

Writing Silver Sentences

Using Poetry to Make Compare-and-Contrast Essays Come Alive

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IN THE FALL OF 2011, I was teaching poetry and fiction in a gifted-and-talented program at PS 153, an elementary school in the Bronx, when one of the classroom teachers asked to meet with me privately. When we sat down together, Ms. Wolahan told me that while her third-grade students enjoyed the work I was doing with them, they needed to learn how to write a compare-and-contrast essay for the upcoming ELA exam, and asked me if I could use my workshop time to teach this form to them. “They can do it,” she said. “But I need you to show them how.” The following week, I asked the fourth grade teacher I worked with, Ms. Farkas, if she’d like me to teach her students the compare-and-contrast essay as well. She gave me a resounding yes!

I knew the teachers were under a lot of pressure, and wanted to help them if I could, but I didn’t want to abandon the creative writing the students were doing in my workshops. Was there a way, I wondered,

that we could collaborate to meet both the teachers’ objectives and mine? Having taught the compare-and-contrast essay for three years now at PS 153, in third through fifth grades, and more recently at PS 230 in the Bronx with third-graders, I can report that students this age can indeed learn to write creative and well-structured compare-and-contrast essays, although the process requires scaffolding. It took a good deal of thought and effort, as well as honest and open communication with the teachers, but together we found a way to use creative writing to spark student interest in the compare-and-contrast essay and to support the development of the Common Core skills they are required to master.

During my first foray into teaching the compare-and-contrast essay, I stumbled, feeling guilty that I’d let creativity wither in the service of state requirements. I lost my sparkle. I didn’t know how to juggle all of the octopus tentacles this genre poses and still keep art alive. Toward the end of my residency, I attended a couple of artist meetings at Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Listening to poets explain how they used poetry as a platform on which to build essays inspired me, and I realized I could do that too. But I needed to figure out what kind of poems would stimulate students’ imaginations and also help them

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generate focused ideas for their essays.

Another obstacle I faced that first year was figuring out how to collaborate with the teachers so that we could build on each other's work. In one of my first lessons teaching the compare-and-contrast essay, I suggested students select two subjects to write about that fell under the same umbrella, such as two sports. I suggested they divide a piece of paper in half vertically. "Make a list of the things you like and dislike about each sport," I told them. "How are they different? How are they the same? You can weave these ideas into your essays." As they began writing, Ms. Wolahan pulled me aside. She wanted to know why I hadn't said anything to the students about how to structure their essays. I had taken these skills for granted. But why would third-graders know how to construct an essay?

I realized I couldn't teach this form on my own. I now ask classroom teachers to work with students on some of the skills they need to compose an essay, such as writing topic sentences, using transitional words and phrases, and composing concluding sentences. I support the teachers' efforts by finding innovative ways to remind students of what they've learned, such as distributing strips of transitional words and phrases like *while*, *however*, *but*, *whereas*, *on the other hand*, *instead*, *yet*, *although*, *likewise*, and *nothing could be further from the truth*. The students really enjoy this, and it reinforces their classroom lessons on how to structure their essays.

That first year, I found that many students had difficulty thinking of evocative details to distinguish the two things they were comparing. As I read one serviceable essay after another, I realized my approach was too dry. But I hadn't figured out how to fix it yet.

The following year, I was determined to inspire

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Three Types of Compare-and-Contrast Essays

Block

Write a paragraph, or block, about, let's say cookies, and a second paragraph about cake. Few, if any, essays are written entirely in block style, but it is a good way to get started.

Alternating

Write about cookies and cake, point by point. While cookies are usually crisp, cake is often soft. Cookies are easily transported; however, cake may fall apart during travel. The writer considers comparable issues within the same paragraph.

Combination

Draws on both block and alternating styles.

students to compare-and-contrast like a poet, not like a textbook writer. "Have fun," I told them. "Pretend you are telling a friend how great or how terrible those two books or movies are." I encouraged them to appeal to as many of the five senses as possible in their comparisons. "Think in similes," I said. "Use comparisons in your descriptions to make your sentences come alive."

I introduced the students to the list poem, explaining that it was a very old form of poetry in which things or events or ideas are itemized. I asked them to list words and phrases depicting a place they either loved or intensely disliked. They wrote lively poems. But they struggled to turn those descriptive phrases into the sentences required for the essay. I realized I needed to give students more guidance, to take them step by step through the transition from poetry to essay writing. I

assumed they could connect the dots. But maybe my dots weren't clear enough. I backtracked and asked students to turn the descriptive phrases from their list poems into full sentences. This made it easier for them to segue into essay writing.

This year, I started by introducing my students to the ode. We talked about the history of the form and I shared with them some odes to animals written by third- through sixth-graders in Teachers & Writers Collaborative workshops. They found one of these, "Ode to the Great Blue Heron," particularly inspiring. I then asked them to write an ode to an animal they knew well, and I reminded them to use descriptive language. "Be generous with similes," I said. The ode turned out to be a much better choice for this exercise than last year's list poem, because students naturally wrote in full sentences.

Because it takes six class periods to cover the three styles of the compare-and-contrast essay [*see sidebar on previous page*], I didn't want to devote additional classes to having the students write a second ode about a different animal. Instead, I asked them to compare the animal they had written about in their odes to the great blue heron in the ode I'd shared with them.

When these students drew on the images they created in their odes to write one of the paragraphs in their compare-and-contrast essays, silver sentences flowed from their pencils.

Here is one of the compare-and-contrast essays I got in response to this exercise:

Wild Animals

MICHELLE B., THIRD GRADE, PS 153

The lynx and the blue heron are different in many ways. But they are alike in one way, which is they both live in the wild.

Peek into the safari. Oh my, is that a lynx? Its spots are like heavy dots of ink on paper. It runs like an athlete, eager to win a race. Its fangs are

The resulting odes exploded with imagery. "You're on fire today," Ms. Few's said to student after student as she read their poems. The next step was to turn those lush descriptions into compare-and-contrast essays.

sharp like the point of a knife. Its saliva dribbles down its chin like a beggar drooling for food. Its ears are shaped like triangles. Oh, what a majestic cat the lynx is!

Although the lynx and blue heron are different animals, they are both very fast.

Look up above a bay. Oh my, is that a blue heron? Its feathers blend with the sky. Its sharp yellow beak is like the sun. Its long skinny body is as thin as a twig. Oh, what a majestic bird the blue heron is!

This is why the blue heron and lynx are different but both live in the wild.

I was proud of what my students had accomplished, but I wondered if I could inspire students other than the gifted and talented to write in this form. I got my chance to find out when I was assigned to PS 230 in the Bronx, teaching third-graders.

In these classes I had a bit more time, so I had students write odes to two different animals. I also asked them to describe only the animals' eyes, legs, nose or mouth, fur or feathers, and how the animal moves. This focused their descriptions and helped them keep their subject matter from wandering. To assist them further, I handed out a graphic organizer with spaces to describe the features of both animals.

As we brainstormed ideas for our odes in Ms. Few's class, one student said his parrot's beak was orange.

"Orange as what?" I asked.

"Orange as a sunset," he said.

He told me his claws were sharp.

"Sharp as what?" I asked.

"Sharp as scissors," he said.

The resulting odes exploded with imagery. "You're on fire today," Ms. Few's said to student after student as she read their poems.

The next step was to turn those lush descriptions into compare-and-contrast essays. The students brainstormed to compose a topic sentence, transitional sentence, and concluding sentence that the whole class could use. However, many students composed their own original anchor sentences as well.

The teachers and I guided students as they copied the segments from the graphic organizer onto lined paper. As students read their compare-and-contrast essays aloud, their joy was palpable. Starting out with poetry helped them get in touch with their creativity, and also got them more invested in writing their compare-and-contrast essays. They had imbued the animals in their odes with personality, and this made their essays come alive as well. 🐾

Horses and Monkeys

DARIELYS D., THIRD GRADE, PS 230

I like horses and monkeys very much.

The horse's eyes are blue like the lake. His legs are like a pole with a sign on top. His paws are like the oval part of a spoon. His fur is soft like a baby's skin. His nose is oval like a snail's shell. A horse runs like a jaguar.

I love horses, but I'm into monkeys.

The monkey's eyes are brown like chocolate. His legs are like a stick with a finger. His mouth is long. The monkey's fur is soft like a pillow. He climbs as if he were jumping.

I like both animals equally, even if they are different.

Parrots and Ravens

OLIVIA O., THIRD GRADE, PS 230

I like parrots and ravens.

Parrots have black shiny eyes like the night. Their claws are sharp as knives. Their beaks are orange as the afternoon sky. Their feathers are as colorful as a rainbow. Parrots move as if they have no problems in life.

While I introduced you to parrots, now I will go to beautiful ravens.

A raven's eyes are like a scary night, windy all over. His legs are long like sticks. His mouth pecks

and squawks all day. His feathers are dark and cool. He flies through the sky and soars free.

I like parrots and ravens. Even though they are different, they are unique in their own way.

A Dog and a Cat

JALISSA R., THIRD GRADE, PS 230

A dog and a cat are two animals.

The dog's eyes are brown like a tree. His paws are like a strong bone. His nose is black like the road. His fur is like a soft pillow. The dog moves fast like a woman.

First I wrote about a dog. Now I'm writing about a cat.

The cat's eyes are crayon brown. The paws are furry like a blanket. The nose is black like a computer. The fur is orange. The cat moves like a car going fast.

My two animals are different, but they live in houses.

A Pit Bull and a Fox

FATIMA D., THIRD GRADE, PS 230

My pit bull's eyes are black like a computer. His paws are white like clouds in the sky. His legs are brown like a table. My dog's nose is blue like a sky. Its mouth is white like paper. My dog's fur is like wool. He moves like a person.

First I wrote about a pit bull. Now I'm writing about a fox.

My fox's eyes are brown like mud. His paws are brown like a desk. His legs are like a box. His nose is black like a panther's. The fox's fur is brown like a bag. He moves like he is sneaking.

My two animals are different, because a fox will try to eat a pit bull for breakfast, lunch, or dinner.