

Given Language Exercises

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Three of us are developing **given language** exercises that seem to generate interesting sentences from at least some students. In a text provided by the teacher (**given language**), students are asked to make **text substitutions** or to provide **text fillers**. These exercises are preparatory to introducing **generating frames** which withhold portions of a text but supply cues suggesting language that will satisfy the gaps. Our goals are

1. To make writing easier for some students;
2. To help students write more vividly, with pleasure and pride;
3. To help students use concrete images in their writing;
4. To focus students' attention on concrete imagery, personifications, sound and rhythmic patterns or other specific uses of language which the teacher and students are studying.

To accomplish our goals we have developed the following procedures and materials:

Text Substitutes

Text Substitutes produce exercises in which students are given a piece of writing and asked to substitute their own words for words in the text. For example, students are given a sentence such as this:

In the winter, California grey whales migrate south to the Baja.

Students are invited to play with this sentence according to whatever rules the teacher imposes. The teacher may tell the student to substitute some word for Baja, for example, or invite the student to provide a substitute phrase for California grey whales. Students, in turn, may construct sentences like these:

In the winter, California grey whales migrate south to Mexico.

or

In the winter, Canadian geese migrate south to Michigan.

or

In the late spring, yellow taxi cabs flock to Paris.

Starting with the **given sentence** on the chalk board, students might be asked to think about possible changes, decide on preferable changes, and write the revised sentence on their paper. Then, sentences might be read aloud in small groups or used as **first sentences** for a piece of original writing, or strung together in ways students find interesting. The uses for such sentences may be as diverse as the teacher wishes them to be.

Text Fillers

Text Fillers produce exercises in which students provide words for holes made in a model passage. This procedure asks students to provide words to complete a partially given text. Since parts of the given text are withheld, **Text Fillers** may be both difficult and invite more imaginative responses. As an example, we return to our original sentence, but this time we withhold some of the text:

In _____, California _____ migrate south to _____.

A student might compose lines like these:

In autumn, California grape harvesters migrate south to the orange groves.

or

In cold weather, California surfers migrate south to warmer beaches.

Again, a number of rules can modify the play, increase the difficulty, or focus attention on particular aspects of language (such as kinesthetic imagery) or structure (such as prepositional phrases).

Generating Frames

The step from **Text Substitutes** and **Text Fillers** to **Generating Frames** may be a bigger step than some students want to take. But inviting students to try **Generating Frames** may be inviting them to achieve images, connections, and figures of speech they wouldn't otherwise attempt.

In **Generating Frames**, we withhold one or more of the "context-giving" portions of a text and provide "cues" to suggest what language might satisfy the gap. For example, beginning again with our original sentence, we create this **Generating Frame**.

In _____
(1) this season (2) these animals
migrate _____
(3) in this direction

(4) to this place.

A student might substitute language much like that of the original.

In (1) early autumn, (2) pelicans
migrate (3) south (4) to sun-filled
lagoons.

To introduce **Generating Frames** to students, a teacher may provide copies of one or more of the frames like those suggested here and have students fill in the blanks. The procedure we believe works best is to have students work quickly, letting the structure of the frame and the cues inspire the semantics. If they do move quickly through the frames, there will be some strange results. But the filled-in frame might be a first-draft for a later revision. In the transfer from **Generating Frames** to real writing, all changes that seem right are encouraged--including changes in the words in the **Generating Frame** that were given.

Some students will want to continue to revise their material. Almost surely there will be interest in sharing revised texts by reading some aloud. Just as surely, some texts will be left in the graveyard of failed beginnings. The teacher can encourage students to discuss their feelings about the process. Many students have interesting things to say

about both the invitations and the restrictions **Generating Frames** provide. The following are some **Generating Frames** you may wish to try in your own classroom.

Generating Frame I

On _____
(1) this topographical feature of

(2) this specific place (3) situated

this way between these two landmarks
stands _____
(4) this size, character, and

color of building.

(5) These decorative features do this

to the building
and before _____
(6) lies
stretches
stands

this natural feature
Lately _____
(7) this has been true of the building

(8) This long ago, this other thing

was true

Generating Frame II

When _____
(1) this ordinary event occurred

(2) in this specific place

(3) this person (4) did this

(5) and this

_____ .
(6) and this.

_____ .
(7) Another person (identified by his/
_____ ,
her work) did this,

_____ .
(8) in this place different from the
_____ ,
place in (2)

_____ .
(9) did this and this--vaguely against
_____ .
or in conflict with (6)

_____ .
If _____ .
(10) this second person (in 7) saw
_____ ,
this happen

_____ .
if _____ .
(11) he/she believed/imagined or
_____ ,
felt this

_____ .
(12) he/she did not reveal it.

Our yet-unproved hunch is that first-rate professional writing is our best source for the **given language** we might want to use in developing **Generating Frames**. We are trying to construct sequences or catalogues of **Generating Frames** that focus on particular qualities such as concrete imagery, personifications, or even sound and rhythmic patterns. We can control the difficulty of the **Generating Frame** and the amount of writing it invites by careful selection of texts, by the number of words or phrases we withhold from a text, and by how much specific help we offer through cues.

What we like most about **Generating Frames** is that the writer must produce most of the language. Other **given-language** techniques, including most sentence-combining exercises, give

most of the language to the student and ask only for manipulation. Also, with **Generating Frames**, the cues can provide a kind of tether to imagination without limiting it severely. Many of our students say they are "turned on" by **Generating Frames**.

We also like the idea of going to the masters for our model sentences, but the search for particular patterns, rhythms, or for sentences with given linguistic characteristics, is slow and sometimes frustrating. Nonetheless, we're building several sequences of **Generating Frames** and hope to test them out carefully: Do **Generating Frames** make writing easier for some kinds of students? Do they help some students write more vividly, or with considerable pleasure or pride? Do some students write more concrete images after practice with **Generating Frames**? What kinds of students respond what ways?

The key question seems to be: Will students be helped by **Generating Frames** to write good sentences they wouldn't have otherwise written? If you try **Generating Frames** and want to share samples of your students' work, or tell us how students felt about the work, please write us. Should you want them, we'll provide the original texts from which these **frames** were built. One came from a well-known, living poet. The other came from a prominent novelist of the 20th century.

We think these two **frames** may be of average difficulty for ninth- or tenth-grade students. We know some middle-school students and some adults who have been able and willing to complete them. If you write, let us know where you tried them and with what results.

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