

Literacy Tips

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



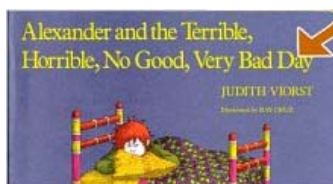
Contact: Amy Goodman
Middle School Literacy Support
907-267-0221
goodman_amy@asdk12.org
www.asdk12.org/MiddleLink/LA/

Tip #35: Sentence Fluency (varying sentence length)

Staring at my computer screen, I wonder what I can write today to specifically help you with the teaching of sentence length. (Did you notice that I started with an "-ing" addition to reinforce last week's email tip? You will start seeing this sentence pattern around you all of the time once you focus on it. You know how that goes...) Last week I addressed varying sentence openers, which is a characteristic of sentence fluency. This week I would like to concentrate on sentence length. Recognizing and establishing flow, rhythm, and cadence improves the overall trait of sentence fluency. Here are some mini-lessons to consider for sentence length:

Slinky City

Use a picture book like *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Judith Viorst) to convey the importance of sentence length.



http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0689711735/qid=1068091061/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/002-7924391-8618402?v=glance&s=books

I show the book and let students quickly reminisce because this is a classic picture book they have probably heard over and over. And

if they haven't heard it, it is time that they did. Read aloud the first sentence. It is a rambling sentence, so be prepared. Ask the students to estimate how many words they think are in that first sentence. Then have a student count them up. (I think there are about 70-something words.) Then read the second sentence and ask students to repeat the procedure. Their guesses will be closer this time. (The second sentence has 40-something words in it.) Finally, read the third sentence which is: "I think I'll move to Australia." This 6-word sentence is like a staccato note in a piece of music. It surprises the reader because of its short, punchy sound. The author weaves these sentences patterns throughout the book maintaining the rhythm and cadence. The book is an excellent example of effective sentence length.

Once students see the powerful impact of varying sentence length, you can help them visualize it by using a Slinky. Place the Slinky on the overhead projector and have a student shorten and lengthen it as they hear sentences from a passage you have selected. A toy accordion could accomplish the same thing and add music (or noise!) to your classroom.

Sentence Boxes

Sentence boxes work well, too, for visualizing sentence length. Choose a piece of writing from the transparencies in your Write Traits kit. Because these were actually written by



students, these authentic pieces of writing are motivating. Read the piece in its entirety so your class can assess the writer's sentence fluency using the student friendly rubric. In advance, write out the text on separate sentence strips. Cut them off to visually show the length of each sentence. Display them as a list, one underneath the other, on the whiteboard.

This sentence is short.

This sentence is longer than the first.

This sentence is quite a bit longer than the first sentences and the second sentence.

A good piece of writing will have a variety of lengths. Have students try this strategy using their own piece of writing. Ask them to copy a few of their sentences as a list onto notebook paper drawing boxes around each. Even with just 10 sentences copied in list form, they should see whether they have a variety of lengths.

You can use the Sentence Analyzer or S.O.S. sheet (discussed in last week's tip) to review your instruction on varying sentence openers and to identify sentence length at the same time. Add to it a column on counting the number of words in each sentence. As a class, determine what range (the number of words) you would identify as a short, medium, or long sentence. By taking the time to count up words per sentence and labeling them as short, medium, or long, students will get a snapshot of the kind of cadence they typically use.

So now what?

You have taken the time to show your students the importance of varying sentence length, and maybe they discover that they mostly use short, choppy sentences. Now hit hard on sentence combining activities, which can be found in *Daily Sentence Composing* and in the *Write Source 2000* handbook/language program (7th grade: pp.121-123, 523-540 and 8th grade: pp.115-120, 485-502 for 8th grade). Explicit, direct instruction in combining sentences will show your students how to create long, fluid sentences.

Source: Culham, Ruth. *6 + 1 Traits of Writing*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.

