

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 #50: The ABC's of Literacy

This tip is a thematic one. I have been thinking about how often I stumble upon the ABC's as a graphic organizer or a connection to literacy, so this tip is a compilation of ABC ideas.

Alphabet Picture Books

I would be remiss if I didn't start with this. There are thousands of great ABC picture books that are published, and many of them are suited for the middle school student. In fact, when I went searching on amazon.com entering the keyword ABC books, I got 22,583 hits. My favorite series is by Jerry Pallotta. Have you seen *The Yucky Reptile Alphabet Book*? You will find these books great models for students to use when writing their own alphabet book on a non-fiction topic or when contributing a page to a class ABC book.

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0881064548/qid=1079049065/sr=1-7/ref=sr_1_7_xs_stripbooks_i7_xgl14/002-6454291-6588852?v=glance&s=books

Your science teachers know *Oh, Yuck: The Encyclopedia of Everything Nasty* because I have been using it in trainings with them. This book has short, scientific explanations on high interest topics like B for belly button lint and C for cannibalism.

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0761107711/qid=1079049356/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1_xs_stripbooks_i1_xgl14/002-6454291-6588852?v=glance&s=books

A + B + C = Topic Sentence

The content area teachers frequently demand summary writing from their students. Rescue them from the weak writing they get that sounds like the following:

This article was about blab, blab, blab, blab, blab...

Instead train your students to demand more of themselves by identifying the text they read thoroughly (A), choosing a strong verb that reflects the overall feeling of the text (B), and attaching the big idea they found as they were reading (C). Then students add on several main ideas from the text in order to complete their summary effectively.

Yes, this strategy is straight out of the *Step Up to Writing* binder, pp. 3-4 through 3-12, second edition. The [attached blackline master](#) is also duplicated in the binder, *Teaching Middle School Language Arts* (a.k.a. new teacher binder) and is being distributed to science teachers in my current trainings. Now you and your science teacher can share the strategy!



ABC Paragraph Revision Trick

The gist of this strategy is to revise basic paragraphs by asking students to start each sentence with the next letter of the alphabet. This will force them to revisit their writing and play with their sentence structure and word choice. This is a very challenging activity, and I wouldn't rely on it too much. You can make your point quickly by doing this a handful of times throughout the year. It is a nice reminder about the importance of sentence fluency and word choice, and how published authors agonize over these elements. See pp. 7-11 through 7-12 in the second edition of *Step Up to Writing*. They have a good *before* and *after* sample to display on the overhead projector.

ABC's of Literacy

Once your students have experienced the ABC Revision Trick for themselves, they will better appreciate [this 6th grader's poem](#) using a similar technique. Another good student example can be found on p. 206 of the *Write Source 2000* handbook. That example starts a poem with the letter "h" and finishes with the letter "m."

Alphaboxes

Use [an alphabox graphic organizer](#) as a way to collect vocabulary before launching into a literature selection. This will activate students' prior knowledge, engage them in prediction, and get them ready to read. Another good use of the alphabox is for closing up a lesson or a unit. Save the alphabox that you used *before* reading and then compare it to the *after* reading alphabox. This shows students how much they have learned.

"Who can give me a term or a phrase that reflects something new they learned today as we studied _____?" Collect student

thoughts randomly but also consider differentiating the activity by calling out certain letters. "Can anybody give me a term for the W box?"



WRITING EFFECTIVE SUMMARIES

A. Identify!

You can identify what you are summarizing in a variety of ways. The following are okay, better, and best ways to identify what it is you are summarizing.

OK: The book
 The film
 The article

BETTER: *Painless Public Speaking*
Forrest Gump
"Going Under the Light"

BEST: *Painless Public Speaking* by
 Sharon Bower
 The movie, *Forrest Gump*
 "Going Under the Light" from
 Newsweek, October 2, 1995

B. Select a Verb!

acknowledges	evaluates
adds	explains*
advises	explores
answers	expresses
asks	features
asserts	furnishes
assures	gives
blames	identifies
captures	illustrates
clarifies	invites
classifies	judges
compares*	lists*
confirms	misjudges
confronts	names
confuses	offends
contrasts	praises
considers	predicts
critiques	presents*
demonstrates	proposes
defends	provides
defines*	recommends
denounces	shows*
depicts	simplifies
describes*	solves
discourages	suggests
encourages	supports
endorses	teaches
entertains	tells*
entices	traces

C. Finish Your Thought!

The final part of the topic sentence is easy if you just ask yourself:

- *What is the big idea?*
- *What is the big concept?*
- *What is the main idea of the item that I am summarizing?*

Keep in mind that this is just your topic sentence and that you will be adding all of the facts in the body of your summary paragraph.

Step Up to Writing by Maureen Auman
<http://www.sopriswest.com>

A + B + C = TOPIC SENTENCE *Painless Public Speaking* by Sharon Bower provides a number of practical hints for people who are afraid of speaking in front of a group.

BODY: Create a fact outline. Then add those facts to your paragraph in sentence form.

HELPFUL HINTS: Use transitions only if they help. Summaries do not need a formal conclusion. If you force a conclusion, it might sound awkward. Also formal conclusions include opinions - you do not want an opinion in a summary.

The ABC's of Literacy

An author
Breaks through the writing block barrier,
Creating pictures
Doing them as
Easily as an artist at an easel.
Finally, dashes of color,
Greens and blues of imagination add the finishing touch.
His work is brilliant; it has beautiful
Ideas that just make you want to read forever!
Kites of fantasy fly through his story.
Long,
Mysterious plots thicken as you read on.
Not a boring part – always exciting.
One mistake. Does it matter? There will
Probably be thousands more in the day.
Quiet, please. Writer at work.
Rooms brimming with waste baskets
Stuffed full of
Terrible mistakes and oopses.
Unrealistic, you say?
Very true. But it
Was meant to be that way.
X-cellent fantasies, mysteries, from a
Yellow pen pout. As you read,
Zillions of ideas for your own stories come.

Charlyn H. Gee

Gee was in the sixth grade at Whitefish Bay Middle School in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, when this was published in *The Reading Teacher*, May, 1995.

Alphaboxes

A	B	C	D
E	F	G	H
I	J	K	L
M	N	O	P
Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X, Y, Z

