of language learners. It can be used in many different ways, but especially in the realm of writing. It helps students begin a writing task, takes brainstorming to a new level, and actively involves students in creating a road map for their thoughts. So what exactly is a mind map? It is best explained using an example and comparing it to regular brainstorming. Mind mapping visually looks like a map of sorts. Instead of a linear model for brainstorming—or just making a list—this allows students to spread out and move around on the page. It starts with a topic in the middle, and then proceeds with keywords that branch off the main topic idea. Sub topics can then be branched off into subtopics until the page is covered with keyword ideas related to the main idea. Students can use pen and paper to draw their mind maps, and you can give examples on the board. You can start out with a simple writing assignment or bigger tasks like an essay, depending on the level and your class needs. Begin with a topic, for example: My wedding day. Students start with the main topic in the middle and begin brainstorming. It could look something like this:



The students can determine what their main idea is from the beginning or they can also use a mind map to brainstorm a main idea. This works well if you give them a vague subject like, write about the happiest day of your life. They could brainstorm the top three ideas and then choose what their main topic will be. Here we have a clearly set topic, the wedding day. Once they have the central idea, they can list out keyword ideas on branches from the main idea. They can also add more detail to the supporting ideas by branching off the supporting ideas. So under "Ceremony" there could be another five bubbles each with a different sub-topic, like vows, parents, music, rings, etc. Students can use different colors and shapes to signify main ideas, supporting ideas, and sub-topics. This technique allows them to open up the possibilities, and there is no one right way to devise a mind map.

2 MAKING CHOICES

The next step in the mind mapping process, after they have a pretty complete start, is to evaluate how they feel about what is on their map. Once they have a lot of words on their maps, they can then start whittling down what they would like to include and what they would like to remove. Be sure to explain very clearly that these are just ideas for what they might want to write about. They don't have to include everything that is on the mind map, and they can erase, edit and revise it as they move forward.

Depending on the range of the assignment, the mind map should reflect an appropriate length and should also maintain the subject matter appropriate for the project. If they are assigned a one page essay, then the above mind map is a good start for generating ideas, but they would then want to choose one or two supporting topics and flesh those out. Students could do a second mind map once they have decided their supporting ideas. This is simply a method for students to get their thoughts down on paper, and they don't have to feel in any way tied to it.

3 BEGIN WRITING

After getting some solid ideas down in front of them, it is a much easier task to then approach the actual writing. If students have several keywords surrounding a supporting idea, they can then take those same words and begin composing their topic sentences with supporting sentences. They could use much of the same language they have already written down. It makes the task of composition much more manageable and gives them a concrete tool to reference. Students generally move from the mind map activity into the writing process with more enthusiasm and more direction.

4 ADAPTING IT

Because mind mapping is so visual and only requires keywords, keep in mind that there are many ways you can adapt it for lower or higher levels. Beginners enjoy the fact that they get to draw things out, use colored pens or pencils, and have such a visual model for a task that may intimidate them at first. It works well for paragraph writing where students mind map their topic sentence, supporting ideas, and concluding sentence. It is a much shorter activity, but you may find that they are able to get more accomplished in a shorter period of time. For more advanced users, this technique can come in handy to prep them for large exams, essay writing, speech writing, or for organizing presentations.

MIND MAPPING IS AN EFFECTIVE AND USEFUL TOOL FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ALIKE.

Often once students are exposed to mind mapping, the old way of brainstorming takes a backseat, and this becomes the preferred method. You'll be amazed at how easily and cohesively students are able to assemble their thoughts and writing!

How To Teach Writing: 6 Methods For Generating Writing Ideas

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN TEACHING WRITING IS THAT WRITING IS A PROCESS.

Very few native speakers will ever start writing at the top of the first page and continue straight through until they finish at bottom of the last one. The entire process has five steps, but the first step in the writing process is coming up with your thoughts and ideas, also known as prewriting. Prewriting helps students gather ideas and give them a bank of possibilities for their writing. This way, as students write they do not have to make decisions simultaneously about content and language. The bank of ideas they will generate will be an invaluable resource as they write.

HOW TO GENERATE WRITING IDEAS

1 BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming is an activity with which most people are familiar. The object in brainstorming is to compile as large a list as possible of potential examples for a given topic. This is a great activity to do in small groups or with the entire class. Brainstorming a list of ice cream flavors is an easy one to start with when introducing the concept. Naturally, one idea will spark another, so it is helpful to have students working together when brainstorming. Challenge your students to come up with as many examples as they possibly can for whatever topic you give them.

2 FREE WRITING

Free writing is an individual activity for getting thoughts from your head on to paper. Explain the concept of stream of consciousness to your students and tell them that free writing is simply putting on paper every thought that is going through their heads. The goal of this activity is to never let your pen or pencil stop writing. Help students understand that though they will begin with a particular topic in mind, it is okay to veer off on tangents as they write. Spelling and grammar are not important for this activity, it is ideas that we are trying to grasp. Give your students a set length of time for this activity. If they are young you may want to limit it to two or three minutes, older students can probably write for five to ten minutes.

3 JOURNALISTIC QUESTIONS

Journalistic questions approach a topic in a more structured manner. Start by reviewing the question words: who, what, where, when, why and how. Then, for your given topic, ask questions starting with each of these words. For example, if your topic was study habits, you might ask, "Who has good study habits? Who benefits from good study habits? What are the good habits? Where do people with good study habits study? Where to they keep their books? Where do they organize notes and homework? When do they study? When do they complete assignments? ..." This activity can be done either individually or in groups with success. Have students write answers to each question.

4 CLUSTER MAPPING

Cluster mapping, also called idea webbing, is a great way to show relationships between ideas. Cluster mapping is also part idea generation and part organization, so students will know exactly how to group their ideas once they are ready to write. To begin, write your topic in the center of the page and put a circle around it. Then you can move in one of two directions. With younger children, have them think of questions about the topic. For example, if the topic is spiders, they may ask, "What do spiders eat? Where do spiders live? What do spiders look like?" Tell students to spread these bubbles out over the page as they will be adding to each. Then, have students answer the questions connecting still smaller bubbles to the bubbles containing the questions. If their question was "What do spiders do?" then they might make connecting bubbles saying they capture flies, they spin webs, they scare nursery rhyme characters, etc. With students who have more knowledge about their central topic, their bubbles connected to the central idea should include subtopics and/or details about the subtopics. Generally speaking, each of the subtopics would be one paragraph in a composed piece of writing with examples and support for the idea surrounding it.

5 FLOW CHARTING

Flow charting is similar to cluster mapping in that it shows relationships

between ideas. However, flow charting is most effective when examining cause and effect relationships. With the central theme drug abuse in the center of your page, to the left students would make list of causes for drug abuse with arrows pointing at the central idea. Peer pressure, medical need, parental example and boredom are all potential causes of drug abuse. Each would therefore be in its own box in the diagram with an arrow pointing from it to the central idea of drug abuse. Then examine the effects of drug abuse and place those in separate boxes to the right of the central idea each with an arrow going from the central idea to it. Homelessness, loss of jobs, failure in school, isolation, further abuse and addiction may all be results of drug abuse. When writing, students can then focus on either half of the diagram (causes of drug abuse or effects of drug abuse) or follow the cause and effect pathway from cause to effect and cause to effect.

6 DOUBLE/TRIPLE ENTRY

Double or Triple Entry is another focused brainstorming activity. This is especially useful when comparing and contrasting two or three topics or when exploring two or three areas of one topic. With this prewriting method, have students make two (or three) columns on their paper. Each column should have a topic which focuses the idea generation. If you were going to compare love and hate, you might label your columns similarities and differences and list your ideas in the appropriate sections. If your students are writing about their ethnic heritage in comparison to another, you could have them label one column with each culture. When finished, students should have a good idea of the points on which they can compare or contrast their topics.

WHETHER YOU CHOOSE TO USE ALL THESE METHODS WITH YOUR STUDENTS OR ONLY ONE OR TWO, PREWRITING GIVES YOUR STUDENTS THE TOOLS AND FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESSFUL WRITING. Prewriting alleviates students' anxiety freeing their minds to focus on words after generating ideas instead of completing both steps simultaneously. Prewriting will give your students confidence and direction as they write not to mention improve the quality of their ideas and organization in their writing.

Get Your Students Writing With These 6 Writing Activities

JUST HOW MUCH CAN A PERSON WRITE ON A POST-IT NOTE?

When you are using them in the classroom, it's not how much you write but what you write. You can use these simple sticky notes to get your students started on all kinds of writing projects. Keeping the planning simple makes the writing assignments less intimidating, and this can be extremely important for students of English as a second language.

HOW TO GET YOUR STUDENTS WRITING WITH THESE 6 POST-IT NOTE ACTIVITIES

1 PERSONAL NOTES

Part of being a good teacher is having good relationships with your students, but that is not always easy to do when you teach a big class. You can use this simple note writing technique with your students to create one on one dialogue and get them to practice their writing skills at the same time. A few minutes before the school day is over, give each person a post-it note to stick on his or her desk. On the note, encourage your student to tell you something about their experiences that day. You might ask what activity they found particularly interesting or what they may not have understood during the day. If you like, have a ready list of questions posted in your classroom so your students can refer to it each day when they write their notes. Then, once the class has left, go through the class and read these notes. Make notes back to your students (on additional post-its) so they know you have heard what they said. You will feel closer to your students, and you may find out some interesting facts that your students may have been too shy to share during class!

2 ELEMENTS OF STORY

Every story has four essential pieces – the character, setting, conflict and resolution. To make sure your ESL students are including all of these essentials in their next story, do this activity before you write. Give each student four post-it notes (four different colors if possible) and explain the four elements that each story should contain. Keeping it simple is best. Character is who is in the story. Setting is where the story happens. Conflict is the main problem in the story, and

the resolution is how that problem gets fixed. Then, have your students write the character, setting, conflict and resolution for the story they will be writing on their four post-its. Now when they go to write their stories, they will have a physical reminder of everything they need to include to make sure their stories are complete.

3 THE NARRATIVE ARC

I often use a six panel comic strip to teach my students about narrative arc when they are writing stories, and the activity easy translates to using post-its in the classroom. Give each student six post-it notes and have her arrange them in a line on her desk. On the first post-it, have your students draw a picture of the main character. On the second, she should draw the setting. On the third note, she draws the problem that the main character encounters. Then, on notes four and five, she draws the problem getting worse and worse. On the last note, the student draws her main character solving her own problem. Once each student has these six pictures, she can use these as a guideline as she writes her story. When she does, her story will come out with a strong narrative arc. Drawing the pictures also helps students who might otherwise be intimidated in a foreign language writing class.

4 STAMP OF APPROVAL

Using small post-it notes, have each person in your class design a stamp that they would like to see printed. The stamp should feature a person, and your students will have to explain why they think that person should have their own official postage. After the stamps are designed, have each person write a letter to the U.S. Post Office explaining why this person should be featured on a stamp. Your students should give three or four good reasons in their letter as well as a short biography of the person. Your students should then include the picture they drew on the post-it and close their letters appropriately. If you like, extend the activity by creating the stamps your students proposed. Several websites let you print your own U.S. postal stamps from an image you upload from your computer.

5 CLASSROOM OPINIONS

How do opinions vary among your students? Is there a majority and a minority when it comes to popular issues? To see what your students are really thinking, have a post-it poll in your classroom! Write a question that touches on a popular issue on your board, and give each student a post-it on which to write his answer. Once everyone's answers are written, have them stick their post-its to the board to form a bar graph which shows the possible answers to the question. Once students can see where their classmates' opinions fall, have each person write an essay about the issue. In the essay, he should identify whether his opinion came in line with the majority or the minority, why he chose that side of the issue, and what he would say to sway someone from the opposition.

6 STICKY DIALOGUE

You can use post-its in your classroom to create a conversation with a paper trail. Give each student several post-it notes. On the first, have him answer a question. Any question will work, but you might want to tie the question into a unit you are studying in class or have students share information that will help them get to know one another better. Make sure everyone has written his name on the note, and then have your class stick their notes on an open bulletin board. Give your class a chance to read what their classmates have written, and then have them respond to one of the notes on their second post-its. Again, students should write their names on the notes and then stick them below the note they responded to. Repeat this activity with a third and fourth post-it. Now that the conversations are finished, review with your students the differences between quoted and reported speech. Each student should then choose one of the conversations and write it using correct grammar and punctuation in both quoted and reported styles.

A BIG, BLANK PAGE CAN BE INTIMIDATING TO ANYONE, AND ESL STUDENTS ARE CERTAINLY NO EXCEPTION. USING SIMPLE LITTLE STICKY NOTES CAN DO SO MUCH TO PUT YOUR STUDENTS AT EASE WHEN IT COMES TO WRITING, AND THE LITTLE NOTES CAN ALSO BE USED TO TEACH BEG CONCEPTS IN WRITING CLASS.

How to Make Students Excited about Writing

WRITING CAN BE DIFFICULT TO LEARN, AND EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO TEACH. FOR MANY, THE RULES OF GRAMMAR AND SPELLING CAN BE COMPLEX AND OVERWHELMING. Learning how to organize thoughts and create a cohesive argument can be just as confusing. This difficulty can cause students to feel frustrated and to avoid or dislike writing, making it even harder for them to learn to write better. Fortunately, there are many ways that you can help these students become more excited about writing to motivate them to learn and to improve their skills.

HOW TO MAKE WRITING FUN FOR STUDENTS WHO DON'T LIKE TO WRITE

1 PRESENT DIFFERENT TYPES OF WRITING

Academic essays and reports are important to learn how to write, but they can be the most uninteresting and difficult writing for many students to master. Present other types of writing to students to help them find their voice. Try out forms like poems, short stories, personal essays, songs, plays, blogs, or even television shows or commercials. Students can work on their own creations, or they can be assigned a portion of a larger class project, such as a movie, television show, or play. Not all of these forms will be popular with all students, but presenting these different forms will increase the likelihood that your students will find a type of writing that they do enjoy.

2 BRING WRITING TO LIFE

After students have explored different types of writing such as TV shows or plays, you can offer them additional motivation by producing some or all of those works. You can put on a class play that the students worked on together, or you can bring a video camera and let students film short commercials, mini movies, or even news broadcasts. Students will take pride in their writing and will get excited to show off their creations to fellow students and their parents. Such projects can also help shy students become more active in class. Other ideas for bringing students' work to life include performing songs, hosting a poetry read-

ing, or putting on an art show illustrating their story characters.

3 CREATE FUN CONTESTS

Encourage students to do their best work by hosting a variety of contests throughout the year. Make the categories broad to allow more opportunities for different students to win, regardless of their skill level. For example, besides best story or poem, categories could include "most unique characters," "best idea," "teacher's favorite," or even "most improved." The more interesting the categories, the more excited students will be about entering. Contests can be paired well with productions of student work, like a play or poetry reading. Make sure the prizes are interesting enough to motivate students to enter and do their best work. A package of pencils isn't likely to arouse as much excitement as a pizza party or ice cream social.

4 ENCOURAGE EXPLORATION

Structured writing prompts have their place in the classroom, but some students will do their best work when they are left to their own devices. Encourage students to explore ideas by allowing activities like freewriting, mind mapping, or even collage. Journaling or creating visual mind maps are great ways for students to explore their ideas and later organize their writing.

5 ALLOW THEM TO PUBLISH

Much like seeing their work produced in the form of a play or video, publication can motivate students to create their best work. There are many ways that you can provide students opportunities for publication. A blog or class Web site is an easy way to publish all student work throughout the year and to make it easily accessible to other students and to parents. Blogs also allow for reader interaction, giving students a chance to see how others respond to their writing. Other options can include creating a class newsletter, a small anthology, or a public bulletin board (in the school lobby or hallway, for example).

6 ENCOURAGE GROUP WORK

Some students need a little encour-

agement from their peers in order to find their voice. Help struggling students by assigning group work. When a student has a part in a larger project such as a story, a series of poems, or a play, he can find inspiration in fellow students' ideas. While it may be intimidating to write a piece of work from start to finish, writing only a portion of a larger piece is much more accessible. When the parameters for the project are set (through the collaborative ideas of other students), there is less pressure to think of compelling ideas, making it easier to focus on and strengthen the small part for which the student is responsible.

7 MAKE STUDENTS THE AUTHORITIES

Peer editing offers a number of benefits. Student writers learn to identify weaknesses in their writing and how they can improve their ideas. Student editors can learn how to strengthen their own writing by identifying what qualities constitute good writing. When they are assigned as editors, students take on a sense of ownership. They become self-motivated to learn the rules of good writing -- from spelling and grammar to proper construction and cohesive structure.

LEARNING HOW TO WRITE WELL IS A LIFE-LONG PROCESS. EVERY SKILL LEADS TO ANOTHER, AND EVEN THE BEST WRITERS CAN IMPROVE UPON THEIR ABILITIES WITH EXPERIENCE.

If students are not properly inspired to write, they won't have the motivation to keep learning and to keep improving their writing. Finding ways to make writing fun and interesting can keep students motivated in the classroom and beyond. Presenting different types of writing, encouraging exploration, and finding ways to bring student work to life or offer opportunities for publication are just some of the ways that teachers can make writing fun for students who don't like to write. Every student is different, and what excites and inspires one student will be boring and tedious for another. Keep trying new tactics and adapt your strategy as needed for your individual students. You will help your students learn a skill that will stay with them their whole lives.

Creative Writing Strategies in the Composition Classroom

THERE IS A TENDENCY TO THINK OF CREATIVE, FICTION WRITING AS WHOLLY DIFFERENT FROM NON-FICTION, ACADEMIC WRITING.

And indeed they are different forms, that utilize different grammar - creative writing and fiction uses more of the past tense, for example. And creative writers are used to being admonished not to use the passive voice in their sentences, to make their writing more active and personal. On the other hand, academic writing relies heavily on the passive voice as it is impersonal, and the agent of the action is often deemphasized, valued qualities in academic writing. The vocabulary is even different, with academic essay writing relying more on academic, Latin-based vocabulary. Such vocabulary is usually discouraged in creative writing, which tends to focus on more accessible words that might realistically be used by the narrator and other characters in the story. Just as an example of this difference, below follow opening lines of a fiction story and a nonfiction article, both written by me:

** My old cellmate Ray was waiting behind the store in his beat-up Caddie when I finally looked for him there.*

** Because of the recent focus on "basic" skills instruction in the primary grades, that is, word recognition and decoding skills, many students come to higher grades able to decode quickly but not comprehend the words they read.*

Probably no explanation is needed on which is which.

However, I have found that while the forms obviously differ, the processes to be similar in the two genres. Writing in both genres generally calls upon the following processes:

**PROCESSES SHARED
BY BOTH CREATIVE
WRITING AND
COMPOSITION**

1 BRAINSTORMING

Both fiction and nonfiction writers go through a period of brainstorming. With a fiction writer, the focus is generally more on "What happened?" What happened after the narrator found Ray waiting for him behind the store? Did he get in the car with him, and why? It is in answering these questions that the story develops.

Brainstorming for nonfiction writers, however, is more topic-driven: it is, more "What do I want to write about? What compels me?"

2 VISUALIZATION

Both fiction and nonfiction writers use visualization. As the author of the fiction piece, I want the writer to see and feel the old Caddie, how dust shows on its faded black paint, how the leather seats feel against the narrator's legs on this hot August day. In nonfiction, I'm more concerned about making my argument: what points am I going to need to raise to convince my reader how critical student writing is?

3 READING ALOUD

Any writer, for fiction or nonfiction, is helped by reading aloud his or her work, to hear the sound of it, how the words and sentences are working together, to consider what might work better. Having students read aloud their work to each other is a rewarding experience, for the pleasure of hearing their own work and of getting and giving feedback.

4 RESEARCH

Both nonfiction and fiction writing require research. Some people are surprised by this, but fiction writers have to do research. For example, I wrote a romance novel set in a Napa Valley winery, and for this I had to develop some expertise on wine. Research also can be reused and shared between the genres—I could someday write a piece about

choosing wines, for example, or the history of the Napa Valley. Once you have done the research, you own the knowledge from it and can reuse it.

5 QUICK WRITES

Quick writes involve jotting down everything about a topic that I know: What do I already know about wine, for example? What's the basic process for making it? Who do I see as being the main characters in this winery story?

6 JOURNALING

Journaling is also very helpful at the beginning stages, in getting and developing ideas. My journal is a word document on my desk top, and I jot both nonfiction and fiction ideas as they come to me along with any development I might have for that idea. My original notes for "Turning," the fiction story whose opening line is above, had a conversation between the narrator and his old cellmate on the nature of assumptions—the narrator had assumed that the cellmate would be in front, not the back, of the store. I take similar notes on nonfiction pieces. The journal, as I see it, is a "dumping ground" for your ideas on a piece that may or may not make it into the final draft, so there's no pressure for it to be excellent work at this stage.

7 OUTLINING

After I've brainstormed and developed ideas, it's time for an outline. Ray and the narrator actually have to go somewhere, and something has to happen, important enough to force some change in the narrator. That's the expected form of a fiction story. Likewise, a nonfiction essay or article has an expected form: after discussing the problem of student writing, I've got to have a recommendation, however small, of what to do about it. An outline will keep the writer focused on moving the writing forward, not dally in the car forever, but actually take the story or essay somewhere.

8 DIRTY FIRST DRAFT

After the outline is completed, the writer is now ready for a first draft, a “dirty” one—the goal is finishing the draft, of presenting the problem of student writing, of proposing a solution, of discussing expected outcomes. It doesn’t have to be perfect at this point or even particularly developed—the focus is on finishing. Developing and editing can come later.

9 CUT AND PASTE

Cut and paste is a word processing function very helpful in the writing process, after the first draft. The first draft is all about getting the material out of your head and onto paper. The second draft is more about rearranging and perfecting. Does the conversation about assumptions belong closer to the middle of the story, when the narrator starts to realize he has assumed far too many things about his cellmate? Does more discussion about a possible solution to the problem of student writing belong up front, right at the outset?

10 FINAL EDITING

All writing, fiction and non-fiction, writing needs to go through a final editing, preferably by a disinterested set of eyes that has not seen the work before, checking the grammar, spelling, missing or repeated words, that even the most meticulous writer might miss problems in his own work.

ALTHOUGH NONFICTION AND FICTION ARE OBVIOUSLY DIFFERENT IN FORM, THEIR UNDERLYING WRITING PROCESSES ARE SIMILAR.

Using students’ past experiences with creative writing, either in the class or otherwise, the teacher can develop the students’ composition/nonfiction skill and understanding of the writing process.

Planning Out a Pleasing Plot.

Starting Your Students on Story

WRITE A STORY. MAKE IT THREE PAGES, AND MAKE IT FICTIONAL. READY? GO! THIS IS NOT THE BEST PREPARATION FOR WRITING A NARRATIVE.

For anyone who is writing, coming up with an effective and well-written piece takes time and effort and some planning at the start of the process. Nonnative speakers will be even more intimidated by jumping into the cold water of story writing without a little preparation ahead of time. Use the following steps with your students to help them establish the foundation of their plot before they set to the task of writing a fictional narrative.

PLANNING OUT A PLEASING PLOT

1 PROCURE A PROTAGONIST

The first step in planning a plot for a piece of fiction is deciding on your protagonist or main character. If you were to write a personal narrative, the protagonist would be the writer of the story. Each of us is the main character in our own stories. For fictional stories, on the other hand, the main character may be a little more difficult to create. If your students need help coming up with an original character, have them start with lists of characteristics that they like and another list of characteristics that they dislike in people. Write down at least five of each. Then when creating their main characters, have your students select two qualities that they view as positive and one that they view as negative. For example, your student may decide his main character is innovative and courageous but is clumsy or she may be beautiful and sophisticated but talk too much. By including a negative characteristic along with the positive ones, the reader will be able to better identify with the protagonist and your students will avoid having a character who is too aloof and unrelatable.

2 PRODUCE A PREDICAMENT

The second step in creating plot is to give the character a problem. There are an infinite number of problems that a character may have, but the key to an effective problem is to make sure the character may or may not be able to solve it. By bringing the main character's success into question, your students will create tension which drives plot and keeps the reader's interest. When deciding on the problem for a main character, consider his or her setting and role in life. Is she a doctor in a third world country? Is he a garbage collector in Beverly Hills? Performing surgery will be a more interesting problem for the second character while finding a way to make quick money may be more challenging for the first.

3 PILE ON THE PROBLEMS

No good character solves his problem on the first try. Encourage your students to think of ways their character may try to solve the problem and fail. Does the doctor try to have a spaghetti dinner that no one can afford to attend? Then does she try to sell her collection of antique novels only to find that the people in the village cannot read? In each case, the attempt to solve the problem will fail. A good rule of thumb is to have two failing attempts to solve the problem before the final successful solution. The character's failed attempts should make the overall situation worse than it was before he or she attempted the solution making the reader question whether the piece will have a happy ending.

4 PLANT QUESTIONS

With each step in the plot, there should be some question the narrative has not answered. How will the doctor get the money? Why does no one in the village eat spaghetti? Why has no one learned to read? As your students plan answers to the problems

they present, have them present more problems that the reader does not yet have an answer to. This pattern of answering one question but bringing up another should continue throughout the story. When all the questions are answered, the narrative is finished. Post-it's are a great tool for kids (and adults) at this stage in the writing process. By writing a short note or drawing a simple picture on each of several post-it's, your students can keep track of the events in their stories and play with the ordering and arrangement. They can also see what the plot will look like if they decide to remove an event all together. These little slips of paper give your students flexibility and make arranging the events of a story less intimidating.

5 POSE A POSSIBILITY

As your students are answering and planting questions, they can use questions of themselves to help further the plot. What would happen if...? What if this event were the next thing to happen? By asking themselves questions, they can think ahead to the next step in the story. They should do steps four and five at the same time while constructing their plots. With each event will come a question that the reader will want to have answered.

WRITING A STORY COLD IS SOMETHING VERY FEW PEOPLE CAN DO. EVEN MOST PROFESSIONAL WRITERS HAVE SOME SORT OF PLAN IN PLACE AS THEY WRITE.

By plotting out the structure of a story, your students will have a path to follow as they write. This will alleviate stress and give them more confidence as they express themselves through words. By guiding your students through this five-step process, you will give them the foundation for a fictional piece of writing that will be engaging and interesting and that your students will be proud of.

Yes We Can Write! Putting Pen to Paper for Beginners

Writing can often get overlooked in the beginner ESL classroom. This may be because students are focused on their speaking and listening skills first, and their reading and writing skills second.

There comes a time in every beginner class to test the waters with writing to see where your students' writing skills are, and to help them to enhance those skills. Solid writing skills will help your students increase their understanding of the language, and learn how to express themselves in new ways.

GETTING BEGINNERS TO PICK UP THE PEN AND WRITE

1 START OUT SLOW

You will have different levels of capabilities and some students may not even have a basic grasp how to spell simple words. Often beginners have such limited vocabulary, writing can feel very intimidating and so they will need a lot of guidance. Don't worry too much at the very beginning about grammar, spelling or punctuation. Let it go for now. You will have plenty of time to get into those details. Just get them to write something down the first few times.

2 REVIEW SIMPLE SENTENCE STRUCTURES

You will want to begin by reviewing simple sentence structures that the students can model and practice. Point out the punctuation rules, and review some of the grammatical points you have been working on and incorporate them into a writing activity. Present tense and Present Continuous are good ones to get students writing. Review the grammar and the differences.

Subject + Verb + Object = I like ice cream. He is a teacher. John is happy.

Subject + Verb to be + -ing = The girl is dancing. The boy is singing. We are learning.

There is a lot you can have students write about that use just these two main

beginner grammar points.

3 USE VISUAL CUES

Using either pictures or real life objects can greatly help students get the pen moving. If they have something that they can look at for reference as they are working out what they want to say, you will get better results. Here is just one type of lesson that can be adapted:

Use pictures from a magazine and have each student pick one. Use a combination of portraits, street scenes, home scenes, and people doing activities, or anything that has some action to it. First, have them write five sentences about the picture on a loose piece of paper. I find it best to give them some direction, such as: write five sentences about what is happening in the picture. Write five sentences describing the picture. Write five sentences using adjectives/action verbs/present tense. You can come up with your own ideas that fit the students' level. Have a few students share what they wrote and either write it up on the board for them or have them write it up there. You can go through and make some gentle corrections as you have another student read aloud what is written on the board. Always collect short writing activities so that you can make all the necessary corrections.

4 PROGRESSIVELY GIVE MORE DIFFICULT WRITING EXERCISES

Don't expect creative masterpieces at the beginning, and be open to assisting students express themselves. In general, they will need help with vocabulary, spelling, and expression. Students will use very basic language, but may also want to experiment with some surprisingly advanced concepts. Let them first explain what they are trying to say and be their dictionary for a time. As time progresses, give them writing activities that are coupled with grammar points, so that they can gain a better understanding. A few tips on where to progress are:

Show students how to combine two simple sentences with and, or, or but, and how to punctuate.

Explain adjective order and show them how to utilize several new adjectives in writing.

Show students how to incorporate more than one tense into a paragraph. For example: I like running. When I run I feel happy and healthy. When I am running I like to feel the sun. Next year I think I would like to run in a marathon.

Introduce future tense and have them write on any number of topics. Things like: what is your goal for the coming year? What dreams do you have for your future? What career will you have in 5 years?

5 INTRODUCE THE DICTIONARY AND THESAURUS

As students continue on their journey of putting pen to paper, it is a wonderful idea to give them resources to improve their work on their own. First introduce the dictionary, and make sure that you have a few good copies for them to use while in class. Many students already utilize electronic dictionaries, but getting them to use a hardcopy can greatly help them increase their vocabulary. Thesauruses are also great resources and can eliminate the frustration of limited (and pretty boring) word usage. You can incorporate activities with both books into writing activities and give students homework that will get them comfortable consulting the books while they are writing.

TEACHING BEGINNER STUDENTS TO PUT PEN TO PAPER WILL PROVE TO BE A GREAT CONFIDENCE BUILDER FOR MANY OF THEM, AND A WAY FOR YOU FIND OUT WHICH STUDENTS MAY HAVE LARGER ISSUES WITH LITERACY. When you are crafting your activities and asking your students to put themselves out there remember that it can be challenging for native speakers to sit down and write. It takes a lot of courage, but both the teacher and the students will see great rewards!

3 Great Ways to Inspire Young Learners to Write

Children in ESL classes are notoriously shy about writing in general. It is really critical for their language development that they receive early and constant exposure to writing opportunities.

TRY THESE 3 GREAT WAYS TO INSPIRE YOUNG LEARNERS TO WRITE

1 FREE FLOW AND CREATIVITY

Perhaps one of the reasons children can be reluctant to write creatively is they are insecure about their spelling, grammatical or structural skills. It is a good idea to remove these anxieties by supplying ample opportunities for creative processing that doesn't pick apart structure and syntax. The focus should be on the expression. For some children, devising a complete sentence may be really intimidating. There are several ways you can navigate around their fears, and provide creative options. First off just try thinking about writing in a different way. Give them an opportunity to string words together in poetic ways that don't necessarily rely on punctuation or traditional meanings. Supply them with some jumping off points, like some familiar vocabulary that they need to include in their writing. Choose different types of words, and provide an explanation or discussion of those words after the writing. An example could be: write six lines and include these three words in your poem: Mother, happy, blue. They could then share their writing with a partner or simply turn it into you.

Free flow writing is another way to accomplish a similar writing exercise and could be a bit longer. This is almost like journal writing, and can be done to varying degrees with many different levels and ages. You can devise it however you would like as long as the end product of writing is not judged on grammar, punctuation or spelling. You can give students a topic and tell them to write for five or ten minutes. Be sure to tell the students not to get hung up on the writing itself, but just to write whatever comes to mind.

Example topics could be things like:

- *Tell about your day today...*
- *describe your last birthday...*
- *what will you bring to class for show and tell.*

The topics can be as low level or as advanced as the students' abilities and you can connect them to the lesson's theme for relevance or use them to review past topics or lessons. Obviously you want to choose topics that the students would enjoy writing about (see our Creative Writing Prompts Parts 1-5!), have some knowledge base, and have some language to express themselves. Follow-up activities to free flow writing could be numerous. You could have students read each other's compositions and use it as an opportunity for peer correction. You could also have the students read what they wrote and have their classmates ask them questions about what they wrote. A third option would be to collect the writing and go over it individually with the students. You want to make sure that free flow writing is just that, and that students don't feel inhibited by what their writing may be lacking. The focus is on creativity. There are lots of other options to focus on grammar, punctuation, and syntax.

2 ILLUSTRATE WRITING AND SHARE

Combining drawing with writing is a wonderful way to engage students, especially really young learners. There are numerous ways to do this to facilitate a feeling of freedom and to allow students to express themselves in two modalities. One possibility would be to have the students do something like a scaled down graphic novel. Depending on the country you are teaching in, these may be hugely popular. Tell students to choose a hero and a villain (great vocab lesson), and then write one scene or frame of a story. Once they have a few frames written, they can accompany that with as simple or as involved drawings as you would like them to get into. They can then share their creations with one another, and you can easily make this an ongoing project making sure that the language objectives are clearly defined. Another way to incorporate illustrations is to have each student draw a picture. You could give them a topic or leave it wide open. Give them a time

limit, and collect all of the pictures when they are done. Then redistribute the pictures making sure that no one gets their own. You can then have students write on any number of topics. They could describe the picture that they see or create a story around it. The purpose is again to be creative and to make writing a pleasurable activity that students want to engage in.

3 CREATE A STORY AS A GROUP (STORYBOARD)

Often in higher levels, an inventive writing activity is organizing a collaborative effort among students to write a story. You can adapt this for younger audiences by also including drawings. This could be an entire week long lesson where each day students engage in a different part of the writing or drawing piece. It is also a wonderful way to remind them of all that they have been learning regarding writing, structure, and syntax. Start by introducing the concept of writing and illustrating a story together. Review the elements of a story and brainstorm with the class all the things the story will need to be complete (characters, setting, plot, conflict, etc.). Then it will come time to determine what the story topic is going to be. Decide ahead of time how you will present this—by dictating it, brainstorming about it, or choosing randomly out of a hat. Then put students into groups. This is up to the teacher's preference. Assign the students their daily task per group and be sure to give them deadlines. The students among different groups will have to work together so that the story has some flow. Sometimes doing the illustrating or storyboarding first will provide the students with a guide to follow when they write. Think it through and determine what will work best for your particular group. The end product could be copied and bound so that all students have a book that they wrote.

WRITING IS NOT JUST ABOUT STRUCTURE AND PRACTICAL ELEMENTS.

It is also about self-expression and creativity. Opening students up to the world of the written word doesn't have to be painful or frustrating. With a little creativity and spirit, even your youngest learners will pick up the pen and surprise you!

Wish You Were Here: Beginning Level Writing Made Simple

FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE, PRACTICAL AND REAL LIFE SKILLS ARE EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.

We teachers strive to bring realia into the classroom, give them experience speaking in real life situations and reading English text written for native speakers. These are valuable experiences for our classes, but we may find that writing, for beginning level students, is more abstract or has little real life applications. The good news is beginning level writing does not have to be disconnected from reality. By walking through the following steps for writing a postcard, your students will have a chance to practice their beginning level writing skills in a practical situation.

HOW TO TEACH A POSTCARD WRITING LESSON TO BEGINNER LEVEL STUDENTS

1 START THINKING

Get your students thinking about experiences they may have had getting postcards. Write the following questions on the board and put students into groups of three or four to discuss the answers.

- Did someone ever send you a post card?
- Who sent it to you?
- Why did they send it?
- How did it make you feel?

2 SHOW AND TELL

Bring in some examples of real postcards for your students to look at before writing their own. Encourage your students to note what type of information the postcards contain. Do they see any similarities among the notes? Do they notice conventions used for addressing the postcards?

3 GET READY

Once your students are thinking about postcards and have seen

some examples, tell them that they are going to write their own postcard, in English, and that you will walk them through each step of the process. The first step is to think about words that can be used when describing vacations. Make a list on the board that your students can reference later. Encourage them to think about words that might describe the weather, the location, the food they might eat or activities they might choose to do on vacation.

4 CHOOSE YOUR DESTINATION

Now your students will choose their imaginary vacation destination. It can be a place they have been, a place they want to visit, or a place that exists only in their imaginations. Give each person a sheet of poster board, card stock or other thick paper. A half sheet of standard sized paper works well. Then, have your students draw a picture on the card of the place they want to visit. This is the front, or the picture portion, of their postcard.

5 ADDRESS THE CARD

You will need to model the rest of the steps in writing a postcard for your students. The first step is to turn the card over and write the address on the card. You may want to encourage your students to select someone who attends your school as the recipient of their postcard. Then use the school address, and show your students how to write it on the right side of your model. After writing the address, have students start their message with "Dear _____" on the left side of the card.

6 WRITE YOUR MESSAGE

You can give your students a simple, seven sentence formula for writing their postcard message. Modeling for your students, write one short sentence in the blank space on each of the following topics: where you are, what it is like, what you are doing,

where you are staying, what you already did on your vacation, something interesting about the place or what you have done. For example, your message might read, "We are at the Jersey shore. The skies are always blue. We are spending lots of time on the beach. Our hotel is very close to the water. We went to a craft show yesterday. The people in New Jersey have been very friendly." Postcards traditionally close their message with the sentiment, "Wish you were here." Have your students write that phrase and then close with "Sincerely, _____".

7 DISPLAY YOUR CARDS

If you like, punch a hole in the top of your students' postcards and thread some string or yard through the hole. You can now hang the postcard from the ceiling in your classroom and students will be able to see each side!

IF YOUR STUDENTS CAN WRITE SIX SIMPLE SENTENCES, THEY HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO WRITE SOMETHING WE SEE IN EVERYDAY LIFE.

When they do, they will have confidence in the language that they are learning, and you might just get to see some of their creativity come out, too. So make school a little more like vacation and write some postcards this summer!

Getting Kids Ready to Write: 4 Easy Strategies for ESL Teachers

PUTTING A BLANK PIECE OF PAPER BEFORE SOMEONE AND ASKING HER TO WRITE CAN BE INTIMIDATING, AND THE CLEAN WHITE PAGE CAN ACTUALLY HINDER THE WORDS FROM COMING.

No one is more susceptible to this fear of the blank page than kids. That is why stressing writing as a process is so important with young students. A big part of the writing process is getting kids thinking about what they will write, or prewriting, before we ask them to put words on the blank page. Following are some ideas you can use to get your kids' heads in the right place before they set their pencils to that empty page.

GETTING KIDS READY TO WRITE: TRY THESE 4 EASY STRATEGIES

1 THE RULE OF THREE

Something as simple as folding a piece of paper into three columns can be enough to motivate your kids to get their ideas on the paper. Ask each person to divide his paper into three sections, either by folding or by drawing lines down the page and then label those columns beginning, middle and end. Then, as your students are thinking about a story that they might write, have them make notes on something that could happen at the beginning of the story, in the middle of the story, and at the end of the story. By getting some possibilities down on paper before writing the story, your students will have an easier time moving the story forward and will ensure a solid plot which clearly has a beginning, middle and end, an achievement that does not always come easy for children.

2 THE KWL CHART

Before setting your students to some research and then a report on any given subject, have them start with a KWL chart. Like the previous activity, your students should begin by dividing their papers into three sections, but

this activity is designed for nonfiction writing, not fiction. Therefore, rather than labeling the columns as sections of a story, your students should label the sections what I know, what I want to know, and what I learned. They can then spend a few minutes filling out the first column with facts and information they already know about the subject they are researching. Then have your students ask themselves some questions about the topic they are going to research. What do they want to know? Have them make some notes in the second column. Now it is time to do the research. As your kids read, have them take notes in the third column, writing down information as they discover it. When it is time to write the report, have your students use the information on the paper as an outline for what they will say about their research.

3 THE DAILY REPORT

Whether your students are getting ready to write a fiction or nonfiction piece, you can use the daily report to help them generate ideas before they tackle writing the entire piece. Start with a review of the question words in English: who, what, where, when, why and how. Then, ask questions or have your students ask questions that begin with each of these words. For example, for a fictional piece you might ask, "Who appears in the story?" For a nonfiction piece ask, "Who was on the scene of the event?" After everyone has some answers to who question, move on to what questions. Working through the question words one at a time is similar to how a reporter writes an article. You may want to put your students into small groups or do this activity as a class, but make sure each person is writing about their own topic on their own sheet even if the whole class is coming up with the questions together. Once everyone has answered at least one question beginning with each word, ask students to go back and read what they have written. They can use these basic facts to outline the final piece and

then go through the process of writing it.

4 STAR POWER

Your students can generate ideas for a nonfiction paragraph with a simple star organizer. Have your students draw a large, five pointed star on one side of a piece of paper. If you have already talked about topic sentences, ask each person to write the topic sentence for their paragraph in the center of the star. If you have not talked about topic sentences, this is the time to do it. You could also have your students simply write the topic of the paragraph in the middle of the star. Each of the arms of the star is for the details that will support the main idea. Challenge your students to write one sentence in each of the arms. Once those sentences are written, the paragraphs are practically finished. Show your students how to start a paragraph by indenting and then copying the six sentences that are inside the star. Finish the paragraph with a concluding sentence and the writing assignment is complete.

THESE ARE ONLY SOME OF THE STRATEGIES WITH WHICH YOU CAN GET KIDS READY TO WRITE. USE THESE IN YOUR NEXT WRITING CLASS, OR CREATE SOME OF YOUR OWN. THE MAIN POINT IS TO GET KIDS THINKING ABOUT AND TAKING NOTES ON A SUBJECT BEFORE THEY HAVE TO WRITE A COMPOSED AND COMPLETE PIECE.

During these activities, make sure your class does not fret over grammar or spelling mistakes as these notes are purely for their own use. The final draft is when they should be careful about spelling and grammar. Getting your kids ready before they write does more than take away the fear of the blank page. It improves the quality of their writing and makes the words come more easily. If you have fun with these writing readiness ideas, your students will, too, and that is something every teacher should want!

Inspiring Students to Write through Audience Awareness

OFTEN STUDENTS ARE RELUCTANT TO WRITE BECAUSE THEY DON'T PERCEIVE THE VALUE OF WRITING: THEY THINK THEIR PAPERS ARE ONLY READ BY THE TEACHER FOR A GRADE.

In general, there is in most modern, industrialized nations a school/"real world" divide, where what one does in school is seen as wholly separate from the rest of life, which is alarming because of course school is meant to prepare people for life. This divide is very apparent in writing instruction: the writing done in school is seen as not like any "real" writing, such as love letter or employment inquiry, with a specific audience the writer cares about, and therefore will take care about organizing the communication to this audience: choosing words and crafting sentences to convey meaning in a precise way. The writing in school seems to take place in a vacuum because the students often have no sense of any real audience that they want to share the school writing with.

So how does the teacher create the sense of audience? Some methods follow.

HOW TO INSPIRE STUDENTS TO WRITE THROUGH AUDIENCE AWARENESS

1 LECTURE ON PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

Talk about writing not being just "notes to yourself." Discuss the differences between personal writing and writing for an audience: in notes to myself I have strange abbreviations, for example, that only I can decipher: "cfl on ref" means I should call someone about repairing the refrigerator. I wouldn't give that note to my husband if I want him to be able to actually read it and make the call. This is why we have to take trouble with our spelling and punctuation when writing for an audience. Furthermore, if I'm going to write the company who produced my refrigerator with the intent of getting

a replacement, I'm going to be even more careful about my language, and I'll have to write at some length to achieve my purpose.

2 WORK WITH A PEER

Share ideas with a partner: discussing ideas with a partner creates an automatic sense of audience. Once students are discussing their writing ideas with someone else, and getting feedback like, "What? Could you explain that?" or "Could you give me an example of what you mean?" they gain in understanding of where they need to think about their ideas more, express themselves more clearly, and choose words in a more precise manner, and this understanding carries over to their writing.

3 PEER REVIEW GROUPS

Have students work in groups to review each other's work. They should exchange papers several days before the due date then come in and discuss the papers in groups a day or two before the paper is due, focusing on each group member's paper in turn, with the rest of the group all contributing to the discussion. Remind the students they are there as readers of each other's work: their role is not to correct it but to respond as readers—what moved them, what confused them, and so forth. Often the students' critiques are very perceptive, and again a sense of audience is created.

4 VISUALIZE THE AUDIENCE

I usually visualize an audience when I'm writing, imagining I'm reading out loud to it. Often this audience is my writing group. While I'm writing, I'm led to asking myself such questions as "Will the group understand that particular image, or is it too personal and idiosyncratic?" or "Will that language offend them?" This visualization leads to revision and self-editing. If students are finding that their peer review groups are working well, have them remain in the same groups

for the duration of term. Tell them to imagine themselves in a dialogue with their peer review group as they are writing. In this way, sense of audience becomes internalized.

5 ASK A PEER TO EDIT WORK

Before handing in a paper, students can have a peer edit it for errors only. You might focus each time on a specific kind of concern: commas, past tense endings, and whatever problems seem to be particularly prevalent in the class. If students know their papers will be edited by a peer, they are more likely to work on the papers themselves at home, rather like tidying up before the cleaning person comes because having her find a mess is embarrassing. Similarly, we wouldn't want a reader to be exposed to a messy paper.

6 CREATE A CLASS PUBLICATION

There are some more advanced techniques an instructor may choose once students are comfortable sharing their writing. One is developing a class newsletter, done on desktop publishing, and publishing parts of student work in it periodically. If students know their work might be published, they will work to polish it. A simpler and more traditional way to do this is to read from student work occasionally at the beginning of class, using it as an example of some technique, such as use of dialogue. Both of these methods, the class publication or reading aloud, can be done either anonymously or revealing the students' identities. Either way, student consent should be gained first.

7 POST ONLINE. ASK FOR REVIEWS.

Have students post their work on a blog and ask for reviews. This can be done by setting up a class blog: students can volunteer to post their work, and their classmates can respond.

Again, some instruction is needed on the appropriate way to critique work: “It was great, I liked it” is not a critique but a compliment. However, “Your grammar stinks” is too general and inconsiderate to be useful. It can be helpful to give a couple comments on a work, one positive and then another suggesting an area for improvement. Remind students the goal is give the writer direction for revision.

8 ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO ENTER CONTESTS

There are many writing contests, such as the numerous ones offered by Writer’s Digest. Some of the prizes are significant, such as cash rewards or travel and entrance fees to conferences. Encourage students to enter: entering a conference also creates a sense of audience and purpose because students have to follow the rules on word count, topic, and so on faithfully to qualify to win.

CREATING A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE FOR WRITING ISN’T EASY: TOO OFTEN WRITING IS VIEWED AS A DULL EXERCISE REMOVED FROM REAL LIFE.

But by faithful application of a few strategies, the teacher can lead students into understanding that writing does have purpose and is meant to communicate with an audience.

Ranting, Preaching, Other No-No's: Teaching Audience Awareness

I'm going to put the topic of Hitler and the Nazis on my short list of forbidden topics in my composition classes.

Not that I find the topic unbearable, on the contrary, there is a lot of fine fiction and scholarly work on the topics of the Third Reich and the Holocaust—but this is published work by scholars or professional writers, people who have bothered to research their topic and who maintain some rationale perspective on it. In general, professional writers don't make ridiculous claims that Hitler was a great leader. However, nearly every time students are writing to the topic of leadership, someone makes this argument on the great leadership qualities of Hitler—and not just neo-Nazis, but rather ordinary students who clearly have not researched nor taken an objective look at the matter. If they had, they would probably determine that Hitler ruled by intimidation and hate-mongering, he broke all of his treaties with other nations, his own generals attempted to assassinate him, and at the end of his regime his country lay in ruins. By any rational measure, this is not great leadership. But that is of course the very issue—Hitler as a topic often is used to build an emotional argument rather than rational one. In fact, it usually precedes a rant that shows limited concern for the audience, as rants in general and “discussions” on a number of topics do. An essay and other rational, formal communication are the antitheses of ranting and preaching. However, a number of students persist in the belief that the essay is the occasion to spew their own emotional views on a topic. And when confronted, they often become hostile—or more hostile than they normally are—claiming their “freedom of speech” is being limited. How can this be addressed? Very carefully, but it is possible for the hostile ranter or self-righteous preacher to be drawn into the domain of rationale discourse.

PRINCIPLES OF DEALING WITH HOSTILE RANTERS

1 “FREEDOM OF SPEECH” IS RELATIVE

Students really know this, from everyday life experience. Yes, they are “free” to tell their girlfriends they are looking a little

chubby these days, but this is not without repercussions: their girlfriends are “free” to end the relationship. It's no different with written discourse. While students are “free” to rave about Hitler, their reader is “free” to put the essay down. Your classmates, having read the material, are also “free” to avoid you.

2 YOU HAVE AN AUDIENCE

Many times students don't fully understand they are writing to an audience, they seem to think they are writing in a vacuum, or to themselves or some extension of themselves. This may be in part the fault of the university: students in fact are just writing to “the teacher,” whom they may just see as a faceless suit. This problem can be combated by giving students a sense of audience by letting them know you, the instructor, on a personal level, a little, so they begin to think twice about ranting or preaching at you as they have come to value your opinion. This same effect can be achieved through having students work in peer review groups. When I've worked in a small group of fellow writers for awhile, reading and offering opinions on each other's work, I begin to care about their opinions, and have an understanding of what they like and dislike, and I'll think twice about gratuitously dropping the “F-bomb” in my work.

3 YOUR AUDIENCE IS NOT A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE

Again, this is relative: your teacher is, in fact, somewhat of a “captive” audience in the sense he is obligated by his contract to read your work. But he's about the only person in the world so obligated. And if your teacher only reads it because he has to, what about the other people who are not? Most audiences are not captive and free to put down the ravings about Hitler. Again, working with a peer group can help give this sense.

4 AVOID CERTAIN TOPICS

Certain topics, like religion, money, and politics, are generally not raised in conversation because they cause unease. In formal, academic writing, what are those topics that not only cause unease but also just cannot be written about rationally? Often, they are Hitler

and the Nazis, as mentioned earlier. Another topic I've discouraged students from writing about in an academic essay is the legality of abortion because the argument tends to be grounded in people's belief systems on the beginning of life, hard to argue rationally. There are other topics that are best to avoid, and may vary from class to class. Brainstorming with students the topics to avoid, coming to consensus on them, and then making up a list to hand around solves some of the problem.

5 SUPPORT YOUR ARGUMENTS

Reminding students they have to support their arguments also tends to curtail ranting as ranting is used, generally, as a substitute for a rationale argument. For example, the argument “Abortion is evil because no decent person would ever do something like that,” is a circular argument (and the probable beginning of a rant) because the support essentially just repeats the claim: “Abortion is bad because it is not good.” Marking student papers with comments like “Support this claim—how do we know it's evil?” can, along with follow-up discussions on appropriate support, get students out of the rant mode and into one of rationale discourse.

6 PURSUE YOUR DISCOURSE GOAL

Most writing has some kind of goal, as communication in general does. It may be as simple as getting your roommate to Please Wash the Dishes, but it has some goal. What is your goal in writing the essay (beyond getting a grade)? If it is indeed to prove that Hitler was a great leader, show me — through rationale argumentation — his accomplishments. Don't rant at me.

FOR VARIOUS REASONS, SOME STUDENTS DON'T GRASP THAT WRITING IS AN ACTUAL PIECE OF COMMUNICATION MEANT TO CONVINCE OR OTHERWISE IMPRESS A READER AND NOT AN OCCASION FOR THEIR OWN PERSONAL TIRADES. Getting them to take a breath, come down from their soap boxes, and engage in rational discourse isn't easy, but can be done.

An Issue for Society: Getting More Specificity Out of Writing

SOMETIMES WHEN READING THE ESSAYS OF BEGINNING COMPOSITION STUDENTS, I'LL READ AN ENTIRE PAGE AND THEN REALIZE I DIDN'T REALLY PROCESS ANY OF IT BECAUSE IT'S FILLED WITH VAGUE, ABSTRACT LANGUAGE LIKE "ISSUE" AND "SOCIETY."

In a way this is not bad. This shows students have recognized there is something called the academic register, that the language in their textbooks is different from what they use in the student union, and this is their attempt to emulate it. However, good writing, besides having a lot of academic words, also communicates to the reader and is direct and specific, not vague and abstract.

So the challenge becomes getting more specificity out of student writing while still encouraging students in their attempts to write more academic prose. There are some different methods to meet this challenge.

10 METHODS FOR GETTING SPECIFICITY OUT OF STUDENT WRITING

1 GIVE MODELS OF SPECIFIC WRITING

Many years ago, in one of my college classes, the instructor complained about something she called "distance" in my writing, a term I still am puzzled by because she never did really offer an example of what she meant by this or what she wanted instead. Predictably, I wasn't able to produce what she wanted. It is not enough to tell a student "Don't be distant" or "Be specific" because these terms are relative—what is "specific" to the student may not be to the instructor.

Showing examples of writing with the degree of specificity you would like to see in student writing would help the most.

2 ASSIGN SPECIFIC TOPICS

You know the saying borrowed from the computer industry: "garbage in—garbage out." If you don't want to read a bunch of essays on our "issues" in "society," don't assign topics with that language in them. Students will faithfully lift it from the topic and scatter it all over their papers. Instead ask students to write what they think about capital punishment, or the Occupy Movement, or the so-called obesity epidemic. When writing about these specific "issues," students are themselves in their writing forced into specifics: it's very hard to write in generalities about capital punishment because the topic itself demands examples and details of specific cases in specific locations.

3 QUERY THE STUDENT

Sometimes just asking students "So tell me what you mean here by 'issue'?" forces them to think about what they mean. Sometimes students haven't really considered that essays are meant to communicate meaning and not just fill up the paper with words. Asking students to articulate their thoughts starts the process of thinking about, then saying, and ultimately writing what they mean.

4 TEACH SPECIFIC VOCABULARY

Another reason ESL students in particular use vague language is they simply haven't developed the appropriate specific language yet. Teaching some of academic language related to the topic is very helpful: e.g., "criminalize," "constitutional," and "legality," for example, are words that students will need in their academic careers as well as help them develop the specific topic.

5 TEACH USE OF THE DICTIONARY/THESAURUS

Used properly, these are great tools for expanding one's vocabulary. Show

students how they can pull up an online thesaurus and find alternatives to "society" and other vague, over-used language.

6 HOLD DISCUSSIONS

Another reason students can ramble on at length in their papers without really saying anything is they don't know what to say or are afraid that what they say will somehow be "wrong." Having small group discussions on topics like the ethics and legality of same sex marriage makes students realize they do have things to say on these topics, and it's all right to say them—in a courteous manner. Ask that the students use their new vocabulary learned on the topic a set number of times: at least 3 new words per discussion, for example. The ideas shared in discussion can then transfer to writing.

7 SUGGEST DETAILS AND EXAMPLES

Sometimes when students seem truly stuck on writing on a topic like legalizing marijuana, I'll suggest that the student might consider an example, such as what happened under Prohibition, when the criminalizing of alcohol created a black market and increased organized crime, and if there might be parallels with marijuana. I offer this as something for the student to consider and form his or her own opinion on, if he hasn't considered it yet. Sometimes the student will reject my analysis of this part of the topic, stating that in this case marijuana and alcohol aren't comparable, and that's fine as long as the student is now writing and using details and analysis.

8 READING AND JOURNAL WRITING

A related reading should almost always be given prior to assigning a formal composition, with an informal journal response, in which students express their thoughts about the reading. Again, having them use the new

words from the reading in their journals will develop academic vocabulary and ability to speak on this topic and will give students ideas to write about in their formal essays, as well, both of which should help eliminate the vagueness.

9 HOLD INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES

Meeting with each student individually sometime during the term can also be of help in getting students to vocalize concerns about their writing and ask questions. In turn, the instructor can ask questions about unclear portions of the student's writing. This is particularly effective with the quiet student, who may be too shy to speak up in class or a small group.

10 TABOO WORDS

I've forbidden use of certain words in composition, telling students they have to think of something different and more specific: "thing," "nice," "bad," "issue," and "society" are big offenders and probably we can mostly do without these words, in any case. There's almost always a better choice.

VAGUE, PSEUDO-ACADEMIC WRITING IS USUALLY FAIRLY EASY TO PRODUCE — STUDENTS CAN USUALLY SCRAWL OFF PAGES OF IT WITHOUT MUCH REFLECTION.

But it can be painful to read and communicates very little. With some practice, teachers can get students into the habit of really thinking about what they mean and how to say it most effectively.

Everyone Knows That. Addressing Underlying Assumptions

Often, when reading student papers, I'll come across a statement that reads something like "the capitalist system is really the greatest economic system. Other systems eventually collapse because of the lack of competition," and then breezes on, without pausing to address the underlying assumptions of the argument or even acknowledging that there are assumptions.

When asked, student writers often become defensive, even going so far as to say, "I didn't address the assumptions because it's a given. Capitalism encourages competition, which is good. Everyone knows that." Does everyone really know that? Possibly—maybe indeed all the leaders and citizens of various communist states really know how great capitalism is but are just not saying, for a variety of reasons. Does this exempt the student from addressing the assumptions and making the argument? It does not. But convincing the student of that may be an argument in itself.

GETTING STUDENTS TO MAKE THEIR ARGUMENT

1 UNPACK THE ARGUMENT

For example, the statement "The capitalist system is the best because it encourages competition" is based on several assumptions:

1. Capitalist systems are competitive.
2. Other systems are not competitive.
3. Competition creates the best economic system.

To be addressed, the assumptions have to be made explicit—that is, they have to be "smoked out." To do this, the instructor can write the claim on the board and discuss what the author seems to be assuming the audience already knows and agrees with. Once the assumptions are written out, discuss whether it's fair to assume the reader really shares these beliefs to the extent they don't need to be discussed or if anyone might reasonably disagree. Students will usually begin seeing the point here, that assumptions do have to be addressed and supported. However, they may still be uncomfortable with the process as it seems like some things like "America is a great

country" are just a given and shouldn't be questioned.

2 ACKNOWLEDGE THE DISCOMFORT

When my student told me that it was "a given" that capitalism is the best system and really did not need to be addressed, I think what he was really saying was it is almost a matter of faith that should not be questioned. Capitalism, like the existence of God and the ultimate good of the nation, are sacred icons in U.S. culture: questioning them can seem almost sacrilegious. And while I can agree that questioning the support for God's existence is not the task of the writing classroom, we can certainly question the good of the capitalist system and demand support for its value when writing about it—at the same time acknowledging students' discomfort with this process. After all, no one said gaining an education would always be a comfortable or easy matter. And the reader may in the end agree with the author, that capitalism is indeed the best system. However, the writer is not excused from making the argument and must still go through the process of examining the value of the claim.

3 SUPPORT THE ARGUMENT

Once students have unpacked their claims of underlying assumptions, they'll realize the assumptions—and the claims themselves—need to be supported, once they are exposed, written on the board in bare, simple statements: "Competition is good." Discuss the kind of support that is needed to support claims like this. This leads to a discussion of what is appropriate support and what a valid and reliable source is: quotes from students' parents and their own personal experiences usually being less valid than research on the topic or opinions of experts.

4 DEVELOP THE HABIT OF CRITICAL EXAMINATION

From their own writing, this process of examining arguments extends into other areas. In going over course reading with students, ask them about the author's claims: What is her major argument in the reading? Does she support it well enough? What are its underlying as-

sumptions? Have students progress to the critical examination of each other's work, noting the assumptions and need for support in their peers' work. In this process, students will lose the habit of accepting claims on faith and begin critically examining them. In this way their thinking skills will develop along with their writing skills.

5 DEVELOP THE HABIT OF CIVIL DISAGREEMENT

Many people bemoan the disappearance of civility from American culture. A large part of this is our unfortunate inability to politely disagree on matters of any importance anymore: we either shout or clam up. We seem to be unable in many situations to "use our words," as mothers urge their toddlers to do when upset (rather than fists). It is the teacher's job to teach students how to use words to politely disagree: "Excuse me, but I don't see that you've supported that claim" or "I am going to have to disagree with that point and for this reason" are acceptable and even welcome methods to counter an argument.

6 QUESTION

Part of the process of critical thought is the habit of questioning. Have students take a statement that they accept as true—it can be as simple as "The sky is blue" to the more complicated "Capitalism is great"—and examine it. "Is that really true? How do I know that? Are there any times when it is not true?" With this process students lose the habit of accepting statements on blind faith just because they are posed as affirmative statements or they are in writing, which many people tend to do.

CRITICALLY EXAMINING ARGUMENTS AND QUESTIONING "GIVENS" IS A DIFFICULT PROCESS BECAUSE IT SEEMS "NATURAL" TO MANY PEOPLE TO ACCEPT WRITTEN STATEMENTS AS A "GIVEN."

However, this process is a microcosm of college study itself and develops students' critical thinking and writing skills, getting them into a lifelong habit of not accepting such "givens" as truly given but rather looking at the assumptions beneath.

Mix Them Up:

Teaching Sentence Variety

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS OF STUDENT WRITING IS ITS LACK OF VARIETY IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE.

Students seem to learn one basic pattern of subject, verb, and object and stick to that without fail. Reasons for this vary: students may lack the confidence to stray from this pattern, they may also lack knowledge of the different structures, connecting words, and transitions necessary to create sentence variety. In addition, although lack of sentence variety is certainly not an ESL problem alone, ESL students also lack a native speaker's intuition about what "sounds right" and may just be unaware in the first place of the monotonous nature of their writing. Finally, although this is a fundamental problem in student writing, students are reluctant to learn more about it, and teachers reluctant to teach, because it is so "boring," and oftentimes both groups think that as long as there are no "errors" in writing, it is "okay."

So the problem becomes first recognizing and then addressing the issue.

SO HOW DO WE ADDRESS THIS PROBLEM OF LACK OF SENTENCE VARIETY?

1 RAISE AWARENESS

Raise Awareness. Students must be aware of the problem before working on it. Write a short paragraph with only simple sentences or rewrite a paragraph from a famous text such as Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Read the paragraph aloud and invite comment. Ask what would improve it. Often students become aware of the concern in this way—when it's read aloud, they become aware of the lack of sentence variety, especially when it is a text they have encountered before. Then give out a revised—or the original—version of the same paragraph with sentence variety this time. Discuss the difference and why the revised (or original) version is better.

2 TEACH DIFFERENT SENTENCE STRUCTURES

Explicitly teach different sentence structures. At this point, after becoming aware of the issue, students are ready to learn different sentence patterns. There are three basic structures for students to learn, a good number for recall. Teach these three with examples:

simple sentence (subject-verb): 'I study at the university'.

compound (essentially two connected simple sentences): 'I study at the university, and I have many classmates'.

complex (a sentence with an independent clause and dependent clause). 'I study at the university because I want to earn my degree and enter a profession'.

3 TEACH CLAUSES

Clauses should be taught at this time, as well. A simple sentence is the same as an independent clause — it has a subject and a verb and stands by itself ('It's raining.'). A dependent clause has a subject and verb but does not stand alone ('Because it's raining'). This is a lot of material to cover and can easily take up a class period. Give students a chance to practice these sentences, perhaps by adding the practice to the paragraph of simple sentences already introduced: have students vary the simple sentences with compound and complex.

4 TEACH CONNECTING WORDS

Teach different connecting words. Show students that words like "because" and "so" and "but" found in compound and complex sentences are needed not only for variety but also for comprehension—a paragraph without these words not only lacks variety but also lacks connections between ideas. Again, this might be

demonstrated best by taking a well-known passage and removing all its connecting words and discuss how easy it is to understand and then comparing it to the original.

5 TEACH FRAGMENTS AND RUN-ONS

Teach the concept of fragment and run-on. A good time to teach fragments and run-ons, two common problems in student writing, is while teaching sentence structure because a fragment is often a dependent clause ('Because it was raining') and a run-on is two or more independent clauses run together without the correct punctuation ('It was raining so I took a coat but I got wet anyway because the bus was late so I was late for work...') Have students look at a paragraph of writing—perhaps student writing from a prior semester with the name removed—and have students find the run-ons and fragments. Discuss how to edit for them, which for fragments is often just to attach the lone dependent clause ('Because it was raining') to a nearby independent clause ('Because it was raining, I didn't ride my bicycle.')

6 PROVIDE EXAMPLES

Show students a paragraph with a variety of sentences. Point out how easy it is to read as the connections between ideas are clear. Do this throughout the semester—discuss how an author used sentence structure to his or her advantage. Often, as students develop an "eye" and an "ear" for this, they become more excited about perfecting their own prose and developing a sense of ownership of their writing. Developing this sense of the language and of good syntax contributes directly to students' sense of themselves as writers.

7 'WHEN YOU WRITE, INCLUDE AT LEAST...'

In giving assignments, tell students to include so many compound and

complex sentences: for example, “In your essay, include at least five compound or complex sentences.” Often students will not do something unless specifically assigned, and this ensures they are including sentence variety.

8 ‘READ & IDENTIFY...’

Have students look over a page of fiction that you bring in. Have them identify the fragments/run-ons on the page—the ones that are in the original, that is, not written in by you, the teacher. Discuss why the author might have written it that way. Does Stephen King not know a run-on? (He began his career as an English teacher, by the way!) Rewrite the paragraph, correcting the sentence “errors.” Discuss the stylistic reasons fiction writers, as opposed to academic writers, might use fragments and run-ons.

9 GIVE A QUIZ ON SENTENCE VARIETY

Give a quiz on sentence variety. Have students first revise an already-written paragraph with only simple sentences, and have students include sentence variety. Students should then write their own paragraphs, including at least one of each of the three types of sentences. Again, students often don’t bother to learn something unless tested.

10 ASSESS PROPERLY

Don’t forget to assess fragments and run-ons. Have students trade essays before turning them in, editing a peer’s work for fragments and run-ons. Also test them on their ability to mark and revise a paragraph with fragments and run-ons written in.

SO DOES TEACHING SENTENCE VARIETY HAVE TO BE “BORING”? ABSOLUTELY NOT.

By first calling attention to the problem and then by practicing editing in a variety of activities, student interest and motivation can be held. In addition, in developing their knowledge different type of syntactic patterns, students’ sense of ownership of the language, of themselves as masters of the English language, also develops, along with their writing skills.

Teaching Appropriate Research and Citation Methods

Almost every time I assign a research paper, I'll get completed papers turned in that list Wikipedia as a source and sometimes even Webster's Dictionary.

I have a required number of sources, so students apparently sometimes "pad" their numbers. But I think there is something else going on here. Students have the entire Internet at their disposal, after all, so certainly they can find more appropriate sources. But that may just be the problem: what's an appropriate source? Students today are exposed to an unprecedented glut of information, and have no way to evaluate it.

ELEMENTS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS TO TEACH

1 SELECTING A TOPIC

Encourage students to choose their own topics (within reason): something they have an interest or even passion in. This passion will carry them through the research process, which can be challenging, in a way that researching something they don't care about will not. And this is more authentic to the task, in any case. Why do professionals conduct research? Because they want to find out more about a topic. That should be students' reason, as well.

2 APPROPRIATE SOURCES AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

At the beginning of a research project, I always bring in a bag of print materials from home, everything from Time magazine to Applied Linguistics, and spread it out. Which sources are popular? Which are academic? Time is popular: it has no citations from experts, was written by staff writers, and has advertising. However, Applied Linguistics has no advertising but has citations and was written by contributing writers so is scholarly. Have students evaluate some material on their own and share their judgments with the class.

Also discuss places to locate scholarly articles: Google may not be the best way. An example I like to give is from my own experience doing some research on The Holocaust. If you Google "Holocaust,"

perhaps millions of search results come up, many of them are the home pages of hate groups whose mission is Holocaust denial. However, if you use a more select search engine like Academic Search Premier, available through many universities, most of the hits you get will be the work of scholars writing in their area of expertise. It is much better to get a select group of articles you can actually use than a lot of material of dubious quality.

3 COMPONENTS OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

Often students are at a loss on how a research paper is put together. I like to tell them it is much like the essay format they have already learned, although this time they are supporting their theses with research rather than personal experience. So, if, for example, I'm supporting a thesis that learning to play a musical instrument has numerous positive effects on academic performance, I would not rely on my personal experience to support this thesis. I'll need research from experts in music education. I might, however, use an anecdote from my experience to open the essay, much as I would in a more usual essay, and in the conclusion I would still summarize my main points. The major difference in content is the addition of research.

4 APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE

Another major difference between research writing and other writing students have done is the language. The tone of a research paper is more formal. The focus is on the research and its process and is therefore more impersonal. The use of the "I" voice is discouraged. In addition, the passive voice is used a lot because of this focus on process over the personal.

5 STANDARD FORMAT MLA/APA

It's also good when teaching the research paper to spend a day or two on standard MLA or APA format. I'll go over in-text citations, how to set up the bibliography, and let students pick which format they'd like to use, as long as they don't mix them up. I tell students that I consider learning MLA/APA a developmen-

tal process, and I don't count errors and subtract points but rather look for general correctness and whether a reader could locate students' sources if she desired--a major purpose of citing.

METHODS TO TEACH THE RESEARCH PAPER

1 SHOW A COMPLETED RESEARCH PAPER/EXAMPLE

Many students have never really seen a completed research paper. Imagine constructing a dress with no idea or model of what the finished product is supposed to look like. I'd refuse to do it. So I like to start the research process by pulling out one of my old research papers, showing its different components, discussing the process I went through in writing it, and passing it around. Even if they don't really understand the model paper's topic, students now have a sense of the construction of the paper.

2 USE OF KEYWORDS

Teaching students effective use of keywords is important because, as in my "Holocaust" example, student will often do a broad search that yields too many sources to sift through: "more" is not "better." Teaching students to narrow their topic with the use of "and"—for example, "Holocaust and the United States" will narrow the search to just those sources that mention both the Holocaust and the U.S., focusing then on the U.S. role. This gets students to focus their topics at the same time.

3 LIBRARY TRIPS

Many students have never been to a library—perhaps in their lives, having grown up in the digital age. Librarians can help students with not only locating sources but also on the research process itself, what the library's databases are, and how to search them.

THERE'S A LOT TO COVER WHEN TEACHING RESEARCH, FROM ENCOURAGING THE ORIGINAL DESIRE TO THE FINAL EDITING OF THE BIBLIOGRAPHY.

But the value yielded in exciting students about the research process and drawing them into the academic world is worth the effort.

Teaching Connotation

ONE OF THE HARDER THINGS TO TEACH IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION IS CONNOTATION, OR THE UNDERLYING MEANING AND ASSOCIATIONS OF A WORD.

This was driven home for me as a teacher one day last semester when I was teaching Maya Angelou's essay ironically titled "Finishing School," about her first work experience as an African American maid in a wealthy white home. In discussing the title and what it might mean, my students, mostly urban, first-generation minorities with at least some ESL background, were stumped until one student blurted out "It's where you'd go to be learn to be a woman." I replied, "Close, but actually, it's where you'd go to learn to be a lady." Again, confusion— isn't "lady" and "woman" the same thing? No, not exactly—they are denotatively, according to dictionary meaning, approximately the same—adult female. But the connotation, the underlying, secondary meaning, is different. One learns to be a lady from other ladies, it seems to me—to walk correctly and sit correctly and pour tea. One learns to be a woman from a man, in all probability, given the sexual connotation to the phrase.

Connotation is subtle, indirect, and to an extent, subjective, containing emotional content. Just the word "lady," for example, for many has pleasant associations, conjuring up images of their mother or favorite teachers. To others, however, the term "lady" might suggest confinement and oppression, with its association with rules and propriety and even social class. Although a difficult concept, connotation should be taught. Not understanding the connotations of words can lead to misunderstandings and embarrassment: while an extreme example, the mistake of calling a male "pretty" rather than "handsome" is one that a student wouldn't want to make.

SO HOW DO YOU TEACH CONNOTATION, GIVEN ITS DIFFICULTY?

1

Start by raising awareness on this issue "connotation." Teach the terms "denotation" and "connotation." Illustrate their relationship, perhaps graphically, with "denotation" and "lady" and "on top" and "connotation" on the bottom

with "lady's" connotations: polite, proper, neat, etc.

2

Illustrate the concept with a word with numerous synonyms, like "good-looking." Brainstorm the synonyms to "good-looking": beautiful, cute, pretty, handsome, etc. What is the difference in connotation between "beautiful" and "pretty"? What is the difference in connotation of "cute" when applied to man and a woman? A child? An inanimate object, like a house?

3

While reading, take note of the author's word choice and discuss connotation. "Why do you think he called his brother a 'clever' businessman in the second paragraph? What's the connotation of 'clever' here?" Other possible questions to ask: What are some connotations to "clever"? What are some other words that mean about the same thing as "clever"? How are their connotations different: what is the difference between being "clever" and being "intelligent"?

4

Watch a clip from a TV or movie, preferably related to the course reading, and take note of the characters' word choice. "When she said 'sorry' in that particular tone, 'sorry,' with the stress on the second syllable, does the meaning change from the usual meaning of 'sorry'? What is the connotation? Is she really sorry?"

5

Act it out. Take a short scene from a reading and act out a scene with a peer. Vary the connotation through varying sentence and word stress as above. How does even the meaning of "Good morning" change when said as "Good morning!", stressing the last syllable? How does the speaker feel about the morning?

6

Have students practice connotation in journals, using the same word in different contexts, or using synonyms of the same word, varying connotation. For example, challenge them to

write about a "smart" person and come up with different synonyms for "smart," varying the connotation appropriately: e.g., "She's intelligent because she understands math very well but also crafty because she can beat you at cards."

7

Have students read a newspaper article on an important topic, such as the upcoming national election. Note the author's use of connotation. How are key terms like "politician" used? Are the connotations positive or negative? Why? Can we judge something about the author's perspective on the topic from the choice of words and connotation?

8

Have a student describe something for the class: for example, the park near the school. Let others know his or her perspective by use of connotation. Describing it as "stark, bare, and lonely" sounds very different than "solitary, quiet, and peaceful," although it might apply to the same place. The class will listen then decide what the speaker's feelings about the place are based on the use connotation.

9

Or describe a person for the class. See if the class can tell your relationship to the person by your use of connotation. Is it your mother, girlfriend, little sister, professor? Does use of connotation vary with each?

10

Do it in writing. Students can describe something, like the classroom or the quad, using pleasant connotations. Then they can pass their papers to a partner, who will describe the same thing in negative terms, by changing connotation.

CONNOTATION CAN BE DIFFICULT TO TEACH BECAUSE IT IS SUBJECTIVE IN NATURE.

Not understanding how to interpret connotation and how to use it can lead to embarrassment and missing out on important information. There are, fortunately, specific elements to this important concept that can be defined, practiced, and taught.

Teaching Paraphrase Skills to Pre-university Students

LEARNING HOW TO PARAPHRASE ANOTHER'S WORDS IS DIFFICULT FOR ANY WRITER, EVEN MORE SO FOR NONNATIVE SPEAKERS WHO COME FROM COUNTRIES THAT DON'T HAVE ANY CONCEPT OF PLAGIARISM.

Many EFL students want to attend a U.S. university, however, they lack the academic skills to write college level papers which involve research. Even if you teach students who don't need to do academic research, paraphrasing and summarizing are beneficial tools for reading comprehension. Below are some ways to teach your students the valuable skill of paraphrasing.

HOW TO TEACH PARAPHRASE SKILLS TO PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

1 EXPLAIN PLAGIARISM

As many countries don't have intellectual copyright laws, many students don't understand the concept of giving credit to an idea that didn't come from them. Use concrete illustrations of "stealing" to help them see the connection. For example, you present the scenario that the students work together to make food at a restaurant. How would they feel if someone used their food without paying for it? Then move to more abstract notions, such as music and movies. How would they feel if someone used the songs which they wrote, and they never got any money for them? Finally, move to ideas and show them how stealing someone else's idea is related to stealing someone's work, even though there is no physical product that you can touch. Regardless if they agree or disagree that intellectual property deserves to be protected, explain that most universities feel this way and they can be in trouble if they don't take plagiarism seriously.

Next, it's important to explain that plagiarism can be both intentional and unintentional. Students can be pun-

ished similarly if they copy a paper from the Internet, copy a paper from another student, or use one or two ideas from a book and forget to cite them. Explain very clearly the consequences of what will happen if they get caught plagiarizing, for example, probation, failure, or even expulsion.

Students also should be aware how easy it is to get caught using information from the Internet. While many universities subscribe to sophisticated software which scans electronic documents, Google can be just as effective. Pretend that you wrote a paper and deliberately copy a sentence from a source online. Demonstrate to the students how you can type that one sentence using quotation marks in Google to find exactly where it came from.

2 USE MODELS

Students need to see many models and examples of what you expect them to do and not do. An activity that works well is giving students a short original text and reading it out loud together. Spend a few minutes discussing the article so that you ensure comprehension. Have a word count at the bottom of the paragraph so students know how many words were in the paragraph. Prepare another short paragraph which changes some words and sentences from the original text but would still be considered plagiarism. Have them read it individually and circle any words/phrases which are used both in the original text and paraphrase, and add up the number of words repeated from the original text. If it is more than 15%, tell them that this is plagiarism and would receive a failing grade. It may work best for you to prepare these paragraphs so you can control how many words are copied from the original.

3 EXPLAIN STEPS FOR PARAPHRASING

Next, show them an effective paraphrase of the text. Look at the para-

phrase first and go through line by line to see how the author took the original sentences and transformed them into a paraphrase. Your ideal model should include the following ways of sentence transformation:

- synonyms
- starting sentences with phrases
- combining sentences
- putting information in a different order (while still maintaining original meaning)
- deletion of extraneous details

By looking at the specific sentences, students will have a concrete example of how to convey the same meaning by using their own words.

The following are **practical steps for writing a good paraphrase**:

1. Read and reread the text until you have a good understanding of the main idea and the details.
2. Put the text away and write down what you remember without looking at the text
3. Compare the original with the paraphrase: Does it have the same meaning? Did you leave out any essential details? Do you use too many exact words?
4. Circle all of the words that are repeated in the original and your paraphrase. Are there any you could change?
5. If words are general and unnecessary to switch (for example: wall, or sit) then don't worry about switching them.
6. If there is a phrase that is either too difficult to translate or just really well-written as is, use quotation marks within your paraphrase. However, these should be used sparingly.
7. Names do not have to be changed.

4 WRITE A PARAPHRASE AS A CLASS

Writing paraphrases together allows you to verbalize the thought process students need to transform the text.

Start with individual sentences at first until students get the hang of it. An example dialogue between the teacher and the class could be as follows:

Teacher: The sentence is "The elephant is the only animal that cannot jump with all of its legs off the ground."

What is the main idea of this sentence?/

Student: Elephants can't jump.

Teacher: Good. Now what are the words we cannot replace in this sentence?

Students: Elephant.

Teacher: Right. We could say "the largest mammal" but that would be unnecessary words. Let's keep elephant in our paraphrase. What about jump? Can we replace jump?

Student: Leap.

Teacher: Good! What about off the ground?

Student: We could say "in the air."

Teacher: Excellent. Now, what about "only animal?"

Student: We can talk about other animals.

Teacher: Great. Now let's erase this sentence off the board and write our own paraphrase. It sounds like we've come up with: "Most animals can leap in the air except for the elephant."

After students have practiced sentences, it may also be helpful to do a class paraphrase of a short paragraph as well. Nursery rhymes work very well for this, especially if students are familiar with these nursery rhymes. For example, paraphrases of Humpty Dumpty may look something like this:

- Original text: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put humpty back together again.
- Paraphrase 1: While sitting on a wall one day, an egg had an accident which resulted in tragedy because no one in the kingdom could repair him.
- Paraphrase 2: The kingdom mourned the loss of Humpty because he was broken beyond repair when he fell from the wall.

5 PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

After writing paraphrases as a class, allow them to work in pairs to paraphrase individual sentences and slowly work up to short paragraphs. Longer paragraphs are really unnecessary to paraphrase as summarizing would be a more effective and realistic skill for longer texts. Other good texts that work well for paraphrasing are nursery rhymes (especially ones they're familiar with), famous quotations, and statistics. These will prepare students well for encountering quotes and facts in academic articles.

6 GAMES

Another way to motivate students and practice paraphrasing is to play synonym games. Games like Taboo work well and encourage students to develop their vocabulary and expand their language to explain words in other ways. For advanced students, you can play a variation of Taboo with sentences. Each student is given a short sentence which they must get the class to guess. They must use synonyms and other phrases to get their team to recreate the original sentence.

PARAPHRASING CAN BE A MOST DIFFICULT AND FRUSTRATING TASK, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE.

Learning to paraphrase will help students to increase their reading comprehension and be better readers and writers while preparing them for academic situations.

Comparing and Contrasting (And Writing, Too)

The combination of comparing and contrasting form one of the most popular essay forms in English classes today, but comparing and contrasting in and of themselves are not purposes for writing. Though we use comparing and contrasting often in our writing, the purpose of papers that use this type of organization should be to persuade, to inform or to explain.

With the understanding that comparing and contrasting are methods of organization and not reasons for writing, here is a straightforward way to teach your ESL class how to write a compare and contrast essay.

HOW TO WRITE A COMPARE AND CONTRAST ESSAY

1 CLARIFY THE PURPOSE

While the purpose of a compare/contrast essay is to persuade, inform or explain, the reasons one might want to do those things have more variety. Usually, a compare/contrast essay will aim to do one of the following 4 things:

1. To show that one item is superior to another like item (that Nintendo video games are superior to Sony video games)
2. To explain something that is unknown by comparing it to something that is known (explain the Presbyterian church government by comparing it to the U.S. government)
3. To show that two dissimilar things are actually quite similar or vice versa
4. To show how something has changed over time (the United States now as opposed to the United States before September 11, 2001).

2 GATHER SOME IDEAS

With any essay, it is helpful to invest some time in prewriting. The process of prewriting helps a person think about a particular topic and collect her ideas before trying to organize

them into a logical essay. A Venn diagram is a good way to prewrite for a compare/contrast essay. To make a Venn diagram, draw two circles of the same size with part of the circles overlapping. Each circle will represent one item that your student will compare in the essay. Label each circle for one of the two items, and then in each circle, write ideas about that item. Where the circles overlap, write ideas that are true of both of the items. If your students do this correctly, they will have all the similarities in the overlapping section of the diagram, and the places that do not overlap will have the differences. Then students should select three or four key points on which to compare the two items. If an essay contains more points than that it may become too lengthy or disconnected, so students should choose those points which will support their thesis most clearly.

3 ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE

There are 2 ways to successfully organize a compare/contrast essay.

The first structure is called block organization. With block organization, your essay will have four paragraphs. The first paragraph will be the introduction. The second paragraph will discuss all the points about one item. For example, give all the pertinent information about apples, their nutritional content, popularity and availability. The third paragraph will discuss all the points about the second item, in this case oranges, again examining their nutritional content, popularity and availability. Students should present the points about the two items in the same order in the two body paragraphs so that the essay has unity and parallel structure. The final paragraph is the conclusion. Block organization is most effective when there is not a large amount of information included in the essay. If a student tries to put too much information in block organization, the overall essay will seem disjointed and lacking in coherence.

The second method of organization for a compare/contrast essay is called point-by-point organization.

This structure will elicit an essay with five or six paragraphs depending on how many points of comparison your student has chosen. The first paragraph is again the introduction. The second paragraph will discuss one point and how it factors into both items. For example, one paragraph may discuss the nutritional content of both the apple and the orange. The third paragraph will then discuss another point about both items. Here it may examine the popularity of both the apple and the orange. The fourth paragraph does the same with the third point, and if there is a fourth point of comparison it is examined in the fifth paragraph. The final paragraph is again the conclusion. The advantage to point-by-point organization is the two items are examined simultaneously, and the reader gets a clearer value judgment for each point. Using this type of organization can make body paragraphs unusually short if students do not elaborate adequately, so encourage students to have at least four sentences in each of these paragraphs.

It is now time to write the essay, do some editing and revising and make revisions. In the conclusion, make sure your students have accomplished the goal they set forth in the introduction. They should have persuaded, explained or informed their reader adequately. They should remind the reader of their thesis and offer some final thoughts to round out the paper.

ONCE OUR STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THAT COMPARING AND CONTRASTING ARE NOT REASONS FOR WRITING BUT ARE MERELY ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES, THEY WILL WRITE STRONGER MORE COMPELLING PIECES.

Using a Venn diagram for prewriting will help the process, and then students can choose either block organization or point-by-point organization. A strong conclusion that echoes the thesis will complete a successful compare/contrast essay for your students.

As I Was Saying: How and Why to Teach Discourse Markers

DISCOURSE MARKERS ARE THOSE PARTS OF THE LANGUAGE THAT CONNECT ONE PIECE OF DISCOURSE, OR EXTENDED SPEECH/WRITING TO ANOTHER, SUCH AS AN INTRODUCTORY PHRASE OR ONE THAT RAISES A NEW POINT OR COUNTERPOINT.

These markers are important in connecting parts of the discourse as well as contributing to fluency. In addition, they guide the listener or reader in the direction of the discourse. For example, they signal the speaker's or writer's desire to open or close a conversation. They exist in both written as well as conversational language, and there are both formal and informal markers.

Students need to know discourse markers because they are important clues in the change of direction in a lecture, a conversation, or essay.

For example, it can be nearly impossible to enter or exit a conversation in American English without some discourse marker like "I just want to say..." or "Anyway..." (In my particular dialect of California English, the stress is on the second syllable in the latter, and there is a long pause following, indicating the speaker's desire to draw the conversation to a close or to move on to the next topic.)

It is also important to learn which markers are more appropriate to writing or speaking. More than once I've had a student turn in a paper with the conversational marker "Last time I checked" (as in "Last time I checked, we have free speech in this country"), when the more appropriate marker would be "In my experience..." or "To my knowledge..." in a formal paper. Knowing discourse markers is important to fluency and appropriateness.

Let's begin by identifying some common discourse markers and their functions.

COMMON DISCOURSE MARKERS IN SPEECH

- 1 As I was Saying... (to bring the conversation back to a former point)
- 2 Anyway... (to move on to another point or to close a conversation)
- 3 Here's the thing/The thing is... (to raise an important issue)
- 4 I'm glad you brought that up because... (to add onto a point just raised)
- 5 At the end of the day... (to conclude an argument)

COMMON DISCOURSE MARKERS IN WRITING

- 1 On the other hand... (to move to an opposing viewpoint)
- 2 In the case of... (to introduce an example)
- 3 In addition to... (to raise a new point or example)
- 4 From another perspective... (to introduce an opposing or different viewpoint)
- 5 In the final analysis... (to conclude)

clude)

TEN WAYS TO TEACH DISCOURSE MARKERS

- 1 Raise awareness. Call attention to discourse markers while reading or listening to conversations or lectures. Once students start paying attention, they'll be surprised how often these are used in both formal and informal situations. Just as an example, in the TV series, "Monk," popular in the first decade of this millennium, the title character Adrian Monk, a former police detective with a series of mental health concerns like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, has the verbal tic of using the marker, "Here's the thing," usually when introducing one of his obsessions to an unsympathetic audience. Playing a clip from a TV series like this to your class can get them to notice discourse markers in speech.
- 2 Have students look for discourse markers in readings. Call attention to how a writer opens a piece, moves on to another point, introduces a counterpoint, and concludes. Discuss how effective the writer is in the use of discourse markers and what might be more effective.
- 3 Have students match discourse markers to their meanings. After students have had some practice recognizing markers in both spoken and written discourse, have them match cards with the discourse marker on one card and its definition/function on other. In this way, students are clarifying and making explicit what they have implicitly learned through exposure.
- 4 Delete markers from extended prose. Have students make substitu-

tions. The next step would be to take a couple of paragraphs of written discourse, delete the markers, and see how well students fill in the deletions. Have them compare their answers with each other and then go over the paragraphs with a class as a whole. It can be surprising how many “right” answers students will come up with for each item: often more than one marker will work well in the same situation.

5

Jumbled words: have students create discourse markers out of a stack of word cards. Have them practice the markers they came up with in a couple of sentences.

6

Give out a list. Ask students to practice using the discourse markers on the list in conversation and writing. Challenge them to include at least three discourse markers in their next journal or other writing assignment.

7

Write some dialogue. Have students write a conversation between two friends in the cafeteria, or a husband and wife at dinner, and so forth. Give students the basic situation and perhaps topic of conversation (week-end plans, finals, etc.), and have them write the conversation. Tell them to include at least three conversational markers.

8

Perform the dialogue. Once their dialogues have been written and checked by the teacher, have volunteers perform. Have the class comment on the use of markers and how realistic they seemed: too formal or informal, for example.

9

Assign writing with markers. When giving their next essay assignment, have students include three markers per paragraph/10 markers per paper, or whatever number is right for you.

10

Have students edit each

other's work. Sometime when my writing appears in print, I'll notice problems with it I didn't see before, especially if I didn't have someone else look it over. Even experienced writers need a second pair of “eyes” on their work because we are not objective about our own work and tend to see what we think we wrote rather than what we actually wrote. Before turning in their papers, students should trade papers with a peer and edit each other's work, specifically focusing on markers. Have students circle areas of concern in peers' papers and discuss at the end. The role of a peer editor is not to correct work but to be a second pair of “eyes.”

DISCOURSE MARKERS COMPRISE A LITTLE-DISCUSSED BUT IMPORTANT AREA OF LANGUAGE.

It is through discourse markers that we move and signal the direction of the conversation or writing. Knowing their correct use will help students function well in English.

Journaling in Seven Out of the Ordinary Ways

OFTENTIMES WHEN PEOPLE HEAR THE WORD JOURNAL THEY THINK OF A DIARY THAT RECORDS SOMEONE'S DAILY ACTIONS, BUT A JOURNAL CAN BE MUCH MORE THAN THAT. A JOURNAL IS A PLACE TO WRITE AND EXPLORE IDEAS, THINK OF NEW THINGS TO WRITE ABOUT, AND KEEP TRACK OF THOSE GREAT IDEAS THAT ARE SO FLEETING.

Try some of the following activities with your students to broaden their understanding of what a journal is and what it can be used for.

COLLECT

1

A journal is a great place to keep a collection. No, not a collection of stamps or a collection of roosters, a collection of words. An easy place to start is to title a page of your journal "Words I Like." Your students can then add words as they learn them or encounter them. These are not vocabulary words they need to learn per se, they should be words that have some sort of appeal to your students. They may like words with an interesting sound like okey-dokey, onomatopoeia, or cellar. They may collect words with meanings that they like, for example, loved one, romance, or achievement. They may collect phrases that are funny or interesting to them like rain cats and dogs or a toothy grin. They may collect words that do all of these things. Then when they write, your students can look back on these words and use them in their own writings. They can also use these lists for vocabulary study to increase their vocabulary.

2

Your students can collect more than words in their journals, they can collect information, too. Have your students set aside one page and title it with a subject that interests them. It may be a page titled monkeys, robots, or eggs. Whatever the topic, have your students start collecting in-

formation on that subject and listing it on that page. This not necessarily a research project. They may encounter information about their subjects while watching television, surfing the internet or from other experiences they may have. At some point, encourage your students to use that information in their writing, either in a fictional piece or in a report of some kind. With all the groundwork done, they will have easy access to a large amount of information and will be able to dedicate more time to writing rather than researching.

OBSERVE

3

Everyone today has a busy life, and students are no exception. With our intense schedules, we often do not take time to just look at what is around us. A journal is a great place to just take a few minutes and observe the things around us. Challenge your students to do a one hundred observation list. A one hundred observation list is just what it sounds like: one hundred observations about one thing. One of the easiest things to make one hundred observations about is your hand. Since most people are right handed, tell your students to make one hundred observations about their left hands. These should not be pieces of information that they research like the bones in the hand or the muscle structure. They should be qualities they are able to observe just by looking at, listening to, feeling, smelling or tasting their hands (of course, washing hands is recommended).

After making observations about their hands or even instead of making them, you can have your students make observations about any object: an apple, a pen, their classroom. They will be challenged to pay more attention to what is around them as well as put those observations into words.

4

If weather permits, another observation challenge is to go outside, find a comfortable spot and observe the world around you. Allow your students some independent time to write about the world around them. You will be amazed at the details your students write about what they see, hear, smell and feel. They do not have to contain their observations to one spot, either. Have your students take an observation walk either in class or as homework. Ask them to write as they walk or to take in all the details and write about them when the walk is finished. The more detail they can give, the better.

REMEMBER

5

Many times, writers think their journals have to contain only the experiences they encounter each day, but a journal is also a place where a writer can remember her past. The personal narrative is one of the first places to start when trying to teach your students how to write a fictional story. We know our own stories better than we know anything else, so what better place to start writing than with our own lives. Sometimes simply starting with the phrase "I remember" is enough to get your students writing on and on, but sometime they need more than this. "I remember a time I felt proud... I remember a time I was angry... I remember when I was excited..." Start your students' memories with an emotion. We are so closely linked with our emotions, we remember feeling all different kinds of ways. Moreover, when we feel those emotions again, we can remember what we did or what we were thinking. These reminiscences are good for the times you just want your students to write without interruption and without criticism. Later, after your students have gotten their stories on to the paper, is the time to revise, edit and adjust.

6

Closely linked to the idea of past emotional experiences is writing about people from our pasts. All of us have people that were significant to us whether they impacted us positively or negatively. Challenge your students to remember someone from their past – perhaps someone they loved and lost, perhaps someone they wish they could get revenge on, perhaps someone they simple lost touch with but would like to find again. Have your students write a letter to that person knowing that the letter will never reach him or her. This may free your students in a way they could not otherwise experience and may even help them work through some difficult times of their pasts.

SO MUCH MORE THAN THAT.

These activities are only a few of the many creative ways you can use a journal to encourage writing in your students. Let these be a starting place for you and your class, and look forward to the many things your students have to say.

PLAN

7

Your students can use their journals to plan future pieces of writing. Start by explaining the words character, setting and conflict. These terms are simple for your students if you tell them that the character is the person in a story, the setting is where and when it happens, and the conflict is the problem that the character has to face in the story. Give your students an example of story planning by listing a character, setting and conflict on the white board. Then do one or two more with your students supplying the information. Then challenge your students to a five-minute race. Have your students list in their journals as many sets of character, setting, conflict as they can in the five-minute time limit. After the race is complete, count the examples and declare a winner. Now show your students how you can go to that plan and determine the resolution to the conflict. Remember that the character should solve his own problem rather than having someone else come and solve it. Now give your students five to ten minutes to go back to their sets they made in the five minutes and add resolutions to each of them. Now have your students plan their own futures. “One day I hope to... I will... someday I am going to...”

YES, A JOURNAL IS A GOOD PLACE TO RECORD OUR DAILY ACTIVITIES AND THOUGHTS, BUT A JOURNAL IS

5 Creative Ideas to Get Your Students Writing About Themselves

Have you ever seen your students sitting in front of a blank notebook with a still pencil in their stiff hands? Nothing on the page and only a blank look on their faces? For some students, giving instructions alone is not enough to get them writing.

You can give your students some direction, and that will often be enough to help them get past the barrier of writer's block. However, the most successful prompts are not about faraway places and people unknown. The best way for your students to write is to write about the things that they know, their experiences in life, themselves.

HOW TO GET YOUR STUDENTS WRITING ABOUT THEMSELVES

1 I REMEMBER...

Sometimes all it takes to get your students writing about themselves are two simple words: I remember. Have your students write these words at the top of their page and simply start writing. They may remember and choose to write about yesterday or an event ten years ago. Either way, they will be writing about themselves, and that is the goal of this exercise. If your students need a little more encouragement or you want to take the exercise a step further, tie the memory to an emotion. Remember a time you were angry and write about that. Tell me about one time when you were frightened. When we have strong emotions, we remember the details of our experiences. If you want, have your students write about a time they felt proud or confident or silly. Any of these emotions will bring the details of the moment back to your students. Partner your class and let them talk about the times they felt these emotions before setting them down on paper. Discussing with a partner or a group will bring more and more memories to the forefronts of their minds which will free them to write more and more on the paper.

2 I BELIEVE...

Do you want another way to get your students writing about the things they know? Ask them to start with the

words "I believe..." Everyone has beliefs. Their beliefs may be religious, philosophical, or scientific, for example. Asking your students to write about what they believe is sure to get the creative juices flowing. As with all the writing prompts given here, the intention is to get your student writing something. This type of writing is not meant to be organized or persuasive or even logical at first. This activity will simply help your students get some ideas on the page. From there, your students can take what they have written and organize and develop it to fit whatever assignment you have for them.

3 A TREE GROWS IN CLASS...

Many cultures around the world place a high value and sometimes even worship their ancestry. Asking your students to write about their families, therefore, may tap into the spring of their creativity. Explain to your students the concept of a family tree. After reviewing the vocabulary for family members, ask each of your students to write about one or more people on that tree. How much do they really know about their families? How have their ancestors influenced the people that they are today? You will be surprised what your students will be able to tell you about their families. Once they have some general information written about each of the branches of their family trees, ask your students to compare and contrast themselves with one of their ancestors or one of their siblings. Ask them to make connections between who they came from and the person they are today.

4 TRAVEL DIARY...

Spring break or a school trip may be the perfect opportunity to assign your students a travel diary. For each day of vacation, ask your students to write about the place they are visiting. They should include how many miles they travelled and what sights they saw that day. You can also have students write about any unusual people they either saw or talked to. When your students return from their trips, they can compile their diary pages into a special binding. Give each student an 11x17 piece of brown craft paper, and have him or her mix up some brown and

gray watercolor paint. They should then paint an irregular pattern over the paper. Once it dries, have them crumple it into a ball and unfold it. This should give the paper a worn, leather-like appearance. They can then decorate the cover with postage stamps from around the world or with rubber stamps and ink to look like passport stamps. Your student can staple their diary pages inside their travel worn cover and have a unique memory of their trip. Students who did not travel do not need to be excluded, either. Have them write about an imaginary vacation or a dream vacation as if it really happened.

5 FREE WRITE...

Are your students old enough and mature enough to understand the meaning of "stream of consciousness"? If so, try out the technique of freewriting with your class. The first time your students freewrite, designate a short period of time, for example, three to five minutes. Challenge your students to write whatever is going through their heads during that time. The goal of freewriting is to never let your pen or pencil stop moving across the page, so make sure your students understand this before starting the activity. In freewriting, explain to your students that grammar and content are not important. What is important is to write without stopping. Your students are sure to share some personal information when they write their stream of consciousness, so reassure them that their freewriting is private as well. This is a challenging activity even in one's native language, so do not let your students become discouraged if they struggle. Point out the success they have achieved and challenge them to write for a longer time with the next try. Then have your students use what they have written to compose a piece of writing that is more organized and refined.

YOUR STUDENTS HAVE A LOT TO SAY, THEY MAY JUST NEED A LITTLE PUSH IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION TO GET THE PEN MOVING ACROSS THE PAGE.

With these writing activities, your students will get the push they need to get started writing about themselves, their lives and their beliefs. No matter what they write, it is sure to be enlightening.

Dear My Dear: 6 Letters

All ESL Students Should Write

MOST ESL TEACHERS, AT ONE POINT OR ANOTHER, REVIEW WITH THEIR STUDENTS HOW TO WRITE PERSONAL AND BUSINESS LETTERS, BUT THAT ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH.

Your students should have an opportunity to practice different types of letters, in this case friendly letters, for when they are required to write one in the future. Here are six types of friendly letters you should review with your students.

HOW TO REVIEW SIX TYPES OF FRIENDLY LETTERS WITH YOUR STUDENTS

1 FRIENDLY LETTER

Though not the most popular form of communication in the twenty-first century, writing letters is still a handy form of communication from time to time. The art of personal communication through letter writing does not have to be lost. Often, a friendly letter is in response to another letter. If your students are writing this type of letter, politeness says they should thank the person for their letter and answer any questions that person may have asked. By doing this, the writer shows that he or she appreciates what the other person has written. When deciding what to write in this type of letter, challenge your students to think about information or topics that would interest both the writer and the recipient. In addition, including as much detail as possible will make the letter more interesting. Your students may want to include some questions for their readers, but make sure they understand that too many questions are frustrating for the reader.

2 THANK YOU LETTER

Social convention often requires a thank you note when someone does something nice for you or gives you a gift. Help your students understand that thank you notes are a cultural expectation, and they should practice

writing thank you letters so they are comfortable writing one in the future. Similar to the friendly letter, a thank you note should express thanks for the action or gift that the writer received. Rather than typing the note and using blank paper, thank you notes are most often written on decorative cards by hand. A typed thank you note seems too cold and insincere to the reader.

3 LETTER OF CONDOLENCE

Though unfortunate, your students will find themselves in situations in which they must send a letter of condolence. This type of letter expresses sympathy to the reader who has been in a difficult situation. Most often that situation will be the death of a loved one, but your students may also find themselves writing this kind of letter if, among other reasons, someone is sick, has lost his job or has an accident. Your students should start the letter by saying why they are writing and then follow with their feelings about the situation. When your students write this type of letter, they must walk the thin line between expressing condolence and increasing the readers sorrow. Again, this will be a situation in which cultural sensitivity will come into play and where the writer should be highly sensitive to the reader's predicament.

4 LETTER OF INVITATION

Sometimes, whether for a party or other event, your students will have to write a letter of invitation to someone. When writing this type of letter, it is most important to be specific in the details of the event and to express to the reader what you want from them. Your students may need to know how many people will attend a certain event, if a guest needs special accommodations or any of a number of other bits of information. Your students should make sure they are giving and asking for all the information they need from this type of letter while keeping the tone upbeat and friendly.

5 LETTER OF REGRET

The letter of invitation is only half of the equation. If your students were to receive a letter of invitation, they need to know that they are expected to answer that letter. When they are unable to attend the event, they will have to write a letter of regret. This is most important for formal situations for which they have received formal invitations – a wedding, a graduation and the like. When writing this type of letter, make sure your students include a thank you for the invitation as well as the reason they will be unable to attend.

6 LETTER OF COMPLAINT

The challenge here is to be honest about your disappointment without being rude or inappropriate. The writer must be able to express negative things in a positive way. Not only will this type of letter challenge your students' abilities to compose sentences and paragraphs, it will also help them understand what is culturally appropriate when complaining.

THERE REALLY IS NOTHING LIKE A HAND WRITTEN LETTER, AND THERE ARE MORE OCCASIONS ON WHICH TO WRITE THEM THAN ONE MIGHT THINK AT FIRST GLANCE.

By giving your students practice with various types of letters, they will be better prepared for the situations in which they will need to write to the people they care about and do it in English.

How to Teach Argumentative Essay Writing

WHETHER YOUR STUDENTS ARE PREPARING TO TAKE STANDARDIZED TESTS OR YOU ARE WALKING THEM THROUGH HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY, THE PERSUASIVE OR ARGUMENT ESSAY IS A STANDARD STRATEGY TO COVER.

When the purpose in writing is to persuade another of your opinion, using the correct logic and following the correct layout are very important, and your arguments, if not written clearly and with support, will fall flat. When it is time to walk your students through the process of persuasion, follow this guideline on the argumentative essay to achieve a convincing result.

HOWTO: TEACHING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

1 TOPIC CHOICE

When teaching a persuasive essay, you should make sure your students are clear on its purpose – to persuade or convince the reader that the position the writer takes is correct. This differs from other types of essays where the goal is to present information or show how something is similar to or different from something else. The persuasive essay is all about changing someone's mind. Some topics are better suited to this type of essay, topics that can be logically argued with facts, examples, expert opinions or logical reasoning. Still, they must be a topic on which someone can take an opposing viewpoint. Some writers may be tempted to choose a matter of preference or faith, but these do not make good topics for the argument essay since it is highly unlikely the writer will be able to alter the beliefs of the reader, so encourage your students to stay away from issues of faith or preference, like 'heaven is or isn't real' (since they cannot prove it,) and to gravitate toward questions they can support, such as 'students should be able to choose their own college courses'.

2 THE OPPOSITION

Though making assumptions is usually a bad idea, your students should start the argument essay with some assumptions about their readers. Since convincing the reader is the primary purpose of the essay, your students need to think about the person for whom they are writing, their audience. Knowing the audience can make the difference between a tolerable and a compelling essay. Your students should assume that the writer disagrees with the positions they are taking on their topic but they should not assume that the reader unintelligent. There would be no purpose to writing this type of essay if the reader already agreed with the writer's position, but if the writer treats the reader as though he is less intelligent, the piece will have a condescending and offensive tone throughout. It is also important that your students think about why the reader holds the opposite point of view. This will be very important when it comes to writing the refutation.

3 THE ARGUMENTS

To prepare to write the persuasive essay, challenge your students to make two lists. One list should be reasons that they hold their opinion (or the pro side of the argument), and the other list should be reasons that the opposition holds their opinion about the issue (or the con side of the argument). If you are teaching a simple argument essay, the list of pros should be longer than the list of cons. If this is not the case, you may need to encourage your student to change to the other side of the argument.

Your students can start with any style introduction that seems most effective, but the body of the essay should be rather straightforward. The writer should choose between two and four of the most convincing arguments and write one paragraph about each. It is very important that he supports his opinion with objective proof – facts,

statistics, typical examples, and opinions of established experts – and not just statements of his own beliefs and opinions. Without this type of support, the argument will not be convincing. If you are teaching advanced students, this might be a natural place to look at logical fallacies and how to avoid them in this type of essay. Once the body paragraphs are written, have your students arrange their arguments in order – weakest to strongest – and end with the most compelling of the arguments.

4 THE REFUTATION

In this type of essay, just as important as arguing your points is arguing against the points of the opposition. When writing this type of essay, your students should not only show why they are right but also why the opposition is wrong. This part of the essay is called the refutation. Looking at the list of the reasons against their arguments, tell your students to choose the strongest point the opposite side might present. Then challenge them to think about why this argument is invalid. A strong refutation will address the argument and prove it is not logical, there is a better answer, or it is not true. Your students should spend one paragraph on the refutation, and it should come after the arguments in favor of their positions on the topic.

WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTS OF THE ESSAY FINISHED, YOUR STUDENTS SIMPLY NEED TO ADD A CONCLUSION TO FINISH STRONG.

They will want to remind the reader of their points and end with a call to action. The overall tone of the essay should be logical and not emotional or manipulative. If your students are able to write this way, their essays will be convincing and effective.

Less is More?

How to Teach Summary Writing

Teachers at times tend to believe that summary writing is easy, and students should be able to do it without being taught. Teachers will sometimes make an assignment to “read and summarize the article,” for example, without much direction.

However, summary writing isn’t that simple. In fact, it’s a difficult academic skill. As with any new skill, especially a writing skill, students need to be explicitly taught.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A SUMMARY?

A summary is a long text distilled to its essentials, the key points worth noting, without examples and details. The specific form, the sentence structure and the vocabulary, has been changed, but the main ideas remain.

WHY TEACH SUMMARIES?

Again, summary writing doesn’t come naturally, and when told to summarize, students will often either copy verbatim, write long, detailed “summaries,” or write excessively short ones missing key information. This occurs because students don’t really know what a summary is or how to write one. If they have been told how to write one, it is usually in nonspecific terms, such as “Put the story in your own words.” This is not technical enough to be helpful. Summarizing is actually a specific and technical skill.

Writing a summary is an important skill that students will use throughout their academic careers. In addition, summarizing improves reading skills as students pick out the main ideas of a reading, it also helps with vocabulary skills as students paraphrase a reading, altering the vocabulary and grammar as they do so. In addition, critical thinking skills are improved as students decide on the main ideas of the reading to include in the summary. Finally, writing and editing skills are improved as students draft and

edit the summary. Students can also work with peers throughout the writing and revision process, so it also helps with cooperative learning. Therefore, many benefits exist to teaching summarizing skills.

STEPS TO TEACHING SUMMARY

1

As a class, read a short selection. This can be either a short essay or part of one. It should be short enough that students can read it in the first part of your class session. Some suggestions are “short –short stories” or biographies of important people like Dr. Martin Luther King. Other suggestions are short expository readings from the fields of science, education, or history.

2

Have students underline the main ideas as they read. Take this opportunity to talk to the students about the importance of marking text as a study skill. They can use this marked text as an outline to review later for quizzes.

3

Once students have their texts marked up, open the discussion of summaries. Discuss what it is. Offer a vivid example of its importance: for example, “How long is the movie Titanic? Yes, over three hours. If someone asked you tell her about Titanic, would you talk for three hours? Of course not! What would you do?” This gets students focused on the notion of summarizing as something they actually do in their everyday lives.

4

Provide an example. The teacher might consider also handing out an example summary of Titanic or something students have recently read—not the reading they are working on

in this lesson—as a model of a summary.

5

Discuss the ideas. At this point, discuss the ideas students underlined in their readings. Call on students to share the main ideas they underlined and write them on the board.

6

Focus on 5 main ideas. As a class, decide on the top five main ideas for the summary.

7

Work on ordering the sentences and connecting them with transition words. Since the main ideas are drawn from different sections of the text and distinct from each other, it is important to connect them. This is a good time to teach some transition words of time or of addition.

8

Paraphrase the sentences. An important concept related to summarizing is changing the summary significantly from the original. Model changing the grammar and vocabulary of the sentences, and have the student help with this as much as they can. This is a good way to help expand their vocabularies. The teacher can refer back to the Titanic example at this point as needed: “Would you use the exact words as the film when describing it to your friend? Or would you use different words that mean about the same thing?”

9

Teach the language of summaries. At this point, the teacher might teach students some of the formulaic language of academic writing, such as the phrase “According to (the author),” to lead into the main idea and the summary.

10

Finalize. Put any needed final touches on the summary, such as an overarching idea to lead with. Also teach concluding sentences that restate the main idea.

11

Give out another short reading selection. Have students work on reading and marking the selection and then writing their summaries by themselves this time or in pairs.

12

It might be helpful at this point to instruct students to first do the reading and marking, and then close the reading, and without referring to it, tell their partner what it was about. The partner can take notes on the re-telling, and then they can compare it to the original, making adjustments, such as adding missed main points or deleting details.

SUMMARY WRITING ISN'T EASY AND ISN'T A SKILL THAT COMES NATURALLY.

However, it is a skill worth the time and effort as students will use it throughout their academic careers and the benefits it provides in reading, writing, and critical thinking skills.

How to Teach Correspondence to ESL Students: Business Letters

We live in an age of fast-paced, frequent communication. Texting, e-mail and instant messaging often assault us from every side. Even so, the classic means of communicating, business letters, personal letters, etc. are still important for students to learn.

HOW TO TEACH BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE TO YOUR ESL STUDENTS

1 THE BUSINESS LETTER

You will want to remind your students of the reasons to write a business letter that they generated in the first brainstorming activity. You can use one of their ideas if you like, but having your students write to a local business that they frequent is a way to support your community and help your students express themselves at the same time. If you do not want your students to write to a local business, you may want them to write to a larger company that makes a product that they like. The advantage to doing this is that your students may receive correspondence in return with coupons or some other useful item included. If you decide to do this, you can create a bar graph to track the number of students who received return correspondence though they should not expect to receive a letter in return. You could also make a place in your classroom to post any return correspondence students have received for the rest of the class to read.

Because business letters are more formal, encourage your students to type the final drafts of their letters. If you have the resources available in class, you can have students type during their writing workshops. If you have a computer lab at the school, your class can type their letters from the beginning. If neither of these are a possibility, have your students write their letters in class and then type them for homework. The structure of a business letter will be different from that of personal letter, and you will want to make the differences clear to your students. They will still begin with a return address and date, but this time they will be justified on the left side of the page. After the date, students should

skip a line and then include the name of the person to whom they are writing, Mr. or Ms. and then first and last name. Below that, students should include the recipient's address. All of these pieces will be in line on the left side of the page. Students should then write the greeting, again left justified. This time they will address their letter with Mr. or Ms. followed by the person's last name and a colon. This colon is different from the comma used in a personal letter. Another difference between personal and business letters is the paragraph structure. In a personal letter, your students follow the convention of indenting each paragraph. With a business letter, instead of indenting each paragraph, they will be left justified, but your students will skip lines between the paragraphs to separate each one. Again, give your students class time to write the message and then move on to the closing. The closing will be left justified like the rest of the letter, but you will want to take some time with your class to brainstorm closings appropriate for a business letter. The most common closing will be sincerely, but your students can also use best regards or any other closings you think are appropriate. Finish the business letter with a closing, usually sincerely. After the letter is printed, your students should sign their name by hand.

Now that your students are finished with the letter itself, it is once again time to address the envelope. This time you should give them a larger, business envelope. The full sheet of paper on which they typed their letters should be folded into thirds and then will fit perfectly into the business envelope. Most business letters will have a printed envelope, but this may be beyond what you want to do with your class, especially with younger students. You can have your students address the envelope the same way they did for the personal letter, affix the stamp and mail.

2 STEP OUT FURTHER

If you are in a setting where you can take field trips, round out your letter-teaching unit with a visit to your local post office. This is a great listening activity if the postmaster or mail carrier gives your students a tour and explains how

mail is processed. It is also an interesting lesson in culture for students from other countries. Though you can mail a letter anywhere in the world, the way the mail is processed may be different from country to country, and your students will find it interesting to see the differences. You can also use a classroom post office to encourage your students to keep writing to one another.

3 THE MEMO

A final type of correspondence to teach your students is the memo. The memo is still for business purposes but is shorter and follows different conventions than the business letter. A memo is used between employees in one company and not for colleagues outside the company. Like the business letter, the entirety of the memo will be left justified and paragraphs will not be indented. A standard memo will have preprinted labels or places for the writer to insert his information. It will look something like the following.

Memo

To:

From:

Date:

Re:

A colon should follow each of the preprinted labels, and the message of the memo will go below the preprinted section. If you decide to have your students write memos, you may want to print a memo template for them and just have them fill in the necessary information. There are many memo templates available with word processing programs and on-line. When your students write memos, they should write them to another person in the class. You will need to explain that re: means regarding and that this is where they should state the purpose or topic of the memo in a word or two. A memo does not need an envelope, but your students should give the memos to you and you should distribute them to the recipients.

IN A WORLD WITH COMMUNICATION THAT MOVES AT THE SPEED OF ELECTRICITY, TRADITIONAL FORMS OF CORRESPONDENCE STILL REMAIN IMPORTANT.

How to Teach Correspondence to ESL Students: Personal Letters

The following will take you step by step through the process of teaching these types of correspondence to your ESL students.

HOW TO TEACH CORRESPONDENCE TO YOUR ESL STUDENTS

1 GET READY

If you, one of your students, or someone else you know has a stamp collection, bring it in for your students to examine. Stamps from around the world are interesting, and each student will be able to feel a part of a larger whole when seeing stamps from his home country. After viewing the stamp collection, encourage your students to bring in stamps they have at home from their native countries or from relatives around the world. You can have your own classroom stamp collection on a free bulletin board, and you can post a map of the world in the center with yarn connecting the stamps (posted around the outside of the map) to a pin on the country from which the stamps came. If you teach math as well as English, you can also have your students calculate, based on the map key, how many kilometers (or miles) the stamps have travelled to get to your classroom.

Now that you and your class have discussed how letters travel from one place to another, brainstorm a list of reasons someone might write a letter. The reasons will range from applying for a job to saying hi to a friend who has moved to supporting someone doing volunteer work in a foreign country. After your class has compiled a list, explain to them the difference between a personal letter and a business letter. Personal letters are friendly and are mainly for social reasons. Business letters, on the other hand, have purposes beyond friendly correspondence. Because they are business related, they must be more formal, shorter and more focused in content. With your class, determine which of the purposes they listed would be appropriate for a personal letter and which would be appropriate

for a business letter.

2 GET THE PIECES IN PLACE

Now that your students are thinking about letters and why they might write them, it is time to look at the pieces that make up letters. You may want to have two samples that you can display at the front of the classroom during this discussion, or photocopy a personal and a business letter for each of your students to examine at their desks. While looking at the letters, make a list of the pieces necessary for each letter: return address, date, recipient address, greeting, message, closing and signature. Ask your students why each piece of the letter is necessary. What purpose does each serve? What would happen if you left out one of the pieces?

3 THE PERSONAL LETTER

Start teaching correspondence with a personal letter. Your students, especially if you are teaching younger children, are probably more familiar with this type of letter. Remind them of the types of letters you would write in this style using the list you brainstormed earlier. After that, have them think of a person they might want to write a personal letter to. For this exercise, encourage your students that they do not have to write to someone who lives far away. They can write to someone as close as the same town. You will probably want to encourage them to write to a relative or friend, but you can also have them write to one another. If you choose this last option, you may want to mail all the letters yourself on the same day and have the students count the number of days it takes for the letters to come to their house. For the math teachers in the mix, this is the perfect opportunity to use a bar graph to summarize how soon the students in your class got each of their letters.

Once your students have decided who they will write their letters to, have them begin with the return address. They will hopefully know their own address and should start with that in the upper right hand of the pa-

per. Below their address, they should put today's date. On a personal letter, the next piece is the greeting. Most personal letters start with "Dear (insert first name)," and it is important that your students remember the comma after the name of the recipient. They may then begin their message on the next line after indenting. Give your class time to write their greeting and then finish with the closing. The closing should be in line with the return address, that is on the right side of the page. Help your students compile a list of the closings they can use in a personal letter. They may include love, best wishes, and sincerely among others. They should include a comma after the greeting and then sign their name. Their personal letters are complete.

It is important when teaching younger children about letter writing to include addressing the envelope. Give them envelopes to use for their letters. You may want to avoid using business envelopes for personal letters to help your students further distinguish the two types of letters, but that will be up to you. Folding will be easier if you use business envelopes which are larger than personal envelopes. Whatever you decide, your students should put their return address in the upper left hand corner of the envelope. Unlike with the letter, they should start by putting their name first and then their address. The date does not go on the envelope. Stress to them that people often write their return address on the back of the envelope, but this is not the correct way to address an envelope. The address of the recipient will go in the center of the envelope: name and address. Stress to your students the difference between the recipient's name on the letter and on the envelope. On the letter itself, they probably used the person's first name only, but on the envelope they must use first and last name.

GIVE YOUR STUDENTS A STAMP TO PUT IN THE UPPER RIGHT CORNER OF THE ENVELOPE AND THEY HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED A PERSONAL LETTER.

Comma or Semicolon?

Tips on Teaching Basic Punctuation

One of the best things about second language learners is that they eat up grammar and often enjoy learning about the nuances of practical usage. One area that students seem quite baffled about is punctuation rules. There are a lot of rules, but if you follow these tips on teaching the basics of punctuation, your students will go from befuddled to enlightened.

HOW TO TEACH BASIC PUNCTUATION

1 OUR FRIEND, THE COMMA

You really don't have to be an expert writer or a college graduate to be able to punctuate a sentence correctly. Language learners in particular tend to overlook punctuation because they have so many other aspects to focus on and sharpen. Grasping basic punctuation rules, like when to use a comma, will not just serve students well in writing, but also in reading, testing, and believe it or not, speaking. So what is the big deal about this little guy, the comma? Well, it is often overused, misplaced, mistaken and kicked around without much regard as to why! One way to eliminate the confusion is to look at the main job of a comma. A comma is a pause. It is used to slow us down, lets us place emphasis where it needs to go, and allows us to write more complex sentences. With language learners, the best way to introduce punctuation rules is to go slowly and methodically. Introduce one or two points and practice them in all sorts of different ways. Only introduce the next rule or lesson when the previous one has been mastered. The first two rules to introduce regarding the comma are described here.

Rule One: A comma is used to separate a series of three or more words, phrases or clauses. Examples:

I like to eat pizza, chocolate, apples, and donuts.

We spoke on the phone in the morning, in the evening, and again late at night.

The boys went to the baseball game, the arcade, and then to band practice. I haven't traveled to Paris, studied French, or met any French people.

A good way to practice this point is to illustrate series that contain not just words, but also clauses, and phrases. You can

do it first on the board and have students come up and place commas where they need to go. Using cards with words on them and having students put the cards in the correct order with punctuation is also a good hands-on puzzle-like activity. Another way to make that more fun is to make the cards larger and have the students physically move themselves (with their cards) around to get into the correct order. It is a great visual activity that will be memorable for everyone!

Rule Two: A comma is used to separate two independent clauses that are joined by conjunctions such as but, and, nor, for, yet, or so. Examples:

I would go with you, but I have too much work to do.

He is a great artist, and he loves his work.

I'm still angry with Sue, so I don't want to see her.

The best and most significant way to introduce this comma rule is to illustrate that you are taking two sentences and combining them with a comma and a conjunction. Doing this at first on the board and then followed by some hands-on practice is a good starting point. Have them write a description of their day with little to no punctuation. Then have them work in pairs to decide where to put commas, periods, and capitalization.

2 THE CONFUSER, THE SEMICOLON

Everyone hates the poor little semicolon. It baffles even us native speakers, and when we do attempt to use, we feel uncertain. So imagine how your language learners feel! The semicolon is also just not used that much. Maybe we prefer to avoid it and find ways around it. The two rules to introduce first are described here.

Rule One: Use a semicolon to combine two very closely related complete sentences. Examples:

Don't go in the water; it is contaminated.

The CEO spoke at the conference; he told us no one would get laid off.

Call me in the morning;

I will give you my answer then.

Rule Two: Use a semicolon along with a

conjunctive adverb and a comma to clarify the relationship between two closely related complete sentences. Conjunctive adverbs include however, therefore, in addition, moreover, subsequently, consequently, instead, and additionally. Examples:

Jane called in sick again today; therefore, the boss is going to let her go.

Both of the above rules will take a lot of practice and examples to solidify understanding for students. Use strong examples and then solicit examples from the students to get them involved. Be sure to point out the lack of punctuation after the semicolon, and that both of these rules must contain very closely related subject matter. After you have done lots of examples, give them a passage of writing that has all the punctuation removed from it. Let them work together to add in commas, semicolons, periods and any other punctuation they know. Another good exercise is to have students generate their own sentences with no punctuation and have their partner or the class put in the correct forms. Also, this is the time to pull out the grammar books and give them some drills for homework.

3 PERIODS AND FRIENDS

The period is a pretty friendly element and known to most students. You can't do much reading without figuring it out. You could do activities in which you introduce question marks, exclamation marks, and periods and test students on determining when each should be used. Because they are so common, often students have a good idea of when to use them. After you have introduced some comma and semicolon rules, it is a great idea to review all types of punctuation by challenging students with cut-up stories, editing paragraphs, or attempting to write an error-free paragraph.

IF YOU CAN SOMEHOW APPROACH PUNCTUATION LESSONS WITH CREATIVITY AND SPUNK, THE STUDENTS WILL HAVE A MUCH BETTER MEMORY TO APPLY WHAT THEY LEARNED.

It Does Make Sense: Teaching the English Punctuation System

Did you know that you put in a comma in your writing whenever you take a breath? (I assume that means while reading aloud.) How about a period? Well, I guess that's a deeper breath.

You might also try putting a period at the end of a "thought." And what about semi-colons and colons? Well... maybe those are for exceptionally long breaths and thoughts? Okay, I guess you can see that these are no official "Struck and White" rules about usage but rather the kind of myths about standard punctuation that are perpetuated, sometimes by educators, I'm afraid. Add to this the concern that writers, such as novelist and poets, often employ their own creative punctuation: for example, poet e.e. cummings wrote in all lower-case, popular novelist Stephen King, a former English teacher, writes long, run-on sentences to indicate stream-of-consciousness thought. So by the time students come onto a college campus, they're often under the impression that punctuation doesn't matter, or is arbitrary, and makes no sense—sometimes all three. Teaching students standard punctuation is usually a semester-long odyssey that involves first disabusing them of "punctuation myths" they have been exposed to.

HOW TO TEACH STANDARD PUNCTUATION

1 ATTACK THE OLD BELIEF

I'll stop short of saying telling students "Forget everything you learned before about punctuation," but I think a good starting place is finding out what students already know. I take a quick inventory, "What does a comma do?" or "Who knows what a semi-colon does?" Students' answers rarely involve dependent and independent clauses but rather breaths and thoughts and other unquantifiable items. I'll then ask "So how much of a breath before I write a comma? A short one or long one? Or do both get commas after?" Student laughter indicates that they are starting to see how nebulous these "rules" are.

2 TAKE A SURVEY

Another way of exposing these past beliefs on punctuation is to have students take a short questionnaire, with questions like the following, mixing in actual punctuation rules with the myths.

1. You write a comma when you take a breath. T F
2. You write a colon before a list. T F
3. You write a period after a thought. T F
4. A letter S should always have an apostrophe before it. T F
5. A period should be written after an independent clause. T F
6. Words like "Mother" should always be capitalized. T F

Seeing their beliefs on punctuation "exposed" in black and white print sometimes gets students laughing, which is good because it shows they understand the silliness of the rules

they were taught in the past—with all good intention, probably: it's much easier to talk to a third grader about breaths than about clauses.

Going over these myths can also give students a good laugh, not a bad thing when discussing the dry topic of punctuation.

3 TEACH STUDENTS BASIC SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Students can't really understand punctuation without understanding basic sentence structure because punctuation connects different parts of the English sentence.

Sentence: A simple sentence is also known as an independent clause. It has a subject, verb, and a complete idea: for example, I drive. This is an acceptable English sentence with a subject (I), a verb (drive) and a complete idea, I drive, meaning I drive every day or habitually, I know how to drive, etc.

Dependent clause: Must be attached to an independent clause for correctness. It has a subject and a verb but is not a complete idea. Because I drive This is not a complete sentence but a dependent clause, and if a student puts a period after it, I will mark it (F) for fragment.

Dependent clauses need to be attached to independent clauses with a comma after if the dependent clause is first *Because I drive, I have car insurance.* or no comma if the dependent clause is second *I have car insurance because I drive.*

I also teach run-ons at this point as the running together of two or more independent clauses without the correct punctuation: *I drive I have a car and I like it a lot* Working with the students, I revise the above sentences with periods and commas: *I drive. I have a car, and I like it a lot.* Or even, if some students know the semi-colon:

I drive; I have a car, and I like it a lot.

4 TEACH THE SYSTEM

Now that some basic sentence structure has been discussed, and students have some understanding of it, punctuation can be delved into more deeply. I usually give a handout of the punctuation mark, a name, a definition and what the mark does, and an example of its use. Introducing punctuation this way emphasizes that it is a system with logical and consistent rules.

5 PUNCTUATION MARKS

, =comma. Separates two independent clauses with a conjunction or separates items in a list. *I have studied on this campus for three years, and I have learned a lot. This semester I am taking Spanish, Algebra, and English.*

▪

⸱ =semi-colon. Separates two independent clauses.

I have taught here for ten years; I like the campus very much.

: =colon. Placed after an independent clause and before a list. *On the day of the final, please bring with you the following items: a pen, a pencil, an eraser, and an exam book.*

. =period. Placed at the end of a sentence. *Danielle is returning to France for the winter break.*

BY SEEING THE MAJOR PUNCTUATION MARKS, WITH THEIR NAMES AND A BRIEF DEFINITION, STUDENTS BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND IT IS A SYSTEM THAT MAKES SENSE.

Follow up activities can include reading a few paragraphs out of the course textbook and discussing punctuation decisions the writer made, proofreading a sample paper as an exercise, focusing on the punctuation, and then moving on to proofread their own and their peers' work.

4 Essential Note Taking Strategies

AS EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS, WE HEAR THE TERM PLAGIARISM OFTEN, AND GUARANTEED TO COME ALONG WITH ANY MENTION OF PLAGIARISM IS A WARNING AGAINST IT.

In some schools, expulsion can be the result of being caught plagiarizing. In an age where plagiarism carries such drastic consequences, taking organized and well documented notes becomes increasingly important. When you take time up front to document your ideas and support, it may save you a tremulous situation in the future. This is especially important for ESL students because the concept of intellectual property is not the same in every culture, and what may be perfectly acceptable in a student's native culture can be very inappropriate in their host country.

HOW TO TEACH YOUR STUDENTS WRITING: NOTE TAKING STRATEGIES

WHAT A NOTE NEEDS

Make sure your students understand that plagiarism is taking another person's words and presenting them as your own. In addition, plagiarism is taking another person's ideas and presenting them as your own. The second trap of plagiarism is far easier to fall into. Therefore, each note your students take should include the name of the author and the source from which the note came, the location in the source (page number or location on web site as best as can be explained) as well as the type of note that it is. Following is an explanation of the different types of notes.

1 DIRECT QUOTATION

When researching, a direct quotation is the easiest type of note to take and the one with the least value. Your students should aim to limit direct quotations to no more than 10% of their total notes. A direct quote cop-

ies the author's exact words from a source. A direct quotation should only be recorded when the exact wording of the author has specific value. These should be written with quotation marks on either side. Use ellipses (...) to show omitted portions and brackets [] to show any words that have been added or changed.

2 PARAPHRASE

A paraphrase is more useful than a direct quotation because the researcher has already written the idea in his or her own words. In a paraphrase, the researcher writes the same information that the author gives but in his or her own words. The length of a paraphrase should be similar to that of the original. Encourage your students to aim for about thirty percent of their notes as paraphrases. When using a paraphrase in a research paper, your students should still cite the source from which the note was taken.

3 SUMMARY

Most ESL students have experience writing summaries. A summary takes a large amount of information from a source and condenses it using unique wording. A summary note will be much shorter than the original source. These notes are useful for remembering large amounts of information. Your students should keep summaries at around thirty percent of their total note taking.

4 PERSONAL THOUGHTS

The final and most useful type of note is the personal thought. Part of research is developing original opinions and thoughts about your topic. Though we believe that we will remember our own thoughts when the time comes to write, the truth of the matter is that we will forget our original ideas more than we will remember them. Consequently it is essential that we write down our own ideas as they come to us during research. These thoughts might be opinions on some-

thing we have read, suggestions for further research or any of many other thoughts. If students are encouraged to note their own ideas as well as those of the authors they are reading, they will put more value on their own thoughts and opinions. That, after all, is the point of doing research: not to feed back a collection of information but to synthesize and apply the information we are learning. Personal thoughts are most useful when writing a research paper because they can be used in their entirety without fear of plagiarism. Students should aim to include at least twenty percent of their research notes as personal thoughts.

THESE ARE THE FOUR MAJOR TYPES OF NOTES STUDENTS CAN TAKE WHEN DOING RESEARCH. IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT A NOTE IS A COMBINATION OF TWO OR MORE AND SHOULD BE LABELED AS SUCH WHEN THE STUDENT WRITES IT DOWN.

If you stress the importance of well documented note taking to your students and warn them of the serious consequences of plagiarism, they will have a firm foundation for doing research in a forthright and upfront matter.

Not Just for Schoolmarms Any-more: Dictations in the Classroom

DICTATIONS ARE OFTEN THOUGHT OF AS ANCIENT ARCHAIC ACTIVITIES DONE IN THE DAYS OF YORE.

In actuality, dictations are valuable tools for many skills in ESL: they can be adapted to involve writing, reading, speaking, and most importantly, listening.

Best of all, they're quick and usually involve minimal preparation. Below are some fresh different approaches to dictation that get students engaged and building their proficiency.

HOW TO USE DICTATIONS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

1 CRAZY DICTATIONS

Pair students up and have them turn their desks so they're facing each other about 5-10 feet apart, giving you two rows of students. Each student should have a text in front of them to dictate to their partner. When you say 'go', have one row of students begin reading their text to their partner across from them. Things get "crazy" when you have many students simultaneously trying to enunciate clearly to a partner several feet away!

A great dictation to give students with this activity is a proverb dictation. Give each student in a pair the explanation or meaning of a different proverb, and make sure that there is one other student pair doing the same proverbs (i.e. if you have 12 students, you will need 6 different proverbs). Write the actual proverbs on note cards, and line them up in the front of the room. Have all the students dictate the proverb explanations to their partners at the same time. When both partners have finished and have let you check their dictations for accuracy, they should race to the board to find the proverbs which match their explanations. Since there are two teams which have the same proverbs, there will be three winning teams who grab the correct note cards before the other pairs. Afterwards, the teams can share their proverbs and explanations.

2 ACCURACY BEE

For this dictation activity, the teacher should select a text of an appropriate length. For an intermediate group, a short paragraph of four sentences would be sufficient. The teacher reads the paragraph slowly to the students with no repetitions. When the teacher is finished dictating, select a volunteer to stand up and begin reading what they wrote. When another student hears a mistake, they stand up and correct the previous student. If the challenger is correct, they remain standing to continue reading their dictation while the previous student sits down. An alternative to this is to line the students up, and when a mistake is made, the student goes to the back of the line and the next student takes his place.

3 RUNNING DICTATIONS

Tape a text of an appropriate length, around 5-6 lines for an intermediate group, outside of the classroom or on a far wall. Pair the students up and designate one as a "runner" and one as a "recorder." If you have many students, it might be best to tape two copies of the text so students aren't running over each other. At the same time, all of the runners go to the text and remember as much of it as they can without writing anything down. Then they return to their partner and dictate the text to them, making sure spelling and punctuation are correct. The runners are not allowed to write anything but may only give oral directions to the recorder. The runner makes as many trips as necessary to the text until they are sure it is perfect. An alternative to this activity is after the runner dictates one line to the recorder, the students switch roles.

4 VIDEO DICTATIONS

Lyric dictations to songs are great ways for students to practice listening as are video dictations. Let students watch a short clip on YouTube or elsewhere. Give them a partially-completed text if the video is long, or simply have them dictate the entire video. The best

videos to do are the ones where you can first play the video without subtitles, and when students have finished their dictation, you can direct them to the video with subtitles. An alternative to this is allowing students to pick their own videos and then having a partner watch the video and check their work.

5 DRAWING DICTATIONS

Often when students do dictations, they focus on the speed and form of what they write, but they don't think of the content they wrote down. After any dictation activity, have students draw a picture to ensure not only accuracy but also comprehension of what they heard.

An activity you can have students do that's a variation on the telephone game is to whisper one sentence to a student whose task is to then draw a picture representing that sentence. Have the next student come up to see the picture and try to figure out what the sentence might be. Have that student whisper their sentence to the next student who then draws a representation of that sentence. At the end of the game you will have several hilarious drawings and misunderstandings from the original sentence!

THE NUMBER OF VARIATIONS YOU CAN HAVE ON A DICTATION ACTIVITY ARE ALMOST ENDLESS!

Dictations are a classic lesson activity in the language classroom that offer great opportunity for practicing listening, speaking, grammar concepts, spelling, punctuation, and much more. They're fast, easy, and low-preparation which make them excellent lesson fillers for any class.

4 Fabulous Strategies for Teaching Elaboration

Detail is one of the most important qualities of good writing. When a writer uses detail, she draws her reader into the story and creates excitement for her audience.

Sometimes ESL students lack detail in their writing. Whether it is because they do not know the vocabulary or do not feel comfortable writing long passages in English, all great writers must learn to overcome these hesitations and make their writing the best that it can be. Teaching elaboration does not have to be all theoretical and difficult to grasp. Here are some ways that I have taught my students to elaborate when they write, and the strategies are ones you can incorporate into your writing class today with no additional effort. I use these lessons in the context of a creative writing exercise dealing with imaginary creatures which I outline below.

WHAT ELABORATION IS

Start your lesson by writing “elaborate” on the board. Ask your students if they know what it means. If they do not know the meaning, ask them what an elaborate painting might look like. Then tell them that the opposite would be a simple or plain painting. Once they have some idea of what elaborate means, give them this definition from dictionary.com: marked by intricate and often excessive detail, complicated.

While an elaborate painting may or may not be attractive, help your students understand that writers elaborate to make their writing more interesting and engaging for their readers. This means that the details that come from elaboration make a story interesting. All great writing uses elaboration.

A CLASS CREATURE

Now that your students have an idea of something elaborate, it is time to create a class creature. This crea-

ture will be elaborate as well. Start by drawing a circle on the board, and tell your students that this is the creature that the class will work with. As a class, add detail to the creature. You may choose items like horns, a beak or feathers. You can give detail about the creature’s skin or feet or movement. As your class offers the details, you should draw them on the creature. In addition, write the words which describe these details either under the creature or in a list to the side of the creature. This can be a good time to introduce your students to some new and interesting vocabulary as the ideas come up.

Now that your creature is complete, ask your class how the blank circle is different from the completed animal. They may say the creature is more interesting, more realistic or that they can imagine it better. Help them understand that the details (or elaboration) are what makes the completed creature more interesting and that this is also true of their writing.

CREATURE CREATIONS

Now your students will have a chance to make their own detailed creatures. Starting with the same blank circle, each student should add his or her own details. At the same time, she should list the words that describe those specifics about her animal. If you like, you can make available any art materials you have on hand such as feathers, pipe cleaners, glitter or plastic eyes for your students to use.

Once your students have completed their creatures, let pairs show one another their creatures and describe what the animal is like.

CREATURE COMPOSITION

Now your students will have a chance to be creative in their writing. Using the creature their imaginations created, your students will write a story using the following or a similar prompt.

The weather outside is strange and you notice a large black pool of smoke outside your backdoor. You walk outside and are transported to a world filled with strange creatures...

Have your students complete the story using their created creature. Encourage your students to use the following elaboration strategies as they write.

1 GIVE DETAILS

One way to elaborate is to give details as you write. Remind your students about the words they used to describe their creatures as they drew their pictures. These specific words that describe different elements of the creature’s body are details that will make their writing stronger and more interesting.

2 GIVE SENSORY DETAILS

A more specific way to give detail as you write is to include words that relate to the five senses: sight, touch, taste, sound and smell. To help your students elaborate, you may want to brainstorm a list of words for each sense. Start with “sight” and make a class list of all the words that can describe how something looks (shiny, bright, red, wavy, etc.) Then make a list for each of the other senses. You might even want to have your students keep a running list in a vocabulary or writing notebook, or keep a class list on a poster in your classroom. Then when they write, challenge your students to include words from the lists that help the reader experience these senses. The goal is to make the reader feel as though he is in the middle of the story.

3 MAKE COMPARISONS

Similes and metaphors are elaboration strategies that compare one thing to another thing. When your students compare their creatures to a more familiar creature, their readers will feel like the imagined creature is more real. Does it roar like a lion?

Does it slither like a snake? Challenge each student to include at least one sentence that compares his creature to another, well known animal. You may want to take a few minutes to remind your students that similes are comparisons that use “like” or “as” to describe two things. “He runs as fast as a cheetah.” Metaphors are comparisons that say one thing is another thing. “My mind was an ocean in a storm.” You may want to practice writing similes and metaphors with your students using their creatures before having them complete the writing prompt.

4 DIALOGUE

Another way to add elaboration in a piece of writing is to write dialogue or the specific words that a character spoke. If your students are familiar with how to write dialogue, challenge them to include specific things that their characters say as they write their stories. If your students are not familiar with writing quotations, review the specific punctuation that is used when writing someone's exact words. You may want to incorporate a grammar lesson on reported speech when you are teaching your students how to write dialogue.

ONCE YOUR STUDENTS HAVE FINISHED THEIR STORIES, HAVE PARTNERS EXCHANGE PAPERS AND READ FOR DETAILS AND ELABORATION.

If a reader sees a specific instance where the writer uses specific detail, sensory words, comparisons or dialogue, have that person highlight the details as he or she reads. This will give your students a clear visual of how much elaboration they have used in their writing.

Give your students a chance to add more detail to their stories if they feel there is not enough, and then post the pictures with the stories on a bulletin board in your classroom or compile them into a classroom book. Your students will be inspired to use more detail in their future writing assignments when they see how their classmates have used successful elaboration in their own creature stories!

How To Teach Writing:

7 Strategies for Elaboration

Do your students struggle to write with detail? Are their descriptions limited, lacking in specifics or uninformative?

If so, you can help your students write more engaging and elaborate pieces by teaching the following strategies for elaboration.

ELABORATION: 7 WRITING STRATEGIES

1 DESCRIBE A PLACE IN DETAIL

It is easy for any writer to mention a place without really telling the reader much about it. Encourage your students to go back through a piece they have written and look for a mention of a place. There may be a personal narrative or story that he was writing when he got so enthusiastic about the plot that he quickly mentioned some place that he did not describe with detail. Have your student go back and write a paragraph describing only that place. It might be where the story takes place like a forest or a school. It might be a place where the main character dreams of going, like camping or skiing. Regardless, explain to your student that adding more information about that place makes his writing more interesting and helps the reader picture himself in that place. Make sure your students know that it is okay to return to a prior piece of writing to add that kind of detail. Describing a place helps the reader put himself in the story with greater ease, and it makes the characters and event more real.

2 USE SPECIFIC WORDS TO PAINT PICTURES

Look at the following examples:

- I went to the mailbox.
- I ran to the mailbox.
- I staggered to the mailbox.
- I plodded to the mailbox.

In each sentence, the speaker is going to the mailbox, but the images are

quite different. With the first sentence, the reader does not get a clear picture in her mind. She does not know how the person felt or how his body was moving. Each of the other examples gives the reader a more complete picture of how the person felt and acted. Show your students these examples and ask them which one they think is boring writing. They will say that the first is boring. Then ask them how they would describe the writing in the other sentences. They will probably say it is interesting, specific or good. Ask your students if they would rather write boring or interesting pieces. They will say they would rather write interesting ones. Then encourage them that by using specific words, the writer paints a clear picture and does not have boring writing. When you are talking about using specific words, it is a good time to explain to your students how a thesaurus works. Show them that by looking up one word like happy, they can find many other ways to express that emotion to paint a clearer picture: content, joyful, blissful, cheery, fortunate, etc. The more specific the word that she uses, the clearer the picture becomes in the reader's mind. Divide your class into pairs or small groups and have them share a piece that they have written with their partners. Then ask their groups to point out places where they do not get a clear picture from what is written. Give students time to revise their pieces and then share with their groups again.

3 SHOW HOW SOMETHING FEELS, SMELLS, TASTES, SOUNDS OR LOOKS

Showing not telling is the key to writing with elaboration. Place a simple common object in front of your class, like an apple, and ask them to describe it. After they have given some description, ask them to describe how the apple feels. Then ask them to describe how it smells. Ask how they think it tastes. Go through each of the five senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) and ask for a specific

description of the apple for each category. Show your students by focusing on one of the senses at a time, they can provide a much more detailed and therefore interesting description. Give your students a little practice in class by asking them to think of a specific object and describe that object in terms of each of the five senses. They should write their descriptions down on a piece of paper. When finished, have students exchange papers and try to guess what the other person's object might be. Were they right? Did the writer give detailed description for each of the five senses?

4 COMPARE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS THROUGH SIMILE OR METAPHOR

A simile is a phrase that compares two things using the words like or as.

- He is as excited as a puppy.
- The girl is like a spinning top.

Both of these phrases compare a person to another object.

A metaphor, on the other hand, compares two things by saying that one is the other.

- They boy was an excited puppy running around the room.
- The girl was a spinning top unable to stay still.

Inspire your students' creativity by challenging them to write similes and metaphors for some of their favorite characters from literature or television shows. You may also want to have them describe each other (though only do this if you are sure no one will be offended). Tell them that using similes and metaphors in their writing helps the reader associate the written piece with something that they already know. This association makes the written piece more real and engaging for that reader.

5 USE THE EXACT THOUGHTS OR WORDS FROM A PERSON

If you have taught your students how

to use quotations, they will be well prepared for this elaboration strategy. Using a person's exact words is usually more interesting than a paraphrase in writing. Encourage your students to use quotations from the people they know when writing their personal narratives. If your students are writing fiction, ask them to imagine what they would say in the situation about which they are writing. Then have them use those exact words for their stories. You can find more information on teaching about quotations here on busyteacher.org in the ESL essentials section.

6 DESCRIBE HOW SOMEONE OR SOMETHING MOVES

This elaboration strategy ties into using specific vocabulary (strategy #2). With a focus on movement, encourage your students to use specific verbs rather than using adverbs. Instead of saying, "He ran to the mailbox quickly," say, "He dashed to the mailbox." Instead of saying, "She cried hard all night," say "She sobbed all night." Using specific verbs rather than a verb plus adverb combination paints a better picture for your reader and helps the author show rather than tell in his or her writing. Let your students know that this is a strategy that professional writers use to make their writing more descriptive. To practice, have your students take a piece of their writing and circle all of the adverbs. Then have them replace the verb plus adverb combination with a more specific verb. How many of the adverbs were they able to replace?

7 SHOW SOMEONE'S FEELINGS THROUGH WHAT HE DOES

Show don't tell, the professional writer's motto, applies to more than just good verb usage. It is the cornerstone to good writing. A strong writer will communicate his character's feelings through her actions. Instead of writing, "She was depressed," encourage your students to show those feelings to their readers by writing about the character's actions. She grabbed the last tissue from the box and dabbed her eyes. She threw it on the floor with the others. She did not change out of her pajamas all day, and she sat in front of the television not even changing the channel though she had no interest in the program that was on.

This activity may be challenging to your students, but the final product is worth the effort it took to create it. They say that actions speak louder than words, and when it comes to descriptive writing, it is true.

THESE ARE SEVEN PROVEN STRATEGIES YOU CAN TEACH YOUR STUDENTS TO PRODUCE STRONG, DETAILED WRITING.

You can teach them to your students one at a time or take a day and go through all of them. Either way, the more your students learn about elaboration in writing, the better writers they will become.

Telling a New Story: 5 Easy Steps for Students to Follow

SOME STUDENTS ARE NATURAL WRITERS. THEIR IMAGINATIONS TAKE THEM AWAY TO EXOTIC AND OUTRAGEOUS PLACES WITH CHARACTERS AS REAL AS THE PERSON SITTING NEXT TO THEM. FOR THE GREATER PART HOWEVER, STUDENTS NEED MORE GUIDANCE WHEN ATTEMPTING TO WRITE A FICTIONAL PIECE.

These 5 simple steps are designed with those students in mind. By taking one piece of a story at a time, even the most reluctant writer can tap into the novelist within!

HOW TO TELL A NEW STORY: 5 EASY STEPS

1 SETTING

Choosing a setting for their story is a good place for ESL students to start. You may suggest a setting to them, like a classroom or their home country or even a backyard, or let them choose their own. Who comes up with the idea really does not matter. What matters is what the writer does with it. To make the setting as tangible as possible, have your students write sensory descriptions of where their story will take place. You may want to start by brainstorming a list of adjectives that appeal to each of the senses. Ask your students what words they know that can describe how a place looks, how it sounds, how it smells, feels and tastes. Then, using those lists, ask your students to describe their story setting paying attention to how each sense takes it in. Reassure your students that they can use many more adjectives than those that appear on your brainstormed lists, but those lists are a good place to start if they are stuck for ideas.

2 CHARACTER

Now that your students know where their story takes place and are familiar with the sounds, smells and sights of that place, ask them to use their imaginations to look around. As they do, have them make note of all

the people and creatures that are present in their setting. For example, if their story will be set in a backyard, do they see squirrels? Insects? Boys playing baseball or girls making mud pies? Challenge your students to list at least ten people or creatures that might be present in their setting (real or fantastical) and then choose one as the main character of their story. With that main character, now, have your students assign what they believe to be two good character traits (honesty, bravery, generosity, etc.) and one bad character trait (selfishness, greed, laziness, etc.). By assigning both good and bad qualities to the character, he or she will be a far more interesting and relatable protagonist. You may want your students to write a character sketch, but that is not necessary as long as they get a good feel for whom their character is before they start writing.

3 CONFLICT

Your students know where their story happens and who the main character is, now challenge them to think of a conflict that the character could have. An easy way to do this is to give your students one minute to list as many different problems as they can think for their character in that setting. Are they lost? Do they need food? Are they fighting or fleeing an enemy? Make it a race to see who can come up with the most conflicts in sixty seconds, and then have your students choose one for their stories. Now the challenge becomes how to resolve or solve that conflict. It is always best for main characters to solve their own problems rather than having someone else solve the problems for them, so have your students think about how their character could solve his or her conflict on his own.

4 BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END

Comic strips are a great way for students to lay out a story. With six frames, you can teach your students

how to structure their story with a beginning, middle and end, something that may not come naturally to them. Starting with six empty frames on a piece of paper in which your students will draw a picture of the main points in the story. Box one should introduce the character and the setting. Box two should introduce the conflict or problem. Box six should give the solution or resolution to the conflict. In boxes three, four and five, challenge your students to think how the problem or conflict could get worse and worse and worse. This will give their stories the appropriate build to the climax that all good stories have. Your students should come to the end of the exercise with six pictures that tell their stories from beginning to end.

5 WORDS ON PAPER

Encourage your students that their stories are practically finished. All they need to do now is write the story from the pictures they already have. Depending on the language level and age of your students, you may ask for one sentence that describes each picture or one paragraph for each frame. You could even challenge your best writers to use an entire page for each of the six scenes. Whatever you require, your students will finish with stories that have strong characters, good conflict and a satisfying resolution.

WHETHER YOU WALK YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH ALL FIVE STEPS IN ONE DAY OR SPREAD THEM OUT OVER A WEEK, THIS SIMPLE FORMULA WILL ENSURE INTERESTING AND ORGANIZED STORIES FROM YOUR STUDENTS, EVEN IF THEY ARE NOT NATURAL STORYTELLERS.

And when they create these great masterpieces, share them with us! Your students will be proud to see their work in print and we will all enjoy reading them.

Teacher Tested Ideas for Telling and Writing Stories

EVERYBODY LIKES A GOOD STORY, BUT JUST BECAUSE A STORY HAS A BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END DOES NOT MAKE IT GOOD.

By looking at some good stories and then teaching your students what elements compose these stories, you and your class can have fun while becoming better storytellers.

STORYTELLING SECRETS: STORIES FROM YOUR STUDENTS

1 CHARACTER

To start your story unit, read to your class some stories that you have already read as a class. Ask your students what they like about the stories. Is there anything they would like to change about them? How do they feel about the main characters?

Character building is one of the most important pieces of a story. A successful author knows that an outlandish story can be successful if it centers around believable characters. To help your students develop these types of characters for their stories, start with a brainstorming activity. Have each student make a list of at least ten personality characteristics that he admires. This list might include intelligence, honesty or bravery. Then have each student make a list of at least five personality characteristics that he dislikes. This list may include untruthful, selfish or jealous. Now have your students select two characteristics from the first list and one from the second list and imagine a character who fits this description. Then give your students some hypothetical scenarios and ask them how their character would respond. These scenarios might be seeing a house on fire, failing a test, or getting incorrect change at a store – first less than he should have and then more than he should. Ask your students to try to imagine how their character would react in each scenario. Then have each person choose one scenario and write out his or her character's reaction in simple story form.

2 PLOT

Some plots are outlandish, others are ridiculous, but no matter how unusual the plot of a story it will follow one of four basic models. Ask your students what they think of when they hear the word plot (or define it if they are unfamiliar with the term). If your students suggest specific examples, point out that any plot can be categorized into one of four basic conflicts.

The first of the four conflicts is man versus man. In this basic conflict, one individual is opposed to another individual. Star Wars is an example of this type of plot where Luke Skywalker is pitted against Darth Vader.

The second basic type of conflict is man versus society. In this plot, one individual is engaged to change the world around him. A historical example of this type of conflict is the life of Dr. Martin Luther King who tried to change the way the U.S. treated those of African American descent.

The third basic type of conflict is man versus himself. In this type of conflict, an individual has an internal conflict that he must overcome, often facing his fears. An example of this type of plot is *A Beautiful Mind*.

Finally, the fourth basic type of conflict is man versus environment. The classic example of this type of conflict is Jack London's "To Build a Fire" in which the main character must somehow generate a fire to keep himself alive in the frigid weather.

Challenge your students to think of other examples that could fulfill each of these breakdowns. Then have each person reread a story he has already drafted and try to determine which type of conflict his piece uses.

Story illustrators look at the basics of a plot when they are illustrating a story. They cannot put every detail of the story into the illustrations, so the artist must decide on the main points of the plot. Have each of your students exchange a story he has written with a partner in the class. Then challenge

each student to illustrate the story his classmate has written. To do so, he must decide on the major points of plot. Suggest each person limit his illustrations to between four and six, and then display the homemade picture books on a bulletin board for your class to read at leisure!

3 SETTING AND RESOLUTION

Setting may be the easiest piece of story for your students to understand. A story can happen anywhere. Spend a few minutes as a class brainstorming a list of different possible settings for a story they might write. The setting could be a city, a building, or a person's home. There are limitless possibilities for strong settings in a story.

For a quick activity using a predetermined setting, have your students imagine a story set in a backyard. Ask each person to make a quick list of different animals who might play the main character in that story. Their characters might include dogs, cats, birds, raccoons, deer, insects or snakes. Then have each person think of a problem (conflict) that each character might have. The dog may be lost. The insect may need something to eat. The bird may have a broken wing. Challenge your students to write as many combinations of character and conflict as possible in a one-minute period. Then explain to your class that the resolution is how the problem is solved. Giving your class more time, ask each person to write down the solution to each of his character/problem scenarios he did in the previous activity. Then have each student choose one and write an original story using the plot outline he has constructed.

STORY TELLING IS NOT ONLY A SKILL BUT ALSO AN ART, AND BY EXAMINING THE MAJOR COMPONENTS OF STORY YOUR STUDENTS WILL BECOME STRONGER WRITERS AND BETTER STORYTELLERS.

So pull up some carpet, sit in a circle and get ready for some original tales from your class as you explore the idea of story!

Fable Time: Using and Writing Fables in the ESL Classroom

Almost every culture of the world includes fables in its literature bank. These short stories using animals, forces of nature or plants and other inanimate objects are meant to teach us lessons that are universally applicable. Besides their moral value, fables can be useful in the ESL classroom because of their simplicity and their ability to draw the reader in regardless of culture. Here are some activities you can do with fables that will benefit your ESL students.

HOWTO: USING AND WRITING FABLES IN YOUR ESL CLASSROOM

1 ANIMALS IN THE MIDST

One characteristic of a fable is that it uses animal characters to portray human characteristics. Each particular animal will act in a human way. For example, the fox will be a crafty or sly animal. The lion will be a brave individual. Before reading any fables in your classroom, take some time as a class to brainstorm a list of animals and the characteristic for which they are best known. Encourage your students to notice if these characteristics apply across cultures or whether each culture views a particular animal in a different way. You may also want to talk about specific animals which will appear in the fable or fables you plan to read with your class. Ask each of your students to choose one of these animals which he or she thinks is most representative of himself or herself as a person and write a description of himself as that animal.

2 A MORAL TO THE STORY

Since the point of a fable is to teach a moral or a lesson to the reader, have your students start this activity by talking about what it means to give advice. In groups of three or four students, have your class discuss the following questions. What are some situations in which you might want advice? What are some situations in which you would not want advice from another person? What would you do if you wanted to give advice to a friend but he or she did not want any advice? How can you communicate your opinions without giving advice?

Explain to your class that a moral is a general truth or piece of advice that is generally true. Ask your class to think of stories they have read or heard that have a moral or give advice. Make a list on the board of these stories. Have groups of students then work together to make a list of lessons that they have learned or lessons that they have been taught using the list of stories on the board for inspiration. This would also be a good opportunity to introduce the concept of a proverb to your class since they are often the moral of a fable.

3 A CLASSIC TALE

One fable that many of your students may already know is the tale of the tortoise and the hare. In this story, the hare is so confident in his own abilities that he makes poor choices and ends up losing a footrace with the tortoise. Read this story to your class two times and then ask the following questions. Who are the characters in the story? What is the problem? How does the story end? What is the moral or lesson of the story? Now give your students a chance to retell the story. Have your class arrange their chairs in a circle. Start the story by telling one sentence in your own words. Have your students continue telling the story, one sentence and one person at a time, until you make it all the way around the circle. At logical points in the story, ask your students how the characters probably felt, and have your class make faces to show these feelings.

After your students have finished retelling the story, tell your students how stories or dramas were communicated in ancient Greece – through theater. Actors used masks of happy and sad faces to communicate the character's feelings to the audiences. Give your class a chance to make their own theater masks that they will use to retell the fable. Give each person two paper plates and two tongue depressors. Allow your students to decorate their masks – one happy and one sad - using whatever art supplies you have available and then tape a tongue depressor to each mask. Once all the masks are finished, get in your circle again and have your students retell the story. This time in-

stead of making faces to show how the characters feel, let your students hold up the appropriate mask. If desired, you can have your students decorate their masks even further to represent either of the main characters of the story.

4 A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Though the morals that fables teach are universal, the stories through which those morals are taught do not necessarily correspond with life in the modern world. In this activity, your students will take a universal moral and apply it to a modern situation. Start by dividing your class into groups of five students, and assign one fable to each group. You can find hundreds of fables free online. One site where you can find these stories is aesopfables.com which has over 650 fables, some in audio files as well as text files. Have each group read their fable and then discuss how the story can be modified to portray a more modern or contemporary story. Working together, your students should rewrite the story in a modern way. After the group rewrites the story, give them some class time to practice two dramatic presentations of the story, one the original version and one the rewritten version. Have each group then perform their skits: one as the traditional story and the second as their modernized version. After each presentation, ask your class what the moral of the story was and how it was communicated in each version. Have a short discussion on the similarities and differences between the two versions. Then take a vote as to whether the class liked the traditional or the modernized version better.

BECAUSE FABLES ARE SHORT STORIES WITH UNIVERSALLY APPLICABLE MORALS, THEY ARE A GOOD WAY TO INCLUDE LITERATURE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM. Your students can have fun learning, telling stories and acting out original tales that carry a deeper message. A bird in the hand may be worth two in the bush, but a fable in the classroom may be worth an entire volume in the library. Try one with your ESL class and you just might see how useful fables can be!

Bringing The Class Together: How To Write a Class Newsletter

WHAT IS A CLASS NEWSLETTER, WHY SHOULD STUDENTS WRITE ONE, AND HOW CAN THEY WRITE ONE? A CLASS NEWSLETTER IS A PUBLICATION THAT INFORMS THE CLASS OF IMPORTANT EVENTS IN THEIR CLASSMATES' LIVES AS WELL AS WITHIN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY AT LARGE: A NEW SIBLING, FOR EXAMPLE, OR SCHOOL HOLIDAYS COMING UP.

Producing a newsletter creates opportunities for authentic speaking and writing tasks as students interview each other and report on news in each other's lives. With desktop publishing programs available, class newsletters are also easy to publish these days. Students can be involved in every step of the process from brainstorming the articles, to writing and editing them, to the final publication, and in the process gain a sense of authentic purpose and audience for writing.

STEPS TO PUBLISHING YOUR NEWSLETTER

This is an entire unit of instruction that could very well stretch out over the course of a week. It's probably best to start small, however, and see if there is enough student enthusiasm for the project to carry it through.

1 First help students become familiar with news articles. Give out a sample news article and study its structure: the headline (title), the byline (author), and the lead or summary.

2 Have students summarize the article, an important writing skill, and also a check for understanding of main ideas.

3 Analyze important language for news articles, such as the how verb

tense is used in a news story, such as simple past and past progressive.

4 Teach the passive voice, which is much used in the news. Teach and practice the passive voice in various tenses. Passive voice is prevalent in the news as the focus is usually on the event (e.g., "A bank was robbed") not a specific person (e.g., "A criminal robbed a bank" is not standard grammar in news reporting.)

5 Have students practice writing sample news articles. Provide them with headlines, either real or made up. Divide into groups, and students write stories to go with the headlines.

6 To provide speaking practice, students can read the stories aloud.

7 Now that students have some familiarity with newspapers and news writing, they are ready for the actual newsletter project. This can be as simple or complex as you would like it.

SIMPLE CLASS NEWSLETTER PROJECT

1 GENERATE ENTHUSIASM
Explain what a class newsletter is, why the students should publish one, and generate some enthusiasm for the project. Show an example newsletter if possible. If you don't have an example newsletter from a prior class, a community newsletter will do in showing the format and the types of stories covered.

2 DISCUSS TYPES OF NEWS TO INCLUDE

Work with students to brainstorm pos-

sible articles. Students can volunteer information about events they have heard about that may prove newsworthy. Some students may be involved in a competition, for example, or working on a particular project. They should receive recognition for their efforts.

3 SHOW ANOTHER EXAMPLE NEWSLETTER ARTICLE

Now that the general project is organized, it's time to talk about actually writing the newsletter.

Teach or review the writing conventions of the news genre: e.g., an inverted pyramid with an early paragraph including the core information and why it is important, and the remainder of the article, which including supporting paragraphs with quotes and interesting facts of decreasing importance to the main idea. News articles are written this way so that they can be cropped as necessary to space requirements.

4 TEACH BASIC INTERVIEWING SKILLS

Go over the types of questions to ask to get information for the articles, such as the five "wh—" questions.

5 WRITE THE STORIES

After this preparation of seeing an example newsletter, a couple of news articles, and some practice in the genre of news writing and its conventions, students are now ready to begin interviewing and writing. Each student should interview at least one other student and draft an article.

6 TYPE'N'SAVE

Students should then type the articles and save them to disk, so the teacher or volunteer student can put them together in a desktop publishing program, and it can be as simple as that, a one-time project.

EXPANDING THE NEWSLETTER PROJECT

If you and your students would like to see the newsletter expand beyond a one-assignment project to a more on-going one, following are some steps.

1 ASSIGN ROLES

Some students may be more comfortable with just writing the news articles while others may want to branch out and take pictures or work on the layout. Get some assistance in expanding the project by recruiting interested students to do some of the work.

2 CHOOSE EDITORS

One student with leadership skills might want to take on the role of editor and decide how to organize the stories each issue by class news, school and local news, and so forth.

3 PUT IT ONLINE

If the class has a web page, the newsletter can also go on the website to keep the class and community informed of school events and news, or students can hand out the newsletter. A regular readership provides an authentic sense of audience and purpose to writing.

4 NEVER STOP

Students can take more control as they gain more confidence and skill, thinking up and suggesting stories to write about.

A CLASS NEWSLETTER TAKES TIME AND PLANNING, BUT THE RESULTS IN STUDENT INTERACTION, TEAM BUILDING, LEADERSHIP, AND WRITING SKILLS AS WELL AS THE FINAL PRODUCT ARE ALL WELL WORTH THE EFFORT.

10 Creative Spelling Teaching Ideas

Spelling can often come across as a challenge to many people, both adults and children. With the English language, it can be doubly excruciating to learn.

Teachers of English need to be sure that their spelling is immaculate, as it can often reflect badly on you if your spelling is not up to scratch. Even if you have difficulty (a lot of people suffer with mild to severe forms of dyslexia), a good idea would be to have a dictionary close by. This will allow you to be sure, especially if a student asks a question. Techniques of spelling are taught differently, depending on the age of the students and of course their current level of language. It can be something of a challenge if you're teaching the Roman alphabet to individuals who come from places like the Far East, Russia or the Middle East. Often their own languages will use a different alphabet such as Arabic or Cyrillic. Before you decide to set about teaching spelling, it is important to realize just where each of your students is coming from. But rote learning isn't the only thing that is going to help. You need to be creative in your style in order to grab and keep the students' attention.

HOW TO TEACH SPELLING

1 THE ABC SONG

Everyone has learned this in school. It is probably one of the most simple and effective ways of teaching in rhyme. This is particularly effective with children. When it comes to languages where the Roman alphabet is used, they will have their own versions of this song. Sometimes they are similar, sometimes the letters are pronounced completely differently. It is important for you as the teacher to give the English pronunciation and make sure that the students apply it correctly. This activity is generally for beginners, and afterwards it will serve as a practical basis for learning to spell words, both simple and complex.

2 HANG MAN

Most of us have played Hang Man at some point in our lives. The teacher will usually start with a blank board, and draw out "gaps" for where the letters of a specific word go. Get one of the students to stand at the top of the class and ask them to think of a word. The students will then ask the student what letters are in

the word. If it is correct, then the letter will be put in one of the gaps. If not, then the man slowly gets "hanged", first with the drawing of the noose, the head and all the limbs. This can be incredibly effective for students to see how a certain word is spelled out as it is slowly revealed to them!

3 PERSONAL DICTIONARIES

Whether you have a class of children or adults, a good idea is to use a personal dictionary. Have them divide it into different sections for each letter at the beginning of the course. Any word the students are unfamiliar with or have difficulty spelling can be put into this dictionary. It is a great way of building up a quick reference, especially for words that constantly crop up.

4 USING SCRABBLE SQUARES

This isn't so much Scrabble - it is using the scrabble squares. A variety of different games can be made from this. An idea would be to get an article and jot down the unfamiliar vocabulary. As an activity for afterwards, play a game involving these. Get the students to spell out a word with their cubes and go around and check them. Write up the words as they originally appear on the board, and with those that are spelled incorrectly, ask the students what is wrong with them and why they are incorrect. This will allow the student to correct their own mistakes, which can help them to be more cautious in the future.

5 SPELLING RULES

English is notoriously difficult when it comes to spelling. Therefore, there is a variety of different rules which are associated with it. Here is an example: "*I* before *e* except after *c*". An example can be seen in the words "receive" and "conceive". However, due to the nature of English, there are exceptions, such as in "science". To help students get their heads around this, write down all the rules and get them to write it down in their personal dictionaries.

6 FOCUS ON EXCEPTIONS

This ties in with the last point. It is a good idea to focus on the exceptions, such as words like "science". Have the students write these down in their dictionaries. As a language learner myself, I found compiling my own list of words

I found difficult to be incredibly helpful. Now as a teacher, I find it to be just as useful for students.

7 REGULAR SPELLING TESTS

Most people who attended school in an English speaking country has been subjected to the painful thought of spelling tests. Usually they are held on a certain day of the week. The students are given a list of words to learn for the week, and then tested on them usually at the end of class. Offer rewards for those who get everything right! This will further motivate the students to learn.

8 WORD OF THE DAY

Having a specific word, particularly one that has difficult or unusual spelling, during every class will expose the students to new spelling structures. Not only will this allow for much more familiarity with strange words, but a discussion can be brought up from it. Often it will work as a great filler if you happen to have some time left at the end of class!

9 "BOWLING"

As a quick test of the student's spelling ability, have everyone stand up. Throw various words at random students and see if they are able to spell them. If not, they have to remain standing. Often this will motivate them to learn the words correctly, as nobody wants to be left standing on their own.

10 SPELLING BEE

In certain countries, Spelling Bees are quite popular with younger people. Often they can be a great incentive for people to learn. Hosting a mini spelling bee in the class is often a great way of motivating younger learners, especially if there is a reward involved. It can be a lot of fun. Get your students to try and organize the competition themselves, organizing who will be the judges, the participants etc.

ALL OF THESE METHODS COME WITH THE PURPOSE OF HELPING STUDENTS TO BECOME FAMILIAR WITH NEW WORDS. We cannot stress the importance of building up a personal dictionary enough. Having a quick reference is often a life saver and, over time, the students are gradually going to need it less and less.

10 Fun Spelling Games for Your ESL Class

WHETHER YOU TEACH ELEMENTARY ESL OR WORK WITH ADULTS, SPELLING WILL BE A PART OF YOUR CURRICULUM.

When you are looking for a fun way to use or review these spelling words in class, try one of the following games with your students.

TRY THESE 10 FUN SPELLING GAMES WITH YOUR ESL CLASS

1 SCRABBLE SLAM

With no preparation and a small financial investment, Scrabble Slam is a fun way for your students to practice spelling words in English. The game consists of a simple set of playing cards with one letter printed on the front and back of each card. Starting with any four letter word, students add one letter at a time on top of one of the original four letters to create a new word. Modify the rules slightly and take turns going around the table to see if each person can create a new word with each of his turns.

2 FREE FORM SCRABBLE

If your students are working with a specific spelling or vocabulary list, challenge them to fit all of their spelling words on a Scrabble game board. Each word must connect with one of the other words, and students only have the letter tiles which came in the game. Students may find it easier as well as more fun if they create their spelling word grid with a partner.

3 UNSCRAMBLLED EGGS

Another activity you can do with a given set of vocabulary words requires two sets of plastic eggs. For each egg, put the letters to spell a vocabulary word (use letter tiles, plastic letters or whatever you have on hand) and shake to mix. Make one egg for each spelling word for each team. Two teams then race relay style, each person opening one egg and putting

the letters in the right order to make a vocabulary word. The first team to unscramble all their eggs is the winner.

4 SPELLING PONG

For a fun, rainy day activity, set up a grid of cups on a table in your classroom. Each cup should have a letter written on the bottom of it. Students then take turns bouncing a ping-pong ball into the cups. Whatever cup the ball lands in, the player has that letter to use as he tries to spell a word. Students take turns until each person is able to spell a word from the letters he has collected. Either race to see who can spell a word first, or challenge students to make as many words as possible from the letters they earn. Make sure your students spell words with at least three or four letters as you play.

5 SPELLING BEE

A Spelling Bee is a classic spelling game which will help your students spell and review words from their vocabulary lists. Divide your class into two teams and have each team stand along an opposite wall of the classroom. Give one word at a time to each student, alternating teams. If the student spells the word correctly, she goes to the end of the line until her turn comes up again. If she spells the word incorrectly, she sits down. The last team standing wins. This game is a great way to review vocabulary or spelling words before a comprehensive test.

6 FIND THE VOWELS

Make a set of go fish cards using spelling words. For each spelling word, write the word on one card minus the vowels in the word (for example "H—D"). On another card, write the vowels which complete that word (for example, -EA-). Students play the card game go fish style by matching the spelling word with the vowels it needs to complete the word. You can add cards to the set as you add spelling words throughout the year.

7 INVISIBLE MAN

For a team spelling game, draw two stick figures on the board. Each figure should have the same number of parts. The goal is to make your team's stick man invisible before the other team does. Give each team a word to spell. If they spell it correctly, erase one piece of the stick figure. If they do not spell the word correctly, leave the stick figure unchanged. Then repeat with two new words. The first team to make his man invisible wins!

8 MAGNETIC LETTERS

Using a magnetic board and a few sets of magnetic letters (available in most stores), see which player can create the most words in a set amount of time, around five minutes, from his set of letters. After the five minutes is up, check the words and explain any unfamiliar vocabulary. The person with the highest number of words wins the game.

9 WORD SEARCH

A word search is a fun way for students to review spelling words. Give each person a sheet of graph paper and have him write the spelling words in the grid before filling in the remaining boxes. Have students exchange their word searches and see who can find all the vocabulary words first.

10 SPELL HOPSCOTCH

For an outside spelling game, have students draw a hopscotch board on the playground.

GIVE EACH PERSON A WORD TO SPELL AS SHE JUMPS THROUGH THE BOXES. IF SHE SPELLS THE WORD WRONG, SHE MUST REPEAT THAT WORD ON HER NEXT TURN. THE FIRST PERSON TO GET THROUGH THE ENTIRE BOARD WINS.

6 Smart Ways to Organize Writing Content

The description of strong writing varies in different parts of the world. Just as values for many other topics change from culture to culture, what constitutes good writing also changes. It is therefore important to help your students write well in English and to teach them what strong writing in English looks like.

In English one of the most important strategies in writing is organization of content. A strong English writer is a guide to his or her reader leading him or her along the logical arguments in the piece. Following are six ways to do this effectively. If your students can understand and apply these organizational strategies, they will be far along the road to successful writing in English.

HOW TO ORGANIZE WRITING CONTENT

1 CHRONOLOGY

Chronology, or time, is the most straightforward way to organize content in a piece of writing. Students should easily grasp the concept of starting at the earliest historical event and progressing toward the most recent or vice versa. This is also a good organization strategy when examining the change in one element (e.g. gender in literature) over time or to show how one idea, place or thing has changed over time.

2 FAMILIARITY AND IMPORTANCE

Unlike chronology, organizing content by either familiarity or importance is more subjective. In this type of organization, students begin with the most familiar topic or concept and move toward the most obscure, the least important toward the most important. They can also begin with the most simple and move to the most complex. This type of organization will build momentum in writing. You should warn your students to always keep in mind the target audience when organizing by familiarity to be most effective. Though eating frog may be quite familiar in a restaurant in Beijing, most Americans have not ever had the experience and would view the idea of it quite unfamiliar. It would therefore be placed

toward the end of the written piece.

3 COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Comparisons look at the similarities between two or more items, contrasts look at the differences. Though an organizational strategy may be to compare and contrast, stress to your students that this is never the purpose in writing. This organizational strategy works well when the writer is trying to present one item as superior to another, to explain an unknown item by comparing it to a known item, or to show how something has changed. Most academic papers both compare and contrast rather than focusing on just one or the other. There are two ways to organize writing when comparing and contrasting. A point by point organization takes each element of comparison or contrast and examines both items in relation to it separately. For example, a writer may examine the science of both food and beauty, then the social roles of food and beauty and then the psychological importance of both food and beauty. A block organization, on the other hand, presents all the information about one item before moving on to the next. In the same piece, block organization would present the topic of food and examine its science, social role and psychological importance. Then the writer would examine beauty on those same three points. If students are comparing more than two points, point by point organization will be more effective.

4 GENERAL AND PARTICULAR

This type of organization takes broad generalizations and moves towards specific statements or starts with specific statements and compiles them into a general conclusion or statement. This is not the same as having a thesis statement and supporting it with details. One example of broad to general would be to examine the short stories of Edgar Allen Poe as a whole and move towards specific issues he includes in this writing such as death and revenge. Narrow to broad examination might begin examining state laws and then move to national laws. This type of organization can be used effectively when examining a larger item along with its component pieces.

5 PROBLEM AND SOLUTION

A more straightforward organization examines the relationships between problems and solutions. This type of organization will do one of two things. It will state a problem and offer multiple solutions concluding with a recommendation or it will begin with a question, make multiple proposals or attempts and conclude with the outcome. This type of organization is most effective with scientific research where the writer formulates a hypothesis, evaluates the proposals and concludes with a solution to the problem.

6 CAUSE AND EFFECT

A cause and effect organizational strategy examines the causal relationships throughout a paper. There are three ways to organize with a cause and effect scheme. The first begins with one event and examines the multiple causes. For example, a student may want to discuss the causes of drug abuse listing peer pressure, medical need and addictive tendencies in the argument. Another student may follow the second strategy which looks at the multiple effects of one course of action or cause. This student may look at the issue of high caloric intake and present the effects of weight gain, insulin imbalance and susceptibility to diabetes. A third strategy for cause and effect organization is a chain of causes and effects which begins with one event and follows the chain reaction to the end result. One example of this might be to examine the chain of events in which the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand led to World War I.

THOUGH THE SPECIFIC ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY WILL HAVE TO BE DECIDED AFTER THE STUDENT DETERMINES THE WRITING PURPOSE, KNOWLEDGE OF THESE SIX ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES WILL GIVE YOUR STUDENTS THE TOOLS THEY NEED TO COMMUNICATE SUCCESSFULLY IN ENGLISH.

You may want to stick with chronology, familiarity and cause/effect with lower level students, but those who wish to be successful in academia or business would do well to understand all of them.

6 Sure-fire Ways to Help ESL Students Improve Their Writing

ANYONE - WHETHER THEY ARE AN ESL TEACHER OR STUDENT - WILL TELL YOU THE FOUR MAIN SKILLS YOU NEED TO DEVELOP WHEN LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE ARE SPEAKING, LISTENING, READING AND... WRITING.

Naturally, learning to speak the second language is often the priority. Listening is essential for speaking, and students easily practice listening skills through movies and songs. Reading is also a skill they may develop easily with the vast amount of material available on the Internet. But writing is usually the skill that is most poorly developed, nowadays only practiced in short emails or abbreviated chat messages.

It is very easy to work on the first three skills in the ESL classroom, but improving writing takes a real conscious effort both on your part and your students'. Need to beat their reluctance to write? Here are some sure-fire ways to do it:

HOW TO HELP YOUR ESL STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR WRITING: 6 EFFECTIVE WAYS

1 GIVE THEM A GOOD REASON

Say the words "writing assignment", and you'll most likely hear students groan. Writing is a chore. It's hard work. And you shouldn't deceive them by saying it'll be fun. Writing is a skill that must be honed through practice. But why would they put in the hard work? What's their motivation?

It's easy to find it in Business English students. Most need to write business emails and texts. But what about teens and young learners? In these cases, you'll need to convey the importance of good writing skills. It is essential for them to know how to communicate, not only in speaking, but in writing. And you must make it clear that sending a text message in Eng-

lish does not constitute good writing. Writing is a skill that will prove to be tremendously helpful in the future and they must understand that.

2 SCHEDULE REGULAR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Teachers often also prioritize the other skills above writing. It is harder to teach and more time-consuming to correct. Make sure you schedule regular writing assignments every month - you may choose to make it once a week, once a month, or at the end of a unit. Business English students may have more frequent, but shorter assignments. But make sure they are assigned in regular intervals. Students will soon learn to expect them and will be less reluctant to complete them.

3 GUIDE THEM

Needless to say, in most ESL classrooms, simply saying, "Write a story of 200 words" won't suffice. The extent of your guidance should be proportional to your students' level. The lower the level, the greater the guidance. As they advance in their English studies they will need less and less guidance, till one day they become more independent writers.

For beginners, it's a good idea to start with short writing prompts or sentences they have to complete. Then, you make the prompt more of a general idea about what they should write, rather than just a sentence: "What would you do if you won the lottery". Here you'd expect them to write several sentences using the second conditional. Finally, they will be ready for more creative, free writing.

At first, you'll need to provide opening and closing expressions for letters. You'll need to instruct them on structuring their texts into paragraphs: introduction, supporting paragraphs and closing. You may even include some phrases they have to use somewhere in their text.

Hand out templates, bibliography, writing style guides and anything they can use to help them in their writing. Soon enough, they won't need the templates anymore.

4 USE PEER CORRECTION

In some levels - and particularly in Business English students - you may choose to have students correct each other's writing assignments. This way, you won't have piles of papers to correct, but they will also learn from each other's mistakes. Go around the classroom, supervise and answer questions.

5 GIVE THEM THE OPTION TO REVISE THEIR WORK

Did someone misinterpret the task? Did a student make too many mistakes? Ask them to revise their work and give them the chance to submit it again. Make sure they understand this is not punishment for turning in poor quality work, but rather a chance to learn from mistakes and make improvements on their writing.

6 MAKE IT A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Try to offer two pieces of praise for every negative point: "Maria, you used great vocabulary and your punctuation is excellent. Now you need to work on using the right verb tenses." By mentioning the things they did right, no matter how small they may seem, you'll be letting them know they're on the right path. Pure criticism and a paper full of red marks will not encourage them to continue practicing!

SHOW THEM HOW USEFUL LEARNING TO WRITE IN ENGLISH CAN BE. FOR SPEAKING THEY HAVE TO THINK QUICKLY, BUT IN WRITING THEY HAVE MORE TIME TO GATHER THEIR THOUGHTS AND ORGANIZE IDEAS. PRACTICING WRITING CAN ALSO DO WONDERS FOR THEIR SPEAKING!

Get Out Your Red Pens! Proofreading Guidelines for Every Level

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO INCORPORATE PROOFREADING ACTIVITIES INTO AN ESL CLASS. HOWEVER THERE ARE STRATEGIES THAT YOU CAN EMPLOY AT EVERY LEVEL TO GET STUDENTS FEET WET WITH FINDING ERRORS AND MAKING CORRECTIONS.

Get out those red pens and show students that they will learn a lot by editing not just their own work, but their classmates' as well.

PROOFREADING GUIDELINES FOR EVERY LEVEL

1 GRAMMAR AND SPELLING CORRECTION

One fun way to informally introduce proofreading is to display some sentences with mistakes on the board. Make sure the sentences are applicable to the level you are teaching and if you want to get really creative, you can even pull the sentences from the students' own work at random. Ask students how many mistakes they can find in each sentence. Have them copy the sentences down or give them the same examples on a worksheet. You could have them work in pairs or individually telling them first to circle the mistakes they can find and if they can, try to correct them. Allow them to use their books, notes, dictionaries or whatever other resources might be helpful.

To make this a bit more fun you could give them a time limit per sentence and ring a little bell or make a sound when they are to progress to the next sentence. Do this maybe five to seven times. Then challenge the students. At this point you could make this into a team game or keep it individual, but you really want to make sure you get all the students up to the board. Give them colored markers that correlate to what kind of mistake they are correcting, like red for spelling, green for grammar, and blue for punctuation. Allowing the students to practice first in their books and then next at the board gives them a chance to analyze the mistakes and consult their friends and notes. You can

also change this up by asking them to target very specific grammar and spelling. The more they get accustomed to doing it, the sharper their red pens will become. You can then do quick grammar lessons at the board, and have students explain why they made certain corrections.

2 PROOFREADING SYMBOLS


You can find lots of worksheets and online resources that detail the proofreading symbols. Depending on the level of the class you can choose to go into the symbols as deeply or as simply as you deem suitable. Students enjoy the use of a visual mechanism for noting errors, but you also want to be careful not to introduce too many symbols at one time. Introduce them in groups and then apply them. Once the students get comfortable using them, you can then add in more symbols to their repertoire. Here are a few examples:

^ Insert (can be used to insert words or punctuations)

(the) Delete this word

() Close this space (if you have deleted something and need to delete space)

 Delete

 Transpose or reverse items

 New Paragraph

One way to give them practice using the symbols is to give them a handout or homework assignment that contains a lot of errors. Have them find as many mistakes as they can while utilizing new marks they have learned. As a follow-up you could also have them take a piece of their own writing and attempt editing that as well.

3 PEER CORRECTION

One very useful method to get students interested in proofreading is to have them do peer correction. This may seem daunting for students at first, but if you very clearly break down what types of mistakes they should be looking for, that can alleviate a lot of the ten-

sion. For example, if you have a fairly low level class, they will not be able to just pick up a piece of writing and start finding mistakes and correcting them. You will need to clearly define what they are looking for and how to correct it. Perhaps you had the students use 10 vocabulary words in the writing. Have the proofreaders search for those familiar words and correct any misspellings. Also, if you have them underline any other mistakes they find they can then work in pairs to attempt to correct and or define the mistakes.

It is best to put the students into groups and have them exchange papers and let them find each other's errors. It is too difficult to expect the writer to catch his own errors. It will benefit their writing by having another pair of eyes finding those common mistakes that all students make who are new to writing.

For a higher level class, you could make the peer editing much more challenging. You could hand out the papers randomly and have students proofread the paper that they receive. Then set a time limit, not too short, because you want to give them time to examine the writing and find and correct errors. After maybe 10 to 15 minutes have students swap papers again. The more often you have the papers circulating the better because the most important part of peer-to-peer proofreading is to make sure the papers circulate around the room. That way, the students get to proofread several papers and the writers get several eyes examining their work. Students also get the chance to show off their proofreading abilities and this definitely helps them develop sharpened grammatical habits and confidence.

HAVING STUDENTS WORK ON PROOFREADING AND EDITING CAN SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE NOT JUST THEIR CONFIDENCE, BUT ALSO THEIR MASTERY OF THE LANGUAGE.

It is important for students to be able to reach the point where they can self-assess their own work as well help those around them.