

Optimising Senior Secondary English Language Series: Using Language Arts to Promote the Creative Use of English

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First!

- Let's take 5 minutes to make a list:

Write down all the smells you've smelled today.

- Now let's share some.

Why is this useful?

- It's a good warm-up for other forms of writing.
- It helps students practise thinking and writing concrete sensory details.
- If you set a timer or otherwise keep time strictly, it's a chance to practise time-limited writing in a low-stakes environment.

Why does it work?

- It provokes sometimes funny, often meaningful answers that are fun to share!

When can you use it?

- At the beginning of class or during natural transitions
- Immediately before exam practice writing sessions
- Regularly as part of your class structure, daily or weekly
- Any time you have 3-8 minutes to fill
- Any time you want students to focus on writing and skill-building in a fun way

Here are a few others to try

- Write down all the **songs** you've heard (whole or in part) in the last three days. Which one is going to get stuck in your head now, and why?
- What are the **foods** that make you feel most comforted? Describe where you're sitting and what it's like to eat one of those foods.
- Write down your ten very favourite **sounds**.
- Write down as many things as you can think of that you wouldn't want to step in, and how it would **feel** to step in each one.

How to make up your own

- Your own sensory writing prompts can tie into:
 - the texts your class is studying
 - the weather
 - a holiday
 - the news...etc.

How to make up your own

- The key is to find a way to relate the topic to the **five senses**. Good ways to start include:
 - Asking “What **sound** would X make?” where X is something that doesn’t/wouldn’t happen (as in, “a typhoon blowing over the Eiffel Tower” or “whales running into each other”)
 - Or try “What would Y **taste** like? How would it **feel** in your mouth?” where Y equals an unfamiliar dish in a literary text
 - Or “What would it **feel like** to be standing in Z place, what would you **hear** and **see**?” where Z equals a scene in an unfamiliar place
- Any way to get students thinking about their **sensory experiences**, and working to put those experiences into language, is great.

Goal-setting and Session Overview

- We'll do several more activities like that one.
- For now, though, let me introduce myself.
 - I've taught creative writing and academic/argumentative writing...
 - mostly to university students, but also primary and secondary students...
 - both here in Hong Kong and in the US...
 - for 15 years.
 - All of the activities I will share with you, I've used in my own classrooms.
 - They are designed for face-to-face instruction, but can be adapted for online.

Goal-setting and session overview

- My **primary** goal is to provide you with teaching strategies to help students write more successful exam responses, with less stress.
- My **secondary** goal is to provide you with teaching strategies to reach beyond the median class ability level, to both underperforming and overperforming students.
- We will discuss **strategies** in the context of HKDSE English Language 'creative' prompts, but they are also useful for improving expository and argumentative writing.
- We will do several **prompts** ourselves to see how they work.

Goal-setting and session overview

- From here on out, we will:
 - **Review** test-taking strategies and time management skills for writing exams
 - **Discuss** and **practise** how to teach:
 - Concrete sensory detail
 - Personalised vocabulary and figurative language
 - Stronger opening statements
 - Creative flexibility, more generally
 - **Open** the conversation to Q&A

Test-taking strategies review

- Remember the **audience** for HKDSE essays:
 - The people marking these are stuck in a room with other people, reading a huge stack of exams.
 - It's worth students' time to make theirs stand out even a little bit. If they can make their marker laugh, or pause appreciatively for a moment, that translates into a higher score.
- Remember the **scoring system**:
 - 7 points language; 7 points content, 7 points organisation.
 - Our strategies today focus on **content** and **organisation**.
- Remember that **time management** is the most important thing.

Essay exam time management

- We can help students shift the balance towards inventing, planning, and revising *smartly*.
 - The formula:
 - 1) Always write down some **first thoughts** and an **outline**
 - 2) As you write, push further **one step** for each of these three main elements:
 - Concrete sensory detail
 - Personalised vocabulary and figurative language
 - Stronger opening statements
 - 3) Use your **time** wisely:
 - Always return to the **beginning** and revise it, because...
 - the beginning sets your reader's **expectations**.

Teaching “concrete sensory detail”

- Our goal here is to help students understand just how important concrete sensory detail is for an exam reader (or any reader, really).
- Here are three activities you can take back to your students.
 - Taxonomy activity (moving along the scale from general to specific)
 - Object Investigation activity (exploring small objects)
 - Sound Association activity (tuning our ears)
- Then we’ll talk about what “pushing one more step” looks like.

Teaching “personalised vocabulary and figurative language”

- Why is personalised **vocabulary** important?
 - Because exam readers are reading hundreds of essays.
 - Because when students take an **active role** in choosing vocabulary to study, they often feel a sense of **ownership**. This leads to more confident and comfortable use of English.
- Why is personalised **figurative language** important?

Literal vs. figurative description

- Literal description:
 - “The blackboard is green.”
 - “My cat is lying on the floor.”
- Literal description doesn't have to be simple; you can do interesting things with it (e.g. “the blackboard is purple plaid”).
- But even so, you're talking about a **shared vision** of an **observable world**.

Literal vs. **figurative** description

- When you move to figurative language, especially **metaphors and similes**, you exit the world of observable, disputable fact and insist that the world is the **way you see it**:
 - “My cat is **as flat as a doughnut**.”
Now you know how plump my cat is, and something about my way of seeing things (I said “doughnut,” not “egg tart” or “dumpling” or “basketball”).
 - “The blackboard is **a sheet of sea glass**.”
Now you are learning something about how I think about colours, and perhaps how I feel when I’m presented with a vast space meant to be written on (I feel it’s a little magical).

Simile vs. metaphor

- Similes use “like” or “as.”
- You are making your comparison **explicit**, as though you are saying “Hey reader, think about how this thing is like this other thing.”
 - “My cat is **as flat as** a doughnut.”
 - “This room is **like** a coffin.”

Simile vs. metaphor

- Metaphors are more aggressive. You are **not suggesting** something is “like” another thing. You are saying something ***IS*** another thing.
 - “My cat **is** a flat doughnut.”
 - “This room **is** a coffin.”
- You are making an assertion about the world that is manifestly untrue, and insisting your reader do something in response: Agree? Refuse? Consider for a moment how it might be true?
- Figurative language is a key tool in making an essay (or any kind of writing) stand out.

Teaching “personalised vocabulary and figurative language”

- Three activities you can share with your students:
 - Word Banking all year long: collaborative and/or individual
 - Postcard-simile activity (expressing personal worldview and emotion through simile)
 - Abstract-Concrete fresh metaphor exercise (expressing personal worldview through metaphor and simile)

Strong openings

- I recommended that students always go back and revise the **beginnings** of their essays.
- Why? Because the beginning sets a reader's expectations.
- If you only have time to change one thing, spend that time making your opening sentence punchier, funnier, more interesting.

Strong openings

- Here are three activities to take back to your students:
 - Transforming statements into interesting questions
 - Aggressively declarative language
 - Picking another place to start

How to teach creative flexibility

- Creative flexibility is the ability to “think outside the box,” in corporate-speak.
- We want students to:
 - bring successful, practised strategies to their exam experiences (see: our session so far), **AND**
 - develop the ability to respond to essay prompts on their own in confident, creative ways.

How to teach creative flexibility

- Here are four activities you can take back to your students:
 - Open-ended Story activity
 - Instant Story activity
 - Instant Songs activity
 - “Imagine you are a [profession]. What do you like about your job?”
- All along the way, it helps to motivate students with fun competition, if you’re not doing that already. Give little prizes for funniest, sweetest, etc.

Reaching beyond the median class level

- How can these strategies help underperforming students do *better*?
 - By strengthening their **content** and **organisation** scores, even if their language scores are weak.
 - In my experience, students' ability to observe the world creatively is not correlated with their ability to write error-free English.
 - Nor is their ability to use a specific exam-writing strategy they have practised in class (for example, turning an opening statement into a question).
 - These strategies give underperforming students ways to **counter** their possibly lower language/grammar scores.
 - By helping students develop a sense of **ownership** and **agency** in their writing.

Reaching beyond the median class level

- How can these strategies help well-prepared students do *more*?
 - First, the same way they help underperforming students: by strengthening their **content** and **organisation** scores.
 - Very proficient English language writers can often write very boring essays (have you noticed?).
 - These strategies encourage students to value freshness and specificity in language, rather than cliché and generalities.
 - Second, by allowing their **pleasure** in language to flourish. These strategies are *fun* for proficient writers.

Reaching beyond the median class level

- You can encourage **all** of your students to do more of them at home to develop their creative writing. Let them know these are strategies and exercises that professional creative writers do!

Thank you

- Thank you for writing with me! Let's go to the Q&A.