**Writing Prompt #1**

*The World’s Longest Sentence* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support)

Goals:

* focus students’ attention on the use of variety in sentence length and structure
* practice the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions
* practice the use of punctuation such as dashes, colons

Constraints:

* no semicolons!

Students are given a sheet of paper and must compose a sentence – one sentence- that fills the entire page. Once they reach the bottom of the page, they can stop, even if it’s mid-word. This exercise works extremely well with higher level ELLs, and can be extended by having students flip over the page and fill the back with sentences that are each no more than 5 words long. These are particularly fun to read aloud in class using robot voices, illustrating how a good piece of writing needs both long and short sentences in order to achieve a rhythm that is pleasant to read.

*I have never learned how to swim despite having had many people try to teach me – my mother, my father, my sister and both my brothers – and despite having had formal lessons throughout my childhood and adolescence, lessons which basically resulted in my getting wet and terrified and my instructors, who were all kind, excellent teachers, becoming frustrated and wondering if, perhaps, I was simply being willful and stubborn in my refusal to learn what was, to them at least, a basic and simple skill that anyone should be able to master, but in fact I really just couldn’t swim, and actually couldn’t even float, no matter how hard or how frequently I tried, and I DID try, because learning to swim became an issue of self-esteem for me, causing me to feel varying degrees of mortification and self-doubt as I watched all my friends easily become like otters in the water while I continued to struggle and fail over and over again, eventually developing, I’m sorry to say, a real fear of water that further inhibited my ability to learn and putting other water-related activities out of reach, such as kayaking, which is a great favourite of my family and which they are able to do because I absolutely insisted that my kids learn how to swim.*

*I put on my bathing suit. I stand at the edge. My teacher is waiting. She’s in the water. She smiles encouragingly. “Jump!” she says. “No,” I say. I will not jump. I jumped yesterday. “I will catch you,” she said. She didn’t catch me yesterday. I sank to the bottom. My nose filled with water. My throat filled with water. My mouth filled with water. I flailed. I couldn’t see. I was scared. She pulled me up. She pulled my suit strap. I surfaced. I coughed. I gasped. I shouted at her. “You lied! You didn’t catch me!” I was so angry. Later, my mother was angry. “Don’t shout at teachers!” “Teacher tricked me,” I muttered. Now, the teacher smiles. “Trust me,” she says. Hahahahaha nope.*

**Writing Prompt #2**

*Story Starters* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support)

Goals:

* written fluency

Constraints:

* keep it clean and respectful (no sex, no drugs, rock & roll ok)
* PRINT LEGIBLY USING BLOCK LETTERS IF NECESSARY

Each student is given a piece of paper with a sentence or phrase written at the top. Their job is to continue the story until the teacher yells “Stop!” At that point they must stop, even if they are mid-sentence, and pass their paper to the person on their left. As each student receives a new story, they are given time to read what is written and continue the story as they see fit. When the paper is in their hands, they have complete control of the narrative. Be sure to give ample time for students to read as well as continue the story. They’ll need a little more time each turn as the stories advance. When you feel that it’s time to wrap things up, tell students, “This is your last turn. Try to conclude the story.” I like to use each student’s names in the sentence starters and give them the story with their name to read aloud to the class. This has honestly been one of the most successful and enjoyable writing activities I’ve done! It’s great for Halloween, as you can give “spooky” sentence starters and end up with some hilarious ghost, zombie stories. Reluctant writers nearly always step up the effort for this one. Below are some sample starting sentences:

1. *No one had warned Meg that there were sharks in the water…*
2. *Robin had been terrified of clowns, ever since the night a…*
3. *Christabel was certain that the dog with the glowing red eyes was following her…*
4. *Kim heard a woman scream from the apartment next door…*
5. *“Why did my car have to break down here, on this dark, deserted dirt road,” Blake wondered…*
6. *Hannah rolled over in bed and gasped when she saw…*
7. *Jenny was delighted to receive an anonymous love letter in the mail, but then…*
8. *Parabjot wished she had never taken the bet to spend the night in…*
9. *Nicola had always hated her roommate’s antique doll.*
10. *Zafrin decided to explore the abandoned asylum…*
11. *The letter from \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ changed Nick’s life completely.*

**Writing Prompt #3**

*Gorgeous Words* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered for support)

Goals:

* vocabulary expansion
* parts of speech
* more descriptive writing

Students work as a class to brainstorm their favourite English words (emphasize that this is based on how they sound, it could even be a word they have heard but don’t know the meaning of or a word in their own language). Words go up on whiteboard as they are shouted out. Try to have students organize them into columns based on part of speech. Emphasize that students are meant to choose words that they like the *sound* of, but it’s interesting to point out how hard it is to separate meaning from sound. Words have strong connotations, so even though I love the sound of *austere,* I have to consciously force myself not to think about its definition. Once a good selection is up on the board (15-20 words works really well) have students discuss/look up meanings of unfamiliar words. Then the task is to create sentences using as many of the words as possible in a single sentence. This can be expanded by having students write their sentences up on the board and then choose sentences to go together into a poem or short paragraph.

*My favourites:*

*Nouns: serendipity, gravitas, incandescence, delicatessen, willow, treble clef, plethora, brook, lullaby, birdsong*

*Verbs: carmelize, tremble, dream, cascade, mystify, surround*

*Adjectives: ticklish, mellifluous, austere, luxurious, derelict, redolent, perilous,*

*The willow trembles in the gentle breeze and dangles its branches in the brook, surrounded by a forest redolent with green smells and the lullaby of birdsong*

**Writing Prompt #4**

*Conversations* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may write as much as they are able, with no minimum requirement)

Goals:

* predicting (reading skill)
* inference (reading skill)
* focus on appropriate register

Constraints:

* script must predict a possible outcome in the upcoming chapter
* conversation should be “realistic” based on what students have inferred about character[s] involved
* conversation should aim to be register appropriate, depending on who is talking and in what situation
* conversation should be based on what students have predicted about characters’ possible experiences in an unread chapter

This is a bridge exercise to link to a new chapter during a novel study. I will use *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as my example. Students begin by working with a partner to enact the conversation in the scene where Junior tells Rowdy his plan to go to Reardon high school, off –rez. Emphasize that they are not to just read the whole page, but just to isolate the quoted speech, the actual conversation. Then students work in small groups to discuss what they predict Junior’s experience will be on his first day of school. How will he feel? How will people react to him? Who will he meet? Then students work with a new partner to compose a script-form dialogue between Junior and one other person. As they have not read the chapter yet, they will choose a “type” rather than a real character, for example, a popular girl, a jock, a bully, a teacher, a school secretary. A minimum of 10 exchanges works best, but give no minimum to ELLs. Again, concluding by having students act out their conversations is fun and can lead to lots of predictive discussion.

**Writing Prompt #5**

*A Letter to A Literary Character* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support)

Goals:

* to deepen understanding of and engagement with a text
* focus on appropriate register

This is another writing task that links to novel study. Have students compose a letter of advice to a character in the novel they are reading. For my example, I will be writing a letter to Romeo, giving him some much-needed relationship advice. Tell students that they are to write the letter as though the character is either a good friend (informal register) or as though they are a “therapist” and the character is their patient (more formal register).

*Dear Juliet,*

*I know you think you’re in love with this guy you’ve just met, but girl, you only JUST MET HIM. And to be quite frank, he’s kind of a noodle, don’t you think? You’re so young! What are you, like 14? That is crazy young to be thinking about getting married to anyone, much less this dude who spends all his time moping about love. Besides, Juliet, you’re totally just a rebound thing for him. It wasn’t even a full day ago that he was mooning over some girl called Rosamund. Or was it Rosalind? Rosie? I can’t remember. I doubt he can remember, either. The truth is, Romeo is a serial monogamist, Juliet. You know what that means? It means he’ll get tired of you. He may say he’s willing to die for you now (by the way, it’s super creepy when guys say that) but he’ll be panting after someone else in under a week. Guaranteed. Now, I’m not suggesting you should follow your parents’ wishes and hook up with this guy they have all picked out for you. Paris is a huge drag. But at 14, you have plenty of time to wait for the real thing and make your own choices, so just chill for awhile. Maybe focus on your education. Marriage can wait, trust me.*

*Yours truly,*

*A Friend*

**Writing Prompt #6**

*Expand the Story* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support)

Goals:

* to draw attention to the use of non-identifying relative clauses as a way of packing in information and description
* for higher grades, to draw a distinction between identifying and non-identifying relative clauses and to practice the use of reduced relative clauses to streamline writing (if you’re interested: <http://esl.about.com/od/grammarstructures/a/Reduced-Relative-Clauses.htm>)
* to think of other ways to make writing descriptive beyond the use of adjectives and adverbs

Constraints:

* students must expand the paragraph with as many non-identifying clauses as they can

Give students a bare bones narrative paragraph and have them re-write it to be more informative and descriptive by adding the constraint above.

*Original paragraph*

*Melanie took a cab to the airport. She was making a trip to Toronto. Unfortunately, half-way to the airport she realized that she had left her suitcase at her apartment. She was running quite late, but she asked the cabbie to turn around and take her back. When she arrived at her building, she found that the elevator was out of order. She sprinted back up to her apartment, retrieved her suitcase and hurried back down to the street. The cab had vanished. Furious, Melanie stood on the curb and hailed cab after cab, but because it was raining, they were all occupied with passengers.*

*Expanded paragraph*

*Melanie, a young woman who had recently been given a marvelous promotion, took a cab to the airport, which was about an hour away from her apartment. She was making a trip to Toronto, where she was going to meet the president of her company and attend a number of important business meetings. Unfortunately, half-way to the airport, she realized that she had forgotten her suitcase, which contained all her vital paperwork, at her apartment. She was running quite late, which was typical for her, but she asked the cabbie, who was grumpy and also smelled of alcohol, to turn around and take her back. When she arrived at her building, a beautiful old red brick building, she found that the elevator was out of order. She sprinted up to her apartment, which was on the 13th floor, retrieved her suitcase and hurried back down to the street, which was now slick and grey with the rain that had recently begun to fall. The cab had vanished. Furious, Melanie stood on the curb and hailed cab after cab, but because it was raining they were all occupied with passengers.*

**Writing Prompt #7**

*If…* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support and may need additional grammar instruction on conditional structures)

Goals:

* to practise accurate use of real and hypothetical conditions (ie. to avoid mistakes like *If I will win a million dollars…* or *If I would have known…*)

Constraint:

* students must vary the clause order in their sentences as shown in exemplar

This writing task focuses students’ attention on using conditional sentences.Students create a series of conditional sentences, each one using the result clause from the preceding sentence in the condition clause of the next. Make sure to point out the difference in comma use depending on which clause comes first in the sentence.

*If I had known he was going to win the lottery, I would have married him. I wouldn’t be living in a crappy rat-infested apartment, if I had married him. If I weren’t living in a crappy, rat-infested apartment, I would be able to host our annual family Christmas party. I wouldn’t have to drive all the way to Calgary if I were able to host our annual family Christmas party. If I didn’t have to drive all the way to Calgary, I would be able to work over the Christmas holidays. I would have more money if I were able to work over the Christmas holidays. If I had more money, I would be able to buy a new laptop. I would spend way too much time on social media if I had a new laptop. If I spent way too much time on social media, I would probably discover who he married. I would be jealous and unhappy if I discovered who he married.*

**Writing Prompt #8**

*Passive Practice* (adaptable to any grade level but much better for higher grades; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support and may need additional grammar instruction on passive structures)

Goals:

* to focus students’ attention on when to use and when to avoid the passive voice in their writing

This prompt is intended as a “fun” task to supplement a more “grammar-y” mini-unit on passive and active voice. Therefore, assume that before attempting this exercise, students have a good understanding of passive grammar and are able to identify subjects and objects in a sentence! Have each student write simple sentences in the active voice (Subject-Verb-Object). The sentences should be in a variety of tenses. When they are done, students exchange papers and work to transform their sentences into passive voice. Passive voice sentences go on the board.

Active Sentences Passive Transformations

The dog eats the poo. The poo was eaten by the dog.

The man is kicking the tires of his car. The car tires are being kicked by the man

The blood stained my T-shirt My T-shirt was stained by the blood.

The beautiful woman was staring at the ugly man. The ugly man was being stared at by the beautiful woman

Someone has drunk all the vodka. All the vodka has been drunk

The girl picked up the gun. The gun was picked up by the girl.

Someone stole my purse! My purse was stolen!

The man is taking some drugs. Some drugs are being taken by the man.

After all the passive sentences are on the board, have students write a narrative paragraph (or two) that uses as many related sentences as possible. Students are permitted to revert the sentences back to active voice if they deem it more appropriate. As they assess the sentences, students’ attention is focused on the potential “clumsiness” of some passive structures. They may also need to change the tense of the sentence. This makes for great grammar practice as students must pay close attention to the logic of what they’re writing. Allowing students to make further structural adjustments to the sentences only makes the exercise better by increasing the opportunities to think about and adjust the grammar, but this is totally adaptable at teacher’s discretion.

*My T-shirt was stained by the blood of the man lying on the ground at my feet. He stared up at me, blinking in confusion. “Why did you shoot me?” he asked. I glared at him. “As if you don’t know!” I snapped. “Someone has drunk all my vodka, and I’m pretty sure it was you!”*

*“That’s a ridiculous reason to shoot someone!” he shouted. “And anyway, I didn’t drink your vodka. I’m a bourbon man, myself.”*

*“I don’t believe you,” I retorted. “The beautiful woman across the street has been staring at your for over an hour, and she told me you reached over and took my bottle and drank it all up in a single swallow!”*

*The man turned his head to look across the street. “Really?” he asked. “How odd. I wonder why she has been staring at me. I’m not very good-looking.”*

*“It’s irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that she saw you. Busted, I’m afraid.”*

 *“I could die, you know.”*

*“You’re not going to die. It’s just a flesh wound. You are going to take some drugs for the pain and sleep it off. I doubt you will even need to go to the hospital, you big baby.*

*I reached down, picked up the gun and looked around for my purse. I was certain I had left it on the table behind me but it wasn’t there.*

*“Oh no! First my vodka and now…someone has stolen my purse!”*

**Writing Prompt #9**

*Headline Writing* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support, but be aware that humour doesn’t often translate & puns will likely be puzzling)

 

I start the lesson off with a variety of accidentally amusing headlines. There are tons available on line. Have students work in groups to enjoy them and explain to each other why they’re funny. For younger grades, show how headlines work for clarity and brevity. For older students, you can probably just go straight to the prompt. Give the students a number of news stories. You can make them up or take actual short articles and hand those out. Make sure the headlines have been cut off. In partners or working individually, challenge students to create the shortest headlines possible without sacrificing clarity.

**Writing Prompt #10**

*A Poem That Answers An Unusual Question* (adaptable to any grade level; ELLs may be partnered and given dictionaries for support)

This might work well as a warm-up exercise for the beginning of class. Have students draw a question on a slip of paper from a box. They shouldn’t share their question. Encourage them to be playful and poetic in their ideas, but if they wish, they could also adopt a serious, scientific tone and write a paragraph instead of a poem. Give students a 10-15 minute time limit, and once everyone is finished, have students share their writing so that the rest of the class can try and guess the question .

Constraints:

* students should not refer to their question in their poem, only answer it in a way that will permit other students to guess at what their question might have been

*X*

*You mark the spot*

*Your two straight lines know exactly which direction to go*

*Decisive, brisk, no-nonsense*

*You are the axis*

*The signature*

*The location on the map*

*There’s no doubt*

*True or False, X, you always*

*Know the answer*

***Question: What is the most intelligent letter of the alphabet***