

## Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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### Tip #34: Sentence Fluency (varying sentence openers)

Remember that daily writing you are doing because you know you need to provide lots of practice for your students? Perhaps you are currently doing an overview unit of the six traits of effective writing? Maybe you are currently revising a major piece of writing with your students? In any case, I know that you probably wouldn't mind some suggestions for improving your students' sentence fluency.

#### ***NBASWTSWT***

That's right! It's an acronym, but you may not want to memorize it. Never begin a sentence with the same word twice! This is sound advice from Lorena Scalph, a veteran LA teacher at Clark Middle School. She produces and publishes her own writers' handbook for her students and this is one of her tips.

#### ***S.O.S.***

In order to analyze how students are starting their sentences, you might want to use the Sentence Analyzer blackline master in your Write Source 2000 language binder. You can find this on p.113 in the 7th grade binder, p.105 in the 8th grade binder, or you can mock up one of your own and call it the Sentence Opener Sheet (S.O.S.).

Choose a piece of writing from which to model. Consider choosing a high interest excerpt from a favorite adolescent novel. Harry Potter to the rescue again! Type up a

passage and display it on the overhead. Underline the first three words in each sentence while a student records the phrases in a vertical column on butcher paper. Discuss the variety of openers the author uses to start off each sentence. Have small groups identify some of the unique ways the author accomplishes this, and then ask students to choose what they believe is the strongest opener.

Now focus on student writing. Use a transparency from your Write Traits kit or create a piece of your own using a name such as Polly Esther or Chuck Roast. Perhaps this piece of writing will not have as many strong sentence openers, but be positive and try to pick out a strong one as well as help students identify the weaker ones, which frequently rely heavily on the same sentence patterns.

Have students choose their own piece of writing to revise from their daily fast writes. Using the Sentence Analyzer or the S.O.S. sheet, ask students to record the first three words in each sentence they have written. They should do this so they can begin to quickly see any repetition like: I went to, Then I went, Next I went... They really won't need to analyze more than 15 sentences of their writing to capture potential patterns.

Back this up with a mini-lesson on alternative ways to begin sentences. One of my favorite mini-lessons is to teach students to start



sentences with the "ing" form of the verb - the participle. To demonstrate, I dramatically walk into the classroom and throw some books on the floor. Then I ask the students to finish the phrase I write on the board: *Walking into the room, Ms. Goodman...* I ask students to notice the way in which the sentence begins with the "ing" form of the verb. I ask them to notice the comma after the dependent clause. Then I pick a student volunteer who plans a creative way of entering the classroom. The next sentence might look something like this: *Laughing hysterically, Kristen stumbled into language arts class.* I record it on the board and ask students to find the "ing" word and the comma. Continue in this fashion calling on volunteers to act out situations and to write down what they observe each student doing. Insist that they begin with the "ing" word and that they place the comma correctly. Compare responses. My students loved the acting, which got them kinesthetically involved with the grammar. Finally, the students need to apply this new knowledge to their own writing. Remember to challenge them to rewrite a few of their sentence openings in the piece that they are revising.

The following two activities are from *6 + 1 Traits of Writing* by Ruth Culham. This is published by Scholastic. If you would like to borrow it, please let me know and I will drop it into interschool mail for you. Here is a link for more information about this excellent resource.

[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0439280389/qid=1067381522/sr=1-1/ref=sr\\_1\\_1/102-9913902-3671313?v=glance&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0439280389/qid=1067381522/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/102-9913902-3671313?v=glance&s=books)

### ***Off to a Good Start***

Use sentence strips for this activity. Those of us with elementary training probably still even have a stockpile of these! Give each group of

students a sentence strip with a sentence printed on it like: While gazing upward, I watched the clouds drift slowly across the sky. Challenge the group to rewrite the sentence in as many ways as they can without losing its meaning but by starting off in a different way each time. Students should record each new version on a sentence strip. Ex. I watched the clouds drift slowly across the sky. Have a group member display the original sentence strip on the whiteboard with the new versions beneath it for comparison. Ask students to place a star next to the version they believe is the strongest.

### ***End with a Noun***

To make your sentences more powerful, end with a noun. It's perfectly correct to use verbs, adjectives, pronouns, but nouns seem to pack the most punch. Give groups of students a practice sentence (use idioms, famous quotes, proverbs, etc.) and have them rewrite it by ending with different parts of speech. This will also be a good review of parts of speech and an excellent diagnostic opportunity for you.

Example:

- A rolling stone gathers no moss. (noun)
- If a stone rolls, hardly any moss will be gathered. (verb)
- If you are concerned about moss growing on a stone, roll it. (pronoun)
- When trying to rid yourself of moss, roll the stone quickly. (adverb)
- If you roll the stone, the moss will become smooth. (adjective)

By the way, [enjoy this grammar poem](#) that teaches students the 8 parts of speech!



## The Parts of Speech

Anonymous

All nouns are names of things

As Mary, Rome, and kings.

Pronouns take the place of nouns,

You know, she works, he owns.

Verbs tell something to be done

To read, count, sing, laugh or run.

When what kind you wish to state,

Use adjectives as small or great.

But if manner you would tell

Use adverbs, slowly, well.

Conjunctions join the words together,

As men and women, wind or weather.

The preposition stands before

A noun, as in or through a door.

Interjection shows surprise,

As oh! how pretty! ah! how wise.

The whole are called eight parts of speech,

Which reading, writing, speaking teach.