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Children Can Write in Paragraphs and Enjoy It!

Hope W. Dunne

How many of you conscientious teachers have felt that you have "turned off" your YOUNG AUTHORS as you have discussed and studied paragraph development - topic sentences, supporting ideas, concluding sentences, writing from outlining and other traditional ways of developing paragraph awareness? Do your children really enjoy finding the topic sentence in the workbook exercise and crossing out sentences unrelated to the paragraph? My observation of most children's writing is that such activities make little impact upon it. Hundreds of research studies have found that most children do not apply such learned generalizations to their personal writing.

The first step to help children gain paragraph awareness requires oral activity experiences. This writer advocates starting with BRAINSTORMING kernel sentences (noun-verb) related to a particular topic or activity. This introductory activity has been found to be successful with all children, regardless of their age or maturity. This plan can insure that children write factual reports and experience stories in complete sentences and lead to paragraph development. The rest of this article will describe the way it works.



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ORAL ACTIVITY

After finishing a unit of study - social studies, science, health - a good way to review is to BRAINSTORM kernel sentences related to the material just studied. The whole class participates and the kernel sentences are recorded on the chalkboard or chart paper.

The following examples of kernel sentences resulted from a fourth grade class brainstorming after studying a unit on Forest Regions.

loggers yell
lumberjacks saw
trees crash
moss seeps
forest smells
fires burn
animals survive
seeds sprout
water evaporates
pulp cooks
environment communicates
rangers enforce
bears jump
helmets protect
people conserve

Next, the class is encouraged to choose one kernel sentence for chalkboard development with the teacher. It is expanded into a main idea sentence by adding adjectives, adverbs and prepositional phrases. To achieve this the teacher asks for words to **describe** the noun, to **tell how** the action took place, **where** and **when**. With the topic sentence completed, the children choose related kernel sentences (supporting ideas) for sentence expansion - to complete the details of the paragraph. **Sufficient oral**

activity must take place in the classroom to insure **individual success later** in writing a story or report in paragraphs.

INDIVIDUAL WRITING

1. Provide each child with a set of three or more blank squares (4"x5") in **different colors**, made from construction paper.
2. Have **each child decide** which **kernels** he/she would like to use as **main ideas** in writing a story about the unit. Write a kernel sentence on each of the colored squares. The child should be encouraged to **group** together **two or three related kernel sentences**, placing them on the back of each card. (Look at the grouping that could take place from the example above.) The kernels on the back are used as details to develop the **main idea** kernel into a paragraph.
3. Encourage each child to manipulate the order of the colored squares in deciding upon the sequence for writing the story (report).
4. Have the child develop the kernel sentences on each colored square into a paragraph. To make the story flow smoothly, encourage the use of transitional words to show **chronological** order - i.e. when, next, after that, soon; to show **cause and effect** - i.e. therefore, because, since.

Dale, a fourth grade boy, carried this out by choosing three kernel sentences, placing each on a different colored square. He placed them in the following order:

1. loggers work
2. logs are transported
3. lumber is used

On the reverse side of each of the kernel sentences, he wrote:

1. cut down trees
saw trees
haul trees
2. hauled to the sawmill
pulled to the debarker
cut into lumber

3. doghouses
houses
books
desks
paper
firewood

Here is his story.

Forest Happenings

Busy loggers work very hard. First they cut down the rough trees. They sing while they saw down trees. They haul the heavy trees to the truck.

Afterwards, the logs are transported by trucks, or by the river, to the sawmill. First they are pulled to the debarker by a moving chain. Here the bark is taken off the logs. Finally they are cut into lumber.

Lumber is used for doghouses and houses. So many things are made out of wood. You can use it to make desks and paper for books. The scraps that are left can be used for firewood.

The teacher*, who submitted the above example said, "After this lesson, the children seemed to have a better understanding of paragraph structure. I was pleased with our first attempt using this technique. It will be used often with various topics." In fact she did and the following example shows the growth that took place in Mrs. M.'s room during the year.

Kernel Sentences BRAINSTORMED by the class after studying the water cycle:

water changes
sun heats
water rises
sun draws
water evaporates
water dries
droplets collect
air cools
clouds form
condensation occurs
steam appears
precipitation falls
rain soaks
water seeps
precipitation forms
rain runs
water flows

*Ruth Murphy, fourth grade teacher, Fisher School, Marquette, Michigan.

rainfall returns
lakes evaporate
liquid changes
gas changes
pans dry
droplets form

Julie prepared to write her report by selecting three kernel sentences to place on different colored cards. Her finished story has an introductory and concluding paragraph.

1. water evaporates
2. condensation occurs
3. precipitation falls

On the reverse side of each she wrote:

1. sun heats
water changes
water rises
seawater changes
sun draws
lakes evaporate
liquid changes
pans dry
water areas dry
mud holes dry
2. condensation forms
droplets collect
clouds form
droplets form
air cools
gas forms
steam appears
3. rain soaks
rain seeps
rain runs
rainfall returns
water flows
precipitation forms

Here is her story.

The Water Cycle

The water cycle is very important to us on our planet. This continuous movement of the water to the atmosphere and back to the earth involves three parts.

During the first part water evaporates into the air. This is called evaporation. This happens when the sun heats the water and the water vapor goes into the air. The effects of this can be seen in many areas on hot days. Mud holes dry, along with small pools and lakes.

After evaporation, condensation occurs. Water vapor rises into the air. As it rises, it is cooled. Sometimes it may cool enough to collect into droplets. If enough droplets collect, clouds form.

When the droplets become large enough, precipitation falls to the earth. It may fall as snow, sleet, rain, or hail. The rain seeps into the ground or the water flows into lakes or rivers.

If water flows too quickly or if there is a large amount of moving water, the land could be ruined. Trees may be damaged or killed. Watersheds could be destroyed. Soil could be eroded. All of this could eliminate animal habitats and their food.

Eventually, it will evaporate once again and the cycle will continue.

As you can see this kind of preparation not only helps the child to write in paragraphs but prevents copying from the reference book!

As **every** child in the classroom is made to feel that **each** has something **important** inside him/her to say and that in writing it, he/she **becomes an author**, the ground is laid for studying how other authors write their stories and books. Discovery lessons can take place on paragraph formation. Led by a skillful teacher's questions, children will learn that an author indents for different ideas to help the reader understand what is written; that each paragraph deals with one topic or theme; that the sentences in the paragraph are related to each other. With these discoveries well in mind, the kernel sentence teaching strategy for paragraph development will be most successful.