

## 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 #37: Middle School Fair Tidbits

I had the unique opportunity to pop in and out of several literacy sessions at the Middle School Fair. Because we had seven out-of-state presenters sponsored by our publishers, I wanted to make sure everything went smoothly for them. Even though I have been to many trainings over the last 27 years and have files of excellent ideas, I still walked away with some new ideas from our in-service. I would like to summarize a few for you. I hope that you, too, discovered something new during your day at Mirror Lake.

#### ***Leigh Abbott, reading intervention specialist from Denver***

Leigh reminded me of the need for keeping an active pace with our middle school kids. Her rule of thumb is to "change the state" in her classroom every 11-15 minutes. She often creates change with movement, sometimes music. At one point in her session, she distributed handouts. She randomly chose 4 people to stand in each corner of the room. She gave each person 1/4 of the stack of the handouts. Her directions to us were, "In order to get your handout, you will have to go to one corner of the room. When you get there, say something nice to the person. Give them a compliment. If it is sincere and accepted by the person you have approached, he/she will give you a handout." I loved this! It got us out of our seats, temporarily changed the state of the room, and required us to speak/listen with a purpose of making the

other person feel good. It also got the handouts distributed. (Leigh told me at lunch that she sometimes distributes tests by simply taking the entire stack and throwing them up in the air. She then tells students to come up and get one. She doesn't overuse this gimmick, but it does create a bit of a fun frenzy to take students' minds off the pressure of a test. If you are brave enough to try that, let me know how it goes for you!)

#### ***Neilia Solberg (Step Up to Writing)***

Neilia reminded me of why brainstorming needs to be backed up with organizational strategies. We know that brainstorming is an excellent step for prewriting. However, if we ask students to write from a brainstormed list or web of ideas, they will generally write in the same order in which they brainstormed - randomly. This, of course, will create a weak piece of writing. She always takes the time to have students look for logical connections to create some kind of order in the brainstormed list. Her best piece of advice was, "Don't let students take out a blank sheet of notebook paper too soon. The longer you stay on the prewriting/planning stage, the better the final product will be."

#### ***Pat Paine, Holt***

Pat presented a twist on Probable Passage. The twist she presented was called Story Impressions. This prereading/writing activity



gets students actively predicting and connecting to a piece of text that is going to be read. Select 10 - 15 key concepts, vocabulary words, names, places, etc. in a list format on the left-hand side of a blackline master. Write them down in the order that they appear in the text. Then challenge the students to work in partners or groups to use all of the words in a story. The pre-selected words should show up in the student writing in the order that they are listed on the blackline master. (This seems to be one difference between Probable Passage and Story Impressions. Usually with Probable Passage, you ask students to categorize the words into four boxes: characters, setting, conflict, and resolution. This reinforces story elements.) Students then use their combined prior knowledge and their imagination to write a story based on the order of the words selected. Share the student stories aloud from group to group and on butcher paper, do a quick comparison/contrast. Hold off reading the real text until the following day. Motivation will be high because students have put a lot of energy into the activity and feel ownership. They will be very ready to hear how the author used the same list to create the published piece of literature. Compare/contrast again to determine which group story was closest to the author's. Discuss which story version used the terms the most effectively. Perhaps they will even like a student story better than the original text!

### ***Louise Matlasz, McDougal Littell***

Louise presented A Taste of CRISS. Within her session, she highlighted a vocabulary activity that can unify a school by presenting vocabulary through the content areas. In fact, Goldenview is already doing something very much like this. Ask departments (math, LA, soc. st., and science) to generate a vocabulary list of 30 words they would love to see all students learn by the end of the year. Choose

a schoolwide facilitator to use the intercom to present to students and staff the Word for the Day. (Remember you have at least 120 words that departments have given you, which should cover the entire year. Need more? Add in the elective teachers' word lists, too.) The facilitator announces the Word-of-the-Day and spells it. He/she reminds students to listen attentively throughout their day for the word to be used during instruction. Teachers are challenged to include that word in context within their lesson for the day at least once. (This means a student would hear that word at least 7 times in context throughout the day as they go from class to class.) Teachers should be encouraged to use any definition of the word and any form of it. For example, if the Word of the Day is *constitution*, then in social studies the teacher would probably refer to the Constitution of the United States. The home ec. teacher might use constitution in a much different way explaining the constitution of the bread they are baking. Doesn't this sound like fun? Content area vocabulary we want students to learn anyway, all staff contributing to the choice of words, all staff presenting the words ad lib throughout their lessons, and students learning the words through context. Yes, this could work!

### ***Mark Hansen, Great Source***

Mark reminded me of the need to teach the different text features that are found in various kinds of informational text. Challenge your class to a text feature scavenger hunt. Provide them magazines, brochures, newspapers, textbooks, technical manuals, etc. Have them generate a list of features they find. Refer to these features and their importance. When teaching a lesson, focus on a text feature found in the informational text. Have students evaluate its importance in that particular situation on a scale of 1-5. Compare student reactions. Bold-faced words, for example, are frequently found in



content area textbook selections. Take time to let students skim those bold-faced words. I know we all do this, but set the bar higher by then asking students to evaluate how helpful the bold-faced words actually were to their reading. Taking the time to rate these features will result in higher order thinking if you ask students to justify their reasoning.

### ***Thanks for Middle School Fair***

The last thing I want to chime in about today is also related to the Middle School Fair. I wanted to publicly thank these publishers for their generosity in sponsoring presenters for us, so I went to the Anchorage Daily News web site at <http://adn.com>. If you click on the Life section and follow the links, you can find a place to write a free, 100-word thank you to anyone you want. It is very user-friendly; however, it was a challenge for me (the wordy one) to limit my thanks to 100 words or less. It reminds me of the need to teach students this writing skill - being concise. Think of all the people who help make your team successful, and then thank them publicly throughout the year in the newspaper. This is a great way for us to build community spirit. I love reading this section of the newspaper, but I really never took the time to figure out the procedure.

