

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Polishing Writing Video Transcript

Jenee Ramos:

Can I see hands again of people who are thinking about doing short fiction or a short story? Yes, beautiful. Can I see hands of people who are thinking about personal memoir? Exactly. Okay, what we're going to go over quickly today will be something that can help everybody working on both of those types of pieces. There's two things we're going to look at. First, this self-revision checklist talks about having an engaging opening. What does that really mean? Well, we're going to play around with that a little bit today.

Today's class was a way to get them to think back over how we polish our work, how we get to a place where we're complacent about our writing, and happy to compliment each other a lot. We'll slow down and look at what we applaud in other writers' work, what engages us and makes us feel like we want to keep reading.

One of the first things that your peer commenters are going to look at is your title, and whether or not the opening grabs you or hooks the reader. Another thing is this idea of varying your sentence structure. Your peer commenter is also looking at the sentence variation. Check that your sentences begin in a variety of ways. So we're going to talk about that. And check the beginning. Is there an inciting incident that grabs the reader's attention?

They have a number of checklists and different conversations that we've had around how to polish their work, but I haven't seen that happening in their successive drafts. So today's class was about sort of slowing down and taking a look at things like your openings.

Anybody have an idea about a way to start either piece in an engaging way?

Student:

I guess you could start with dialogue or something, conversation.

Ramos:

Okay, good. So just start right off the bat with some sort of dialogue. Awesome. We're actually going to look at some openings and see how that works for

people. I'm going to have you partner up. I'm actually going to give you a card that has either an effective opening on it, an engaging opening, or maybe a not-so-effective opening. And what I want you to do is read the card. And you're going to say what the technique was that this writer used.

I do tend to use a workshopish like model. So I'll start with some sort of a lesson, which we'll do at the beginning, and then they'll do some group work. So there's a lot of mini little projects happening. So the students understand that, "This is my chance to really work on the differentiation that I want to."

Student:

Oh, yeah, because...

Student:

And, like, you don't know what it is.

Student:

Or not.

Ramos:

Managing the organized chaos and finding a way to differentiate within it has been a lot of practice. I know who I need to go to before class starts. I know when there are certain groups of kids that I actually don't need to see.

Student:

So for the technique, paragraphs kind of started with, like, the beginning of a conflict. We felt like it was effective because the opening sentence hooked the reader in. Because we, like, questioned what the conflict was. But we didn't believe it was effective because after the author made the scenario seem more significant than it actually was.

Ramos:

Okay, that's interesting. I like that.

Student:

"Have you ever taken a trip on which you had such a wonderful time that you thought it could never happen again? A trip so great that you thought it was too good to be true? Well, I did, five years ago."

Student:

The technique that was used here is that the author used a question to open up the paragraph. We felt that that was very effective because it almost feels like

you're not really reading something, you're almost having a conversation, so you're more intrigued with the actual piece.

Ramos:

Okay, so that was effective to you guys.

Student:

Yes.

Ramos:

How about the rest of this particular paragraph? The second sentence was also a question. So it's like the conversation is continuing.

Dalia:

She really highlights personal styles in writing. I think it's great, because it allows people to start, you know, developing their own voice in writing. Because everyone, you know, has a very specific style. But it's not always pinpointed by English teachers, because they're just looking for this one single format. And I think Ms. Ramos is looking for a format, but she wants to be able to tell who's writing it.

Student:

I want to keep reading. And, like, it's very intriguing.

Ramos:

Awesome. So the question is, do you want to keep reading? And you said, without my asking, that you would want to keep reading. So I guess that works for you. Very, very good. Something to consider in your own writing.

There's so much that we need to slow down and talk about, and I've had the ability to do that in this class, taking our time with not only the reading, but the ways in which we respond to the reading.

The last thing that we're going to do today is a little exercise playing around with how you modify your sentences so that you have a paragraph that's actually sort of musical. So I've got a quote here. Can somebody talk for just a quick second about what Provos did here?

Student:

Well, he used sentences with, like, various different lengths, and that kind of created...like, it set the mood. And he just, like, balanced everything, and then he created, like, a rhythm to it.

Ramos:

Yep.

Student:

So it kept the reader, like, interested, and you want to, like, keep reading, I guess.

Ramos:

Is there a sentence in particular that you feel like really started to make that happen?

Student:

Well, he says, "I use short sentences, and I use sentences of medium length, and sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, blah, blah, blah." With, like, the crescendo, and the drums, and everything. So...

Ramos:

Excellent. So what I want you to do is think about literally varying your sentence length, but also think about where you want the sentence to start. I'm going to give you a sheet of paper that we're going to work on together. Everybody will have a chance to talk to me before we go. How about... Myra, can you say yours?

Myra:

"The lifeguard furiously blew her whistle at 4:00 to clear the pool." And I said, "At 4:00 the lifeguard furiously blew her whistle to clear the pool."

Ramos:

Perfect. You didn't leave out any words. You just changed the order around, right? So thinking about doing that in your own writing could actually really sort of change the flow of it.

Dalia:

The revision process for me is always a little difficult. Because when you write something you feel a little sentimental. You don't want to let it go, some of the things you write, you know? It's like, "Wait, that sentence is good, but it's not necessary, but it's good," you know? For, like, personally. But then when someone else reads it, they're like, "You know, I don't see how this connects."

Student:

"From the bench, the players "loudly shouted encouragement to spur their team's victory in last night's game." Yeah, you just have to start off with...

Student:

Exactly.

Ramos:

Learning is important. Effective teaching is important. That means spending, you know, an extra week and a half or two weeks or three weeks on a particular skill with a particular text so that we don't get to everything that we thought we were going to, or that was believed that we should. At the end of the day, that teacher power is actually pretty important, that sense that this is what's best for these kids right now, and this is where we're headed.

Do you notice all six of these, if I'm not mistaken, start with the word, "The"? Even just changing the one word that seems to repeat itself in a couple of the sentences could go a long way. What would the effect be of your going back to maybe one or two of your old paragraphs and changing the beginning, the way you start or structure one or two sentences in that paragraph? Any thoughts?

Student:

I think it would kind of keep the reader more interested in reading. Because I know sometimes when I read things, and, like, it's the same sentence over and over again, with the same structure, it gets kind of boring, and everything starts to sound the same.

Ramos:

Great. It's something to take a look at. I'm not suggesting that you do this for every paragraph. I'm loving your paragraphs. But as you think about polishing your writing, it's something to consider.

What's great about the Common Core, I believe, is that it's not a prescription for what teachers should do. There's so much choice and personal style and variety that you can bring to some of these great recommendations.