

Six Sentences: A Revision Exercise¹

Lesson Plan

Course: ENGL 110

Objective: To hone sentence-level revision skills and achieve Student Learning Outcome C

Materials: paper/pencil or laptops (supplied by the students)

Preparation: At the end of the previous class, I ask my students to bring their completed drafts to the next class.

Time estimate: 50 minutes

Direct instruction:

I open the class session by talking about what sentences tend to do in argument body paragraph: make a claim, set up sources, present evidence, analyze or discuss evidence, transition from one idea to the next, and so on. I then ask what makes a good sentence—a question they frequently struggle to answer.

I instruct them to pick a sentence from their draft, one that they think might not be good (whatever that means). I encourage them not to pick their thesis or a quote/presentation of evidence. Instead, I suggest they select a topic sentence or one that does analysis.

I tell them to copy the sentence down and label it #1. I then lead them through a series of revision prompts, giving them several minutes to write or type each:

- To make the sentence as short as possible,
- To make the sentence as long as possible,
- To change the order of components within the sentence,
- To change three words in the sentence,
- To divide the sentence in two,
- And to combine the sentence with the one before or after it in the paragraph.

These become sentences 2 – 7.

I ask the students to read over the sentences and to pick their favorite, but not to mark that on the page. I then put them into groups of 3 or 4 and have them read their sentences to the group, who then vote on the “best” sentence from the lists.

¹ I’ve been doing some version of this exercise since I was a graduate student. While I’ve edited it over the years, credit for the idea belongs to Professor Lad Tobin.

I ask them to share times when everyone agreed on the “best” sentence. I then ask them to share times when everyone disagreed. The disagreements tend to be fairly lively.

I then return to the original question: what makes a sentence good?

At the end of class, I emphasize that “good” is both subjective and contextual. We have to know what the sentence needs to do within the paragraph in order to evaluate it, but that there are some patterns. Good sentences are clear, active, etc. I also point out that they now have some concrete strategies to employ when they know a sentence is “off” but can’t figure out how to fix it.

I use a PPT presentation for the exercise, which you can access [here](#).

Because of COVID-19, I did this exercise virtually (sans the group component) this semester. If you’re curious, you can watch the video [here](#).