DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 258 284 CS 209 135

TITLE Language Everywhere. [Compiled from Columns in Three Issues of "Live Wire," August, October, and December 1984.]
INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
JOURNAL CIT Live Wire; v1 n1-3 Aug-Dec 1984

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Class Activities; Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; Group Dynamics; *Language Acquisition; Language Arts; *Language Usage; *Learning Activities; Poetry; Reading Instruction; *Teaching Methods; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

The teaching activities presented in this paper focus on expanding children's language. The paper describes (1) a "community journal" activity in which students recorded observations about events occurring in various parts of the classroom, (2) a poetry assignment using Richard Wilbur's book of poetry, "Opposites," (3) an exercise to assemble individual book pages into a proper story, using group interaction, (4) a descriptive exercise involving observations of everyday objects, such as fruits and vegetables, and (5) a poetry exercise using verbs to describe an unnamed object. (HTH)

# Language Everywhere

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National Council of Teachers of English

# LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

## Community Journals

Community journals give students the chance to include writing in everything they do. Students write about experiences and share ideas with classmates by adding to and asking about what others have written.

In each of the activity areas of the classroom, place a teacher-made, bound 9 × 12-inch blank book in which anyone is welcome to write. Unlike the individual narrative journals which are kept in personal folders, these community journals remain in the respective activity areas and are titled to reflect what happens in each area. For example, my six- and seven-year-olds record:

observations of our resident guinea pig and rabbit in *Smokey and Rockwell*

science discoveries in *Exploring*

art projects in *Things We Made*

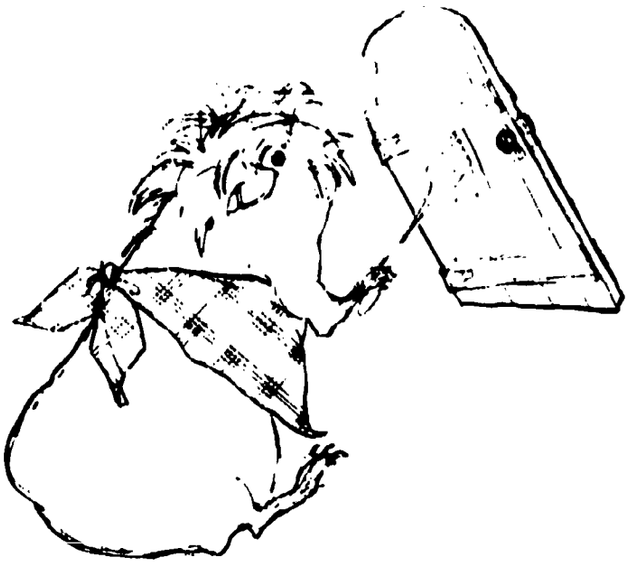
plays and puppet shows in *Pretending*

math activities in *What We Did in Math*

environmental observations in *Outside Our Window*

The entries are spontaneous. No one is forced to write comments or questions, but students need little, if any, coaxing. At sharing time they volunteer to read their entries and respond to questions and comments from peers: "How come you could lift the books with the balloon?" and "I like the way you told how the bird scared the cat because I've never seen that before."

Through the journals the children have a permanent record of meaningful experiences and build upon the work of friends. One child writes that the guinea pig tugs at its water bottle; another adds that it likes to hide behind a certain cabinet. Someone describes how to make a geoboard butterfly; a classmate makes the butterfly and is then inspired to create and write about her own design.



The greatest benefit of community journals is that they are visual records of the development of the children's critical thinking skills, skills which are often assumed to be beyond children so young. In the journals the children do the following:

*record observations*

"Smokey was biting his litl house mad out of a box."

*write descriptions*

"Today I say a krow and a hckod [chickadee]. The krow was ol black and the hckod has a black bak and a wit brast [breast]."

*make comparisons*

"I found out that the ball of clay will not drap [drop] when the pencil is on it. But it will fall wath no pencil."

*make predictions*

"The leve [leaf] is going to fal on the brd [bird]."

*draw conclusions*

"He didet [didn't] go awa from the TV sad [set]. I gas [guess] he lics [likes] TV."

*establish cause and effect*

"Wn you skrh [scratch] the rock it tn [turns] blu It tn blu be [because] the nll [nail] is bluw."

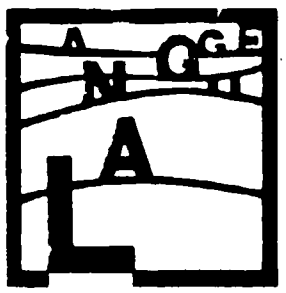
*question and challenge each other*

"The rabbit likes the cabnt [cabinet] But the guina pig das not. Why?"

Best of all, the children increase the number of skills they bring to any writing experience. In the journals, they observe, think, predict, question, draw conclusions, take delight—and appreciate writing as a natural complement to everything they do.

*Kathy Matthews, a former teacher at Atkinson Academy, Atkinson, New Hampshire, is a graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, Durham.*

Live Wire, August 1984



# LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

## Writing Light Verse

Poetry writing. The words fill the hearts of some people with apprehension on a scale to match the dentist's drill, a walk down a dark alley, or a call from an IRS auditor.

But this doesn't have to be the case. Students can be offered poetry assignments that challenge them and give them a chance to play with language. Word play is the key for beginning poetry writers. Young poets must be given a chance to exercise their creativity while they learn the delight of language. Verse writing using opposites gives them that chance.

I discovered opposites when I came across Richard Wilbur's delightful little paperback *Opposites* (Harcourt, 1973). An opposite is a poem that tells what the opposite of something is. This type of poem is made up of one or two couplets—a fact that appeals even to the more reluctant poets in your group. Here are two examples by Wilbur:

What is the opposite of two?
A lonely me, a lonely you.

What is the opposite of riot?
It's a lot of people keeping quiet.

Each opposite's first line will be either a question or a statement of an opposite. The second line (and any subsequent line) is the answer to the question or statement. I've found that opposites of two or four lines work best with most students. Sustaining the *idea* of an opposite for six or more lines is too difficult for beginning poets, so an extended verse can wait until students have more experience and confidence.

Here are three opposites written by my students:

What is the opposite of having many?
It is quite obvious—not having any!

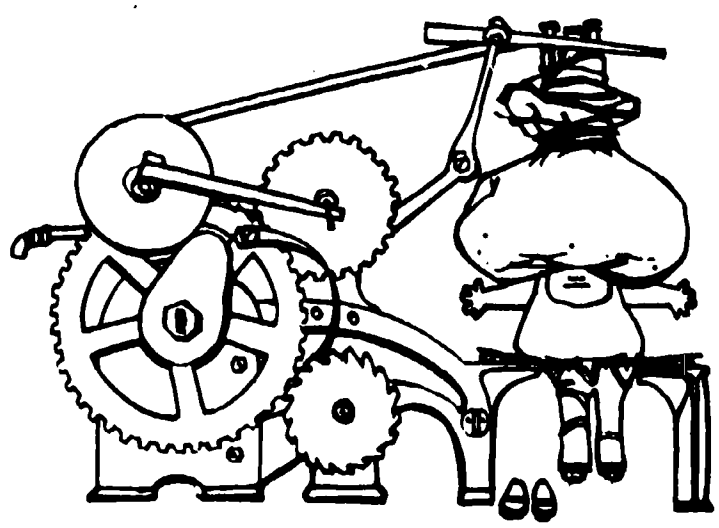
What is opposite of being fat?
I don't think you have to be told that.
It's being able to fit into your jeans
Without the use of mechanical means.

The opposite of sitting still
Is running or climbing up a hill.
Or playing any type of ball,
Until you get tired, stop, and fall.

These examples may not be weighty, but my students have experimented with language and words, had some fun, and discovered that poetry has rather a nice flavor to it after all!



*Paul B. Janeczko, classroom teacher and editor of poetry books, Gray, Maine*



Live Wire, October 1984

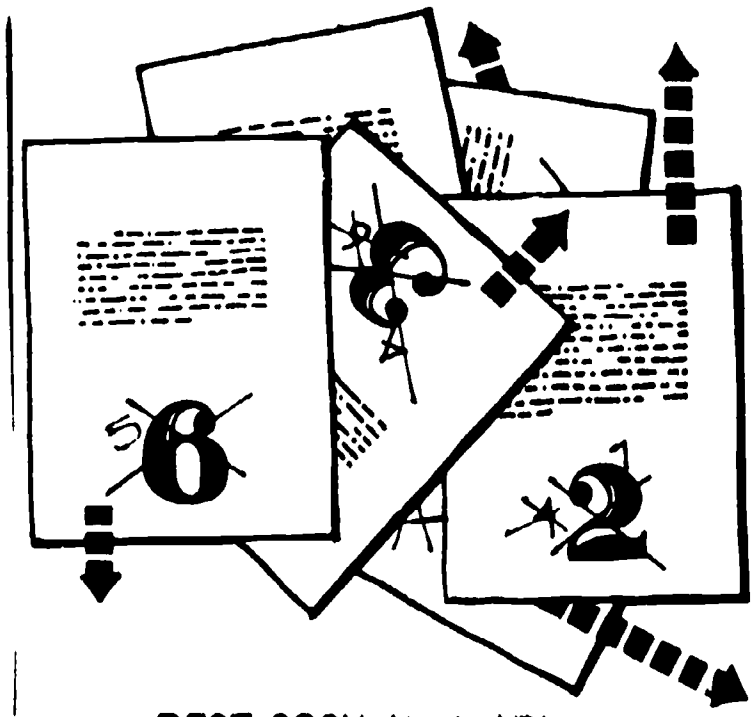
# LANGUAGE EVERYWHERE

## Next Page, Please

"Next Page, Please" is a reading activity with a twist. It requires students to focus on the meaning of the passages they read, but also to think in terms of what they know about how a story fits together. Students receive individual pages from a text; through reading aloud, group discussion, rereading, and group evaluation, they maneuver these disarranged pages into the correct sequence.

In selecting a story to use, choose one that can be understood without looking at the illustrations. Sentences should end on a page and not carry over, and each illustration should cover only one page to avoid giving clues about the correct sequence.

After photocopying each page of the story separately, protect pages from wear and tear with self-adhesive plastic, mix them up, and give one to each student. A volunteer can pass out any leftover pages, and another can collect the pages as the activity progresses.





Each child silently reads his or her page. Anyone who thinks he or she has the first page reads the page aloud and gives reasons for thinking so. If more than one page is suggested, all these pages are read aloud and all reasons are considered. The group decides which page comes first, and the page is passed to the page collector. Don't indicate whether the students are correct or not. Incorrect choices will become clear as the story is gradually reconstructed.

When a decision has been reached on the first page, any student who thinks that he or she has the next page reads that page and gives his or her reasons. Again, all pages are considered, the group makes the decision, and the page goes to the page collector.

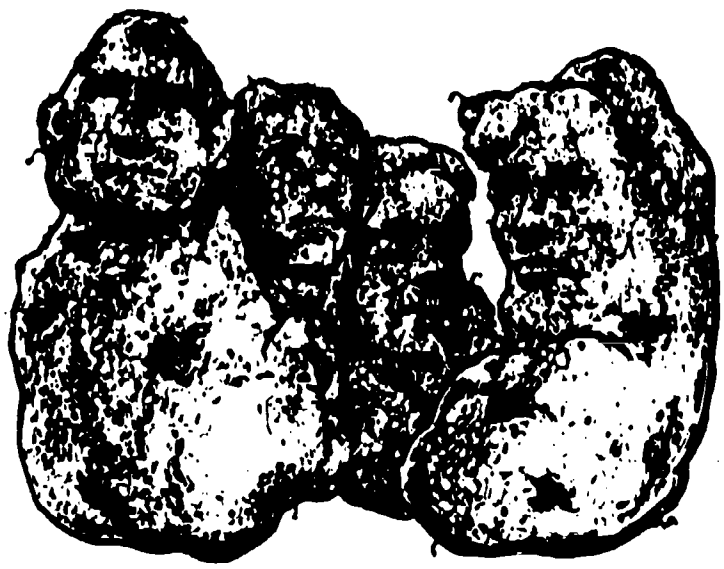
This procedure continues as students piece the story together. Encourage them to discuss the sequence as pages are read. When two or more pages are under consideration, have students reread the previous page or pages and then reread the pages under consideration. Sometimes students discover that a page belongs earlier in the story, or that a page placed earlier in the sequence better fits the current action. Rereading occurs as the change is considered. When all pages have been put in order, the entire story is read aloud by the page collector for a final check on meaning.

This activity is not limited to narrative materials; it can be used successfully with paragraphs of content material, stanzas of poetry, and even notes of songs or steps in solving an equation.

*Karen M. Feather, East Texas State University, Commerce, Texas*

## Look Again

Common everyday objects are useful tools for teaching students the skill of precise description. Potatoes can be supplied to students at little expense, and students are both entertained and challenged by trying to distinguish one potato from others that "look just like it." In this activity, students look more carefully at common objects, find exact words to describe minute details, and use analogies, metaphors, and similes to distinguish one potato from another.



You'll need a potato (apple, banana, or other object) for each student. Students will be working in groups, so you may want to bring potatoes for one group, apples for another, bananas for a third, etc. Objects of the same kind need to be roughly the same size and shape.

First, divide the class into groups of four to six students and give each student a sheet of paper and a pencil. Let students pile potatoes in the center of their group, enough for each student to have one. Each student selects a potato and looks it over carefully, recording every detail that might help someone else to identify this particular potato in a group of similar potatoes. Students use similes and metaphors such as: "My potato looks like a face" or "My potato is a baby; it is tiny."

As students inspect their potatoes, ask such questions as: What shape is your potato? Does it have flat spots? How many eyes does it have? Are there any rough spots or other markings? Is the surface the same texture all over?

When students finish writing their observations, each group returns its potatoes to a pile in the center of their group, making certain the potatoes are thoroughly mixed. Next, students exchange descriptions with others in the group and try to find the potato described in their new descriptions. When students have identified the potato, have them trade the pile of potatoes and the descriptions with other groups and try to match each potato with its description. Students discover that enough detail will make even a common object such as a potato unique and identifiable.

*Betty Jane Wagner, National College of Education, Evanston, Illinois*

## Verb Poetry

One way to improve drab writing is to replace over-used verbs with less-used ones. In searching for a way to pass this lesson on to students, I hit upon an activity that reminds students of the verbs they know but rarely use and that shows how many different verbs can describe the same action. In addition, the activity develops sensitivity to rhyme and rhythm.

In a "verb poem," students use verbs to identify an animal or object without naming it. Students say the verbs aloud as they make their selections, in order to consider sound as well as meaning. Completed poems are read to other students who guess what the mystery animal or object is.

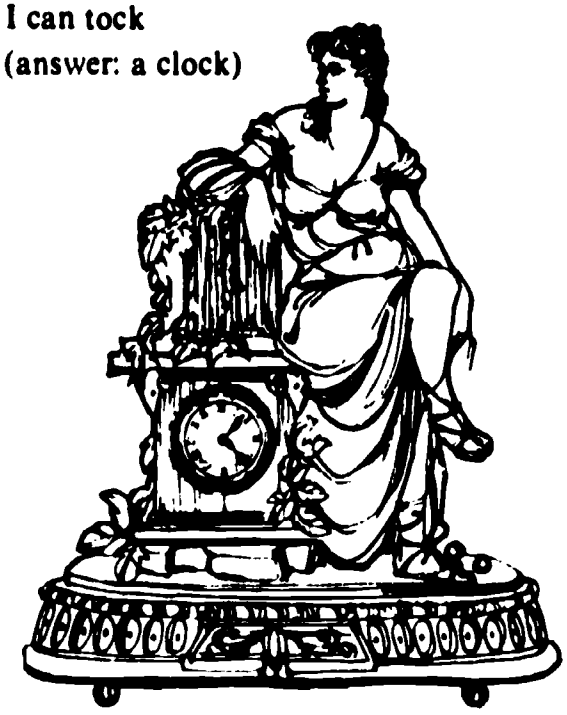
1. Students brainstorm a list of three or four dozen verbs by asking such questions as:

   What does a horse do?
   What does a rabbit do?
   What does a bee do?
   What does a train do?
   What does the wind do?

   Students jot down the verbs in their notebooks, or one student writes verbs in a visible place for the whole class to see.

2. Copy the following shortened sample on the chalkboard and ask students to guess the subject.

   I can click
   I can whine
   I can stop
   I can tick
   I can chime
   I can tock
   (answer: a clock)



3. Each student selects a subject for a verb poem. Students then select from the list they've brainstormed those verbs that fit their subject, or they think of other descriptive verbs. Following the form of the sample poem, students write a verb poem that describes what their animal or object can do. Saying the verbs aloud as they write helps them to spot those that sound the best together. The verb poems can be any length, but they should contain at least nine verbs. Students read their completed poems aloud to each other or to the class, and the listeners try to guess the subject. The following are possible subjects for verb poems:

| | |
|---|---|
| a pair of feet | a soap bubble |
| a marble | an old car |
| a siren | a wrecking van |
| a fire | an ice skater |
| scissors | a skier |
| a yo-yo | a rubber ball |
| a pogo stick | a kitten |
| a rocket | a mouse |
| a rusty hinge | a violin |

*Patricia J. Morton, Park School, Mill Valley, California*

Live Wire, December 1984