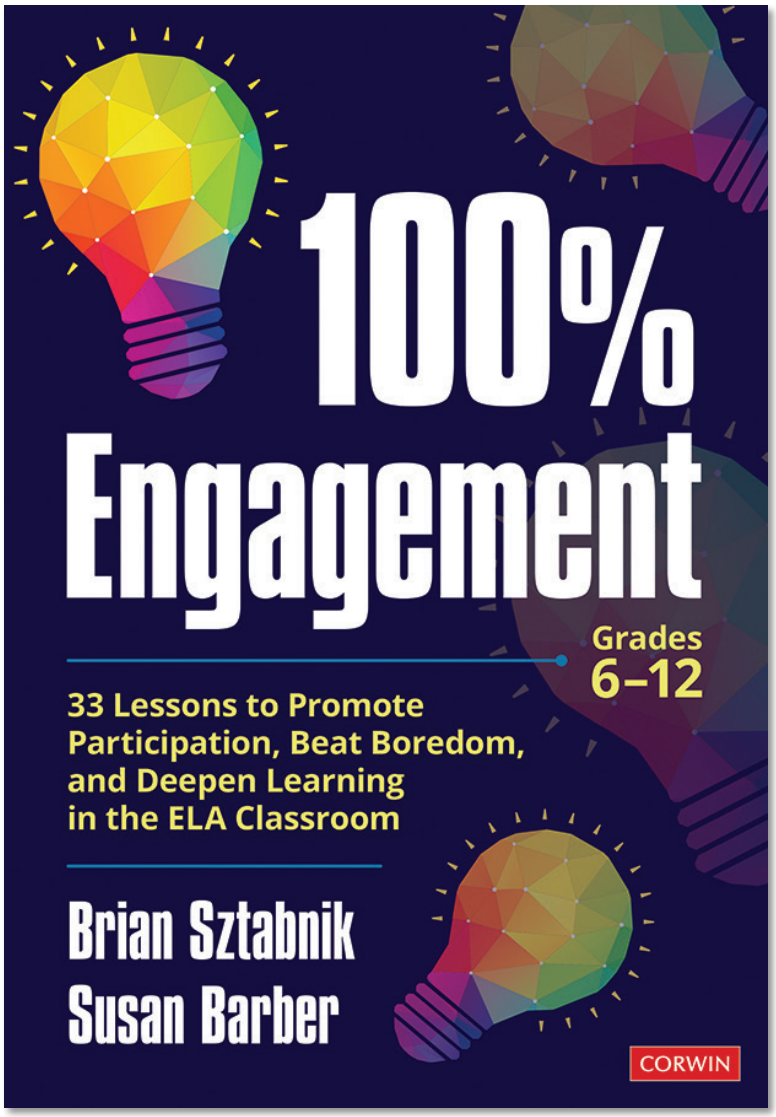

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CORWIN

Spotlight Reading

LESSON 10

Lesson Learning Objective

In this lesson, students are taught how to use key words and phrases to form insights on a text.

Background

While visiting the Atlanta Van Gogh Experience recently, I was struck by Vincent van Gogh's words: "Great things are done by a series of small things brought together." When students read, they bring together small things—words, phrases, and clauses—to make sentences. The ability to make meaning of sentences not only is foundational for comprehension but also allows for opportunity to teach and practice close reading skills and how specific scenes connect to larger thematic ideas.

Spotlight reading is simply pulling a small part of a passage for further examination. Too often teachers and students jump to draw conclusions and build inferences on whole passages without taking time to examine smaller chunks. Spotlight reading forces students to slow down and build interpretations from the sentence level.

One of my first spotlight reading activities was centered on the first paragraph of *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver (1999). I wanted students to think about the importance of the first paragraph of a novel as introducing thematic ideas. In order to do this, I removed a few words and asked students to fill them in. Guessing what words went in the blanks forced a close reading of the first few sentences while also keeping students engaged. Consider the following example:

> Imagine a _____ so strange it must never have happened. First, picture the _____. I want you to be its conscience, the _____ in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular _____ overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with _____: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like _____, clutched in copulation, secreting their _____ eggs onto dripping leaves. _____ strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The _____ of monkeys.

> A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of _____ biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous _____. And, in reply, a _____ of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking _____ out of death. This forest _____ itself and lives forever.
>
> Imagine a ruin so strange it must never have happened. First, picture the *forest*. I want you to be its conscience, the *eyes* in the trees. The trees are columns of slick, brindled bark like muscular *animals* overgrown beyond all reason. Every space is filled with *life*: delicate, poisonous frogs war-painted like *skeletons*, clutched in copulation, secreting their *poisonous* eggs onto dripping leaves. *Vines* strangling their own kin in the everlasting wrestle for sunlight. The *breathing* of monkeys. A glide of snake belly on branch. A single-file army of *ants* biting a mammoth tree into uniform grains and hauling it down to the dark for their ravenous *queen*. And, in reply, a *choir* of seedlings arching their necks out of rotted tree stumps, sucking *life* out of death. This forest *eats* itself and lives forever.

The object was not to get it right but instead to think about word choices and the different effect specific word choices had on interpretation. Students were highly engaged in this activity, and I began to narrow my focus and pull one or two sentences from our core text for close reading examination.

Later I was introduced to the idea of spotlight reading through Roy Peter Clark's book *The Art of X-Ray Reading* where Clark examines several sentences from classic texts. Clark (2017) examines short passages from 25 works and puts them under an X-ray for an extremely close and focused reading. I began my own search for sentences and short passages and reframed the examination through a spotlight. In a dark space, a spotlight shines on one particular person to emphasize them, which is what I wanted to do by singling out specific sentences in texts we were reading. So began my journey with spotlight reading.

Susan Barber

Susan

From Inspiration to Reality in Susan's Classroom

Sentences and short passages were often the focus of classroom discussion, but I lacked a systematic method for the activity. Enter the writer's notebook. The writer's notebook has always had a place not only in my classroom but also in my heart. I love the idea of a space to experiment

with syntax, style, and voice. I often equate the writer's notebook to working out: The more we exercise our muscles, the stronger we get. The same is true for writing: The more we exercise our writing muscles, the stronger as writers we become. The writer's notebook becomes the writing gym—a place to work out ideas, sculpt sentences, and grow stronger.

What I didn't realize when I introduced the writer's notebook initially was that it would serve as a place to build our close reading skills as well. Spotlight reading became the basis of our writer's notebook work. Students now had a systematic way to not only close read small portions of the text but also experiment with their observations in writing.

I began curating my own list of sentences for spotlight reading. For example, we examined the use of the choice of passive voice and its effect using a sentence from Brenda Peynado's short story "The Rock Eaters" (2021):

> We had to show them, we'd been right all this time to have flown away. After so many years of loneliness and the futures we'd broken by disappearing from them, how proud they were that everyone had returned! (p. 146)

From there, students took their turn experimenting with passive voice. Students often throw out random words or phrases, and those become the base for our sentences; or students choose their own topic to write about. Other times, students pull sentences from essays written in class and revise them using observations from spotlight reading.

Or, looking at the opening sentence in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843):

> True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?

This sentence invites us to discuss how syntax helps the reader characterize the narrator: with the use of the exclamation mark after the first word followed by an adjective set apart with em dashes that leads immediately into repeating adverbs before getting into the main idea of the rhetorical question. Why a question to open instead of a statement? Why the inverted syntax? Why establish the second-person point of view from the very beginning? Students will notice so many different things in this one sentence, but all of them will point to an unreliable narrator.

Reading and writing instruction at the sentence level is often overlooked in secondary English classrooms, yet sentences are the building blocks of texts. Secondary writing instruction mostly occurs at the essay level—organization of ideas, bolstering evidence and commentary, introductions and conclusions. But growing writers need a place to continue to work on reading and writing at the sentence level.

Variations

To adapt the lesson to suit the unit you're teaching and the needs of your students, consider the following variations.

- An extension of spotlight reading is using what is noted in the spotlight reading sentence as a mentor for spotlight writing. Students construct a sentence or revise a sentence from prior writing, experimenting with the focus principle from spotlight reading.
- Students create their own spotlight reading prompt by finding a sentence or poem excerpt, writing a focus question, and sharing their own observations on the passages. This is a great way not only to provide students opportunities to find entry points into a text but also to build a library of spotlight reading examples.
- While this part of the book is focused on short fiction, you can use this lesson for poetry, novels, and many other kinds of text.

The Lesson Plan

Time

5–10 minutes

Materials

Writer's notebook (physical or digital) or pen and paper or computer

Opening Activity

- None. This is typically the warm-up.

Main Activity

- Identify a sentence or portion of a short story or other text for close examination.
- Project the sentence excerpt on the board as students enter the room.
- Students spend approximately 90 seconds making notes about what they notice about the text in their writer's notebook.
- Provide a focus question for further observation (syntax, diction, style choices, rhetorical strategies, thematic ideas, etc.) and allow students to respond in their writer's notebook for another 3–4 minutes on the text and question.
- Students share observations in small groups.

Closure

- While this is a warm-up activity, a short whole-class discussion for students or the teacher to share ideas can bring closure to this lesson.

How to Get 100% Engagement

The systematic routine of examining sentences builds students' confidence in their close reading skills and reinforces the idea that sentences serve as entry points into a text. By narrowing the focus to the sentence level, students are less overwhelmed at approaching the entire text and can start writing about the text. Students also are engaged because it gives them time to individually work out analysis on very specific excerpts and talk about their thoughts in a low-stakes environment.