The Five Basic Brushstrokes

Rationale

• Good writers use grammar as a tool
• Complex grammatical concepts can be taught as tools for creativity
• By studying the tools at their disposal, students can improve sentence fluency and variety while also increasing accuracy in their use of imagery

Support from Research


“One principle that undergirds my thinking about grammar and mechanics is that they are inherently linked to craft, and by making this link, we alter students’ perceptions of what grammar and mechanics do.” (Anderson 10)


“I believe that things happen in children’s writing when they write through the arts that do not, perhaps, happen through other ways of teaching writing. It can be an aesthetic experience, a way to engage the imagination in peculiarly empathetic ways.”(Ehrenworth 4)


“To paint images like these requires an understanding of image grammar—a rhetoric of writing techniques that provides writers with artistic grammatical options.” (Noden 2)

Common Core Standards

• L.1 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

• W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

• W.10 Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
Student Objectives

• Students will be able to use participial phrases, absolutes, adjectives out of order, appositives, and active verbs in order to add variety and interest to their writing for the purpose of conveying vivid pictures of scenes and images.

The Five Basic Brushstrokes

• Painting with Participles
• Painting with Absolutes
• Painting with Appositives
• Painting with Adjectives Out of Order
• Painting with Action Verbs

My Model for Teaching Grammar as Part of the Writing Process

1. Define the Brushstroke in Simple Terms

The Absolute: A noun PLUS an –ing or –ed verb added to a sentence, connected with a comma or commas

2. Provide an Example with an Image

“Claws digging, feet kicking, the cat climbed the tree.” (Noden 6)

3. Analyze the Technique

“The cat climbed the tree.” (Noden 6)

“Claws digging, feet kicking, the cat climbed the tree.” (Noden 6)

What does this technique do to the writing? How does it change things for the reader?
4. *Have students use the brushstroke to paint a picture with words.*

Examine the image. Then, describe what you see using the Absolute Brushstroke.

5. *Show the brushstroke in an expert text.*

“And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt.” –Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, Page 21-22

**The Appositive Brushstroke**

*Definitions:*

Appositive: A noun that adds a second image to a noun that comes before it

Appositive Phrase: An entire phrase containing an appositive that adds more details than the appositive all by itself

*Examples:*

Appositive: “The raccoon, a scavenger, enjoys eating turtle eggs.” (Noden 8)

Appositive Phrase: “The raccoon, a midnight scavenger who roams lake shorelines in search of food, enjoys eating turtle eggs.” (Noden 8)
Your Turn:

The Brushstroke Assignment

All of this leads up to a descriptive writing assignment. These are the directions:

1. Find a picture, particularly one with action implied, that you would like to write about. You may use magazines or the Internet.

2. Write a one- or two-paragraph description of the picture containing all five brush strokes—one of each type.

3. Underline each brush stroke and identify it by drawing a line to a label in the margin.

4. Do not use more than two brush strokes per sentence.

5. Each correctly used brush stroke will be worth 10 points, as indicated in the attached rubric.

This is the rubric:

- Absolute: _____/10
- Appositive: _____/10
- Participle: _____/10
- Adjective Out of Order: _____/10
- Active Verbs: _____/10

Total: _____/50
**Student Samples**

*A Low/Reluctant Writer*

The baseball, a new Rawling baseball coming down the plate fast. Clutching the bat, the player getting ready to hit the ball. Rawling baseball gliding through the air. The catcher flexible and fast gets ready to catch the ball. Chicago baseball player tightened his hand around the bat to swing with power. Chicago baseball player swings his bat and makes contact with the ball. The ball flying fast with power through the air. GO’s out of the stadium a homerun.

*Medium*

Standing on the colorful sailed boat, looking down into the crisp clear water I spotted nothing in the shadows. So I decided to go for a swim. I jumped in and the water cooled my body. I went down about 100 ft and saw a marvelous undersea life! It filled my body with a run of excitement and nerviness’s as I thought about the dangers of bring down here. Then out of the blue, all the fish started squirming and out comes a crystal blue Great White!

The Shark, the Great White, stared at me with a feeding frenzy look on his face. The long shark, buffed and ready started after me! So I jumped up and jolted to be boat. So I hopped into my boat as the shark is gliding after me. As soon I touched my feet onto the boat’s rough floor, I felt safe and the shark went away.

*Medium-High*

Hunching, watching, and listening the lion waits to pounce on its prey. Then she sees it, a baby deer in the tall grasses and, she pounces, jumping and roaring. Her claws, sharp and long digs deeply into the young deer’s skin. The deer, wounded and surprised, fell to the ground as the lion fell on top of him. The lion let out a mighty roar to let her cubs know that she had dinner. Paws padding the cubs made their way over to their mother for dinner.

*High*

Flying, the car whistled through the thick air smokey and grey. Flaming fires were ravaging the base, the smoke reaching to the clouds. The car, a new war machine is bursting through the air at one hundred miles per hour.
Adapting the Method for Different Grade Levels K-16

- Pick out the grammar concepts your students need
- Find examples of them being used as part of the craft of writing
- Find pictures that can inspire writing, especially ones that your students can relate to
- The process of studying grammar and mechanics as part of the craft of writing can be applied to just about anything. For more ideas and examples, try some of these:

Extending the Lesson

- A gallery tour
  - Once students have a firm grasp on the brushstrokes, try sending them to the computer lab (or taking a field trip to an art museum) to find paintings they can write about.
  - I had my students do this with poetry in the 3rd quarter after learning the brushstrokes in 1st quarter with great results
- Revision Bingo
  - Make a bingo sheet for revision. Students have to score a bingo before they’re done revising. Include the brushstrokes as revision options.