

Invigorate lessons with tangible triggers

Connect writing lessons to concrete triggers

Physical objects can make 6-Traits writing lessons more powerful. Not only do they ramp up the level of student engagement, but they also help students remember the purpose and function of specific writing skills.

When identifying a mini-lesson trigger, first consider the function of the writing skill. The key is to really understand the purpose the skill serves within writing. With that knowledge, then think about what object in the real world works like that.

For example, when teaching students to narrow their topics, the goal is to show them how to go from a large, broad subject to something smaller, more finite. It's all about shrinking the topic. Everyday items that get smaller are Russian stacking dolls, Tupperware, and nesting boxes. Using one of those objects as part of the lesson helps students to visualize the idea of starting with something big and moving to something much smaller, much more focused.

The Power of Physical Triggers
COMPARE THE FUNCTIONS OF ESSENTIAL WRITING SKILLS TO EVERYDAY OBJECTS

CHEERIOS BOX. The title (of the box) tells the reader what to expect inside, and the title of the writing tells the reader the type of information to expect. So don't throw in a Fruit Loop sentence when you told the reader you would be writing about Cheerios.

PIZZA-BOX TABLE. Hold up each main idea or topic sentence (table top) with a minimum of three legs (supporting detail sentences) of support.

MCDONALD'S FRY CONTAINERS. Just like a consumer's appetite varies, readers need a variety of sentence sizes that vary from short to long.

BATTERY. Verbs are the battery in a sentence; they make the nouns move/do things. Like a TV remote—without a battery, the remote doesn't work. Without a verb, the sentence doesn't "work."

NESTING BOXES. Shrink a large subject or topic to a small, manageable, and narrow idea (elementary = topic sentence, secondary = thesis statement).

GROCERY-LIST PAPER. Pre-writes are a grocery list of details of key words and phrases you want to remember to develop in the first draft. List the details and then organize them. Like shoppers group items by aisle, group details by category.

INFLATED BALLOON. Short, undeveloped writing is like a deflated balloon. When writers add sentences, it's like added puffs of air into the balloon— you're pumping up your writing.

SLINKY. An overstretched Slinky is a tangled mess for the user. An overstretched sentence (too many words that create a run-on sentence) is a tangled mess for the reader.

TRAIN. All writing needs an engine (introduction), middle cars (body), and caboose (conclusion).

BARREL OF MONKEYS. When listing items in a series (each item is a monkey), they are to be hooked together by commas (the monkey arms look like commas).

YO-YO. Send a yo-yo down and bring it back up the same way. Compare that to however the piece starts, it can end the same way (e.g., start and end with description, start and end with a question, start and end with a quote, etc.).

8-COUNT AND 64-COUNT CRAYONS. Strong word choice is about using precise language. Don't use a general word (e.g., blue) when you can distinguish whether it was periwinkle, indigo, or teal.

When planning a lesson on avoiding run-ons, think first about the effect of such a sentence. It's too many words. It's too long. The reader gets confused. It's like a tangled mess of words. Now consider what real-world object gets tangled when it's stretched or pulled too long--a Slinky. If you overstretch a Slinky, it becomes a tangled mess. That's exactly what run-on sentences do to readers; they tangle them in a mess of details.

Utilizing concrete triggers helps students better relate to the skill being taught, how to utilize it in their writing, and how to remember it as they continue to learn more.

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