

Writing Woes: In Search of Focus

Steven L. Layne

Chair – Graduate Programs in Literacy Education

Judson University – Elgin, IL

@stevenlayne

www.stevenlayne.com

1. What one-word adjective best describes how you feel after reading/listening to the piece of writing below?

2. Why do you feel the way you do? In other words, what do you think it is, specifically, about the piece of writing that is making you feel this way?

When I was ten years old, my right foot grew larger than my left one. Sometimes, you have dreams about strange things that didn't even really happen, but you think they did. When I told my mom, she said it happens sometimes and that we could order some special shoes with different sizes for my right and left foot. I know sometimes superheroes even have things happen. Like Superman was adopted. I have read some books where something happens to someone but then it doesn't happen because at the end they tell you, "Oh! It was only a dream!" It's not always cheesy but sometimes it is. I will not take my sister because she will make some dumb comment when I am picking out shoes like she always does. Maybe it will be embarrassing. I hope not. It's time to go buy the shoes. Oh, never mind. It was a dream. No, not really. It was a nightmare. Thank goodness! I don't like to wear shoes anyway.

TEACHING FOCUS: Thesis Sentence Work

1. Have students look at a piece of writing that lacks focus. Assist in a discussion of what is wrong with the piece. Then, introduce the concept of a *thesis sentence* – the sentence (sometimes there are two sentences together) that provides the focus of the paper. Be certain students do not confuse the thesis sentence with a *hook* which is used to garner a reader’s interest in the piece.
2. Provide students with a writing prompt. Then, introduce a list of 4-5 possible thesis sentences with *varying degrees of quality* in response to the prompt. Facilitate a class discussion of which is the best choice and why.
3. When the best sentence is decided upon, explain to students that a thesis sentence is well written when it is simple, concise, and clearly addresses the writing prompt. Remind them that they can often find some key words in the writing prompt to include in their thesis sentences!
4. Begin tossing out some writing prompts to the class (orally or on document camera) and creating your own thesis sentences – allowing them to tell you if you are doing a good job or not. Obviously, you will do a terrible job at times to see if they can “remediate you.” Once you have solidly introduced this concept, practice this step again orally every day or so for just a moment or two. It will have a huge impact!
5. Complete a review of step 4 to get all the kids thinking. Then, provide a new writing prompt. Have someone read it aloud. Call on a student to explain where, specifically, in the writing prompt the writer is told what to write about. Guide them time to find this important sentence and have them underline it.
6. Once the students have underlined this critical sentence, ask them to work in groups or pairs to develop two possible thesis sentences for the prompt. Have them star the one they think is best. Circulate while they discuss and write – to listen in and help as needed.
7. Before you complete step 7, review step 4 to get all the kids thinking. Pass out a new prompt. Follow the process for step 5 with this new prompt, except that now the student pairs or groups will write three possible thesis sentences. Ask them, this time to write one sentence that clearly has a great thesis, one that starts out well but ends in disaster, and one that is just plain awful!
8. Continue this process with new prompts, making subtle changes as you feel the students are ready until, eventually, they are writing a thesis sentence alone for any type of prompt you pass out.

PROMPT: Write a persuasive essay identifying the best show that has ever been on television. Give reasons to support the show you choose as the best.

Scooby Doo Where Are You was my favorite show when I was little, and I still think it is a great show for little kids.

I could never figure out why they always yelled, “Scooby Doo, where are you?” He was always standing just a few feet away.

If you don’t think the *Scooby Doo* is the best show that’s ever been on television, then we can’t be friends.

The enormous popularity of *Scooby Doo*, and the fact that I think Fred and Daphne like each other, is why it’s the best.

Will there ever be another version of *Scooby Doo*? Only time will tell.

Scooby Doo is, without question, the best show that has ever been on television.

I saw the movie one summer. It was dumb.

One reason that *Scooby Doo* is the best show that has ever been on television is that it provides entertainment for people of all ages.

PROMPT: Write a persuasive essay in which you address your feelings regarding how Barack Obama led the USA through a difficult time in the nation's history.

The USA was in good hands with Barack Obama as our leader, and he won that 1st election fair and square, too.

Barack Obama was a good leader, but he shouldn't have done some of the stuff he did.

Barack Obama was a leader who was equipped to deal with troubled times.

My dad voted for Romney, and he should of won the whole thing was rigged my dad told me so.

Barack Obama was at the head of our national disaster, and it turned out fine in the end. Have faith!

PROMPT: Should children be allowed to climb trees, or is it too dangerous? Write a persuasive piece in which you make your opinion clear.

Children should not be climbing trees because they will kill them.

Why do you want to climb trees and maybe break your neck?

Children need the opportunity to climb trees because of the many benefits they will gain from the activity.

Climbing trees has been deadly in both large cities and small ones.

Danger Will Robinson, danger! We have to stop climbing trees, or your life is over.

Tree climbing is not just a fun activity, it's a dangerous one, and people who care about children need to understand the risks involved.

There are both good and bad points to tree-climbing.

Once when I was five I climbed a tree; now I'm in a wheelchair for life.

PROMPT: People are always creating new inventions to make life more pleasurable or easier. Inventions like the microwave, cordless phone, and laptop computers have improved many people's lives. You may think of other inventions that have helped even more. Write an expository paper about one invention and how it helps make people's lives better.

PROMPT: Write an expository essay that tells some positive things about having recess during the school day. Give reasons to support your response.

There are many positives about having recess during the school day.

Recess is fun, great, and cool.

There is nothing I would rather do than have recess.

If we had recess more often, I would like school better.

PROMPT: Some people say “Change is good.” Maybe that is true and maybe it is not true. People also say “Change is inevitable” – that means most things eventually change no matter what. If you could change one thing in this world, what would it be? Write an expository piece to explain your thinking.

WHICH PASSAGE HAS THE STRONGEST FOCUS

... AND WHY?

When my best friend and I are fighting, I feel shaky inside. She was my first friend when I came to this school, and she is always there for me so when we are mad at each other I feel worried. We have had arguments and made up many times over the years, but no matter how much I remind myself of that, being mad at her (or having her mad at me) leaves my stomach unsettled and my brain rushing. It must be a testimony to our friendship that it bothers me as much as it does. If I really wasn't bothered when we are "on the outs," I guess it would mean that she doesn't matter that much to me which is so not true. I know it is not good to put all your eggs (friends) in one basket, and I have not done that – but Shakka is a friend for life so I think it's okay to feel a little out of step when things aren't right between us. I hope, as the years go by, these times will happen less and less because have your best friend available 24/7 is kind of important!

If I compare myself to a pair of shoes, I'm a lot like flip flops. Flip flops are some of the most open shoes of all, and I am a very open person: open to making new friends, open to other people's ideas, open to trying new foods and open to other points of view. Another way I am like flip flops is that I can take a beating. Flip flops get banged around a lot because people slide into them quickly and "flip" them off easily when they are done wearing them. I feel like that with my brothers. They invite me to do things when they are bored but then toss me aside easily when their friends come around. It could be that this is how flip flops get their name – the tossing around part. Flip flops come in many colors; now, I only come in one color, but I dress in many colors so in that way I am like flip flops. I also think flip flops are the "favorite shoe" of a lot of people, and everyone says I'm the favorite grandchild. It might be true; it might not be true. I'm okay either way!

The thing I take for granted is my freedom. I know in my head, and I hear on the news that people in so many other countries are not free but my life is so filled with and impacted by freedom that I know I don't appreciate it the way I need to. According to Webster's Dictionary, freedom is the power to act, think, or speak as one wants without restraint. That is the definition that I like best. It just sounds the best to me from the ones I looked at about freedom. That does not happen in many other countries. Some people are jailed and others are even tortured or killed for sharing thoughts. I read about a kid visiting North Korea who took a poster down, and now he's dead. Why anyone would want to go to North Korea, I don't know because my dad said everyone in that country is a nut – even about posters! If you aren't in a free country, you can't take posters down. Even if it was a bad poster, you should not take it down if you don't ask someone. You should not be acting like you are in charge when you aren't.