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 #6: Compare and Contrast

Did you watch the gubernatorial debates last night? Are your students talking about the upcoming election? This is a great time to address one of the most common critical thinking skills, comparison and contrast. (Did you know that on some state tests up to 44% of the questions are based on this skill?)

Two Voices

To address comparison/contrast in a unique way, try reading and writing poems for two voices. Paul Fleischman has written two such books called Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices (poems about insects) and I Am Phoenix: Poems for Two Voices (poems about birds).

1. Display one of his poems for two voices on the overhead projector. Show the students how to read these. The left hand column is for speaker #1, the right hand column is for speaker #2, and in the middle where the text aligns, both speakers read in unison. It makes for a very dramatic oral reading.

2. Use this poetry pattern to help students with comparing and contrasting. As a class, use a Venn diagram to compare/contrast the gubernatorial candidates' platforms. Begin by trying to find what the candidates have in common and write down those ideas where the two circles overlap. Then discuss how their platforms are different and record those ideas in the other two circles. The Venn diagram graphic organizer helps students visualize comparison/contrast.

3. Now try writing a poem for two voices using Ulmer and Murkowski. Do this as a whole class or put students into partners to try it on their own. Use three columns on writing paper: 1) Ulmer's voice, 2) unison, and 3) Murkowski's voice. The students' writing ideas should come from the Venn diagrams. This poetry format will really help students view the issues from two different points of view. Be sure to have speakers perform these orally! (Check out part of a high school poem about the 19th amendment written for two voices.)

4. Extensions? Always! Apply this idea to the literature you are using in class. If you are an 8th grade teacher reading Nothing But the Truth by Avi, consider a poem for two voices between Phillip Malloy and Mrs. Narwin. If you are a 7th grade teacher reading The Adventure of Ulysses, write a poem between Ulysses and the

Sirens. Think about the power of this strategy. Students have to recall the text, they need a good understanding of the story, and they have to be able to think from two different characters' points of view. Also consider using this poetry format as a way to have students share their independent (recreational) reading with others in the class. Hearing a poem for two voices on a book a student has never read may be just the ticket to get him/her hooked! Revisit this poetry format later in the year by using it as a structure for a test question after a novel study. Share it with your teammates, too, so it can appear again in the context of their curriculum.

Source

This idea was shared by Rick Moulden (consultant with Prentice Hall) at the Oct. 9 language arts gathering at UAA. He will be presenting again at the Nov. 11 cross-district in-service. Look him up!

POEM FOR TWO VOICES
Should the 19th
Amendment Be Ratified?
(Sample high school)

Male US Senator (Voice #1)	(Unison Voices)	Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Voice #2)
I am a male US senator.		
		I am Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
	We have come together to share our opinions about the nineteenth amendment.	
This foolish amendment must be changed! It is what allows women to vote..		
		Women need the right to vote. We need to be able to speak our views.
Women give life, sustain like, and nurture life. It's not their job to decide who's running the country.		
	You're absolutely wrong!	
		You wouldn't be her today if it weren't for women. We've earned the right to vote.