

MAY I QUOTE YOU?

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"I feel a cool spooky wind blow on my excited face." The effect is immediate when Tyler reads a pizzazz sentence from his favorite-time story. Smiles and conversations emanate from the young authors gathered at Tyler's feet as he shares his prize sentence. Of course the topic is Halloween, but he captures its essence in a handful of carefully chosen words. The aspiring author beams as spontaneous applause breaks out for his achievement. I am quite pleased, and this moment is a well-earned reward presented to our classroom's writing time. Arrival to this brief and satisfying event was an adventure of patience and hard work by our third grade class.

Phrase Wall Beginnings

I have been experimenting with the idea of a *phrase wall* for a few years with mixed results. The phrase-wall concept is similar to a word wall, but instead is designed to lift text from student writing in phrases or complete sentences for classroom display. The word wall in our third grade classroom always seems static, a place for words third graders often misspell. I am *probably* quite guilty of not tending to and helping the word wall develop and flourish. Instead, the notion of finding powerful, lively, and visually strong text in student writing is appealing. The phrase wall will be a place to display these word gems.

A new school year begins with a prominent bulletin board designated as the home of the phrase wall. The bulletin board is simply titled *May I Quote You?* I eagerly explain the purpose of the bulletin board to my new class of third graders. I inform students that one sentence or phrase will be selected from a classroom writing activity and written on a piece of adding-machine tape. The selection will then be displayed for all writers to admire, emulate, and discuss. My students seem to take this information

with less excitement than I, but listen intently as the phrase wall is explained among a myriad of first-day-of-school remarks.

A quest will begin in our classroom to find groups of words that work well together in individual writing. My students and I will hunt for phrases in their compositions that jump out and demand to be heard. My third graders are asked to find writing in their text they *just have to share*.

I attempt to clarify how student writing may gain consideration for the phrase wall. The initial phrase-wall standards I discuss with my students include:

- Writing that holds unexpected surprises.
- Writing that is easy to visualize.
- Groups of words that capture attention.
- Descriptive writing that goes beyond the ordinary.
- Writing that is pleasant to listen to.
- Writing that is sensory.

I feel secure that the efforts made on this first day of school will pay writing dividends throughout the upcoming year.

Waiting for Phrases

Quite soon into the school year it is obvious that a phrase wall requires the same constant tending required of a word wall. Despite good efforts and attention, the phrase wall is not thriving or being overrun with uniquely cultivated phrases. Students happily produce great volumes of seemingly effortless writing, but the special, just-right phrases remain elusive. Much of the current student writings are general statements and descriptions about their topics.

I begin to experience a curious sort of panic. Great numbers of creative combinations of words are expected, but none are leaping off the paper and causing that beautiful, yet momentary feeling of becoming intertwined with an author's words. A personal self-doubt begins to arise. The standards of the phrase wall may be too

high or unclear. Perhaps, I have only a vague idea of how to unravel the creativity in the writing being produced by so many dedicated writers.

Finally, a personal alliance is made with patience. I decide to slow the pace, wait for the gripping sentences to appear, and not worry about an empty bulletin board staring at the room. I consider the assets of my students: It is clear that they enjoy the writing process, and there is no shortage of effort while composing. I wonder what I can do to focus their willingness and energy as writers. I decide that if our class writes about the same topic, our conversations about idea development can be connected more easily from writer to writer. Students can share similar thoughts or discover new attitudes while discussing a comparable topic with classmates. I turn to having my students write to a prompt. I select a prompt that is safe, tried, and true. I ask my entire class to write about a favorite animal. The assignment is greeted with the normal enthusiasm I have come to expect from this delightful group of authors.

The introductory discussion for this prompt makes it clear that the writing must go beyond simple descriptions and predictable feelings. I ask my students to develop an idea or feeling in their writing that is not obvious about their favorite animal. For example, we know cats climb trees and dogs are loyal, but these are not unexpected when describing these animals. I suggest students search their thoughts and feelings to find something rare and unusual to share about their animal. Enthusiastic students begin constructing webs, have partner discussions, and look through personal idea lists. Some begin writing as soon as they return to their desks.

On the surface, the prompt-writing assignment appears to be working smoothly. The children are intent, pages are filling with words, and sketches of favorite animals begin to take shape as doodles in the margins of individual rough drafts. I grow curious and summon the class to its meeting spot on the floor. All are asked to bring their writing notebooks, and to be ready to share a favorite *one* sentence from their story.

Students are full of excitement and willing to share as many hands rise in proud unison hoping to be called on first. The first few students I select read some usual feelings and attitudes about animals: cute, cuddly, friendly. Again, I feel that familiar sense of panic begin to emerge.

Fortunately, there is a surprise in all these pages of words. Stephanie offers this sentence for consideration:

“I like all dogs, even those that have three legs.”

Giggles follow as students turn to one another and whisper in a show of positive validation for Stephanie’s work. When asked to explain this sentence, Stephanie informs her attentive classmates that she once saw a dog with three legs, and it was still playful and having fun. This brief time out from writing to share and to hear Stephanie’s interesting idea is a moment that appears to be a catalyst for the beginning of the phrase wall. Stephanie is thanked with applause and smiles. Students return to their desks reenergized by this catchy bit of writing. Grateful and relieved, I watch enthusiastic writers continue with the task of capturing their thoughts on paper.

The Phrase Wall Begins

The following day’s writing session is interrupted for share time. My anticipation is high, and judging by the desire of so many wanting to share, it seems certain the class is on the right track for producing numerous considerations for the phrase wall. Yet, a curious thing happens; Stephanie’s idea is emulated a bit *too* closely. Students share sentences much like Stephanie’s: “I like all cats, even those with three legs.” and “I would love a hamster with only three legs.” This near-verbatim modeling leads our class to the realization that Stephanie’s idea is now much too common and becoming worn out. Unfortunately, the class has relied on Stephanie’s thought so much that her idea is now overused.

But Stephanie has planted the seed of excitement and the use of unexpected ideas in our writing. As the discussion continues, Adam shares his love of frogs by reading:

“If I had a frog I’d be springing around my room.”

The class is enchanted by the idea of Adam getting a frog and being so happy that he springs around his room, much in the same fashion as a hopping frog. A happy boy springing around a room is easy and interesting to visualize. The search is over: Adam’s sentence becomes the first entry on the phrase wall. His idea clearly goes beyond green, smooth, and amphibian. Stephanie’s homage to a three-legged dog helps inspire our class by moving us closer to finding elusive, yet rewarding combinations of words.

Once the favorite animal stories are complete, a new prompt is given. I now ask students to write about their favorite place. I am pleased to discover that students begin to think beyond the apparent of amusement parks and malls. Personal places, such as back yards, their bedrooms, and grandma’s house, begin to appear as topics throughout the classroom.

After the initial writing session for this topic is complete, the same sharing procedure is followed. Students gather and share their most compelling sentence. There is much more clarity in their writing. It is apparent that allowing time for students to discuss ideas and feelings with partners or small groups helps generate details that support their writing. Students are beginning to carefully consider their word choices as they develop their ideas that go beyond obvious descriptions and feelings. There is a more playful and relaxed attitude toward words as students take time to stop and share ideas during writing time. Students are finding just-right words to clearly communicate their ideas. As I listen to students, it is possible to travel with them to peaceful mountainsides, grandfather’s fascinating basement full of model trains, and windswept hills perfect for flying a kite with father.

It is fortunate that Stephanie once again emerges as a budding author. Stephanie's phrase takes the entire class to a stream that is a cooling image on a hot September afternoon. She reads:

“...it feels funny when the water goes between my toes.
It feels like worms going between my toes.”

The usual smiles greet this combination of words. Many students reach down and hold the tips of their shoes, and wiggle their toes in response. Stephanie moves her thinking from the sense of sight to the sense of touch. This example of writing opens the door to using all of our senses as writers. Again, this lifted text provides an opportunity for our class to grow as writers. Stephanie's work becomes the second entry on the phrase wall.

The Phrase Wall Grows

Soon the phrase wall is a focal point of our classroom. Students work hard, hoping to have their idea posted. I see no need to change the format that is now beginning to produce clever phrases and sentences. A prompt is given to write about a favorite time. Birthdays, vacations, and holidays are the topics developing throughout the classroom.

The now highly anticipated sharing time arrives, and as usual the children are quite happy to participate. So many wonderful sentences are volunteered, but one in particular really seems to *leap off the paper*. Once again, Halloween is elevated to a favorite-time status by Landon. In describing a jack-o-lantern Landon writes:

“The eyes are like glowing headlights on a cold frosty night.”

This sentence, wrapped in the senses of touch and sight, is loved by all. This appealing collection of words, written in just the right order, takes the entire audience on a vivid-momentary trip to some Halloween in the past. Landon's words seem to have wings for a brief moment as our classroom of authors pause and enjoy his

pleasant gift of writing. Again, customary applause thanks Landon, and it becomes obvious that this *glowing* sentence will be added to the developing phrase wall. I begin to feel spoiled, but wary to always expect a strong candidate for the phrase wall to emerge from our assigned writing projects.

Hoping to continue the momentum of wonderful writing, I decide to have my students write to a last prompt. This assignment asks students to write and illustrate an *All About Book*. The book is designed to share something about a topic or activity students know a great deal about. I invite students to select something they consider themselves to be an “expert” at, and to organize and present this knowledge or ability in a short instructional book. Each book is to be ten pages. I ask students to share what they know about a topic, and to add interesting and unusual ideas to spice up their writing. The books will be shared whenever an individual author decides his/her book is complete.

The eagerness is noticeable as each child begins planning and drafting. Again, students are given time to meet with partners and small groups for sharing and development of ideas. The individual conferences I have with each writer are productive and meaningful. Most students appear to have selected a manageable topic. The abundance of ideas is reflected in some of the initial story titles: How to Take Care of Hamsters, How to Fly a Kite, Making Coffee for Mom, and Hanging Christmas Lights with Father. Some students still struggle to find a topic, but a brainstorming session that centers on listing daily routines or after school activities helps produce composition ideas. There is a satisfying feel of a true *workshop* approach to writing beginning to take hold as ideas are being released easily into rough drafts. Students are having productive conversations about their writing, and are open to editing suggestions from their classmates and me.

The following week produces several books ready to be shared. There is wonderful information about the life of toads, ways to care for kittens, needs of dogs, and trials of owning two parakeets. As these books are shared, it becomes apparent the once-easy flow of pizzazz sentences is now somewhat slowed. The *All About Books*

are well crafted and beautifully illustrated, but the words worthy of the phrase wall have now become rare. I wonder if asking the children to write in a new style has temporarily shifted the emphasis of writing for creativity to writing for specificity. The *All About Books* are written with precise language in an attempt to give their readers accurate information about their topics. The writer's purpose is now somewhat technical in a very beginning way. The writing is sequential, factual, and full of accurate descriptions.

Yet, this newly developing writing style is just as enjoyable to listen to as the products of the previous prompts. My students are teaching me about the challenging task of becoming *versatile* as writers. When I ask students to write in a new style, it is somewhat unfairly assumed that they will automatically take all their tools of creativity along with them to support their writing, no matter what the assignment. For a moment, I feel that curious sort of panic renew its presence, but the alliance with patience I adopted early in the school year is a comforting reminder that soothes away this feeling.

My patient look at the children's current writing is an encouraging glimpse into the abilities of these young authors. They are wonderful writers, working hard to please their audience, proud of their work, enjoying the writing process, and moving toward flexibility as writers. As the students grow as writers, I also grow as a teacher. Each child serves as a reminder of the promise of what can be if there are willingness and patience as writers. I debate if it is wrong to assume that every story, poem, or book created in the classroom should have a sentence destined for the phrase wall. Surely, these phrases will come and continue, as long as there are persistence and open eyes and ears.

Having gone through this personal reflection on patience, I am about to move beyond the *All About Books* without finding an addition to the phrase wall, and to ready the class for the next writing experience. Luckily, a few students are still waiting for the opportunity to share their books. Kelsey is one of the last students to share her book. It is titled *All About Ice Skating*. Kelsey is a patient writer, and pours herself into her work, especially the

illustrations. Her book is about her ice skating lessons and periodic competitions. Her highs and lows are shared, and she tells of the countless times she has fallen on the ice:

“When I fall and feel the ice it feels as rough as a cat’s tongue.”

I know it, the entire class knows it. There it is, masterfully woven into the fabric of this colorful and informative book on ice skating, a group of words that catches everyone’s attention. This shared work gives us all hope that we will continue to have the ability to grow as writers. Kelsey’s fifteen words find a comfortable and appropriate niche in her book. Our classroom recognizes the importance of using all of one’s writing skills while composing. The children think Kelsey’s book is like a recipe. She has carefully combined just the right ingredients: lively verbs, precise descriptions, wonderful illustrations, and a skillful *sprinkle of* just the right amount of creativity. Kelsey’s sentence is added to the phrase wall.

The Phrase Wall Continues

As my students read the words on the phrase wall, I hope they are reminded of the hard work that went into developing each entry. An equal hope exists that as each item on the phrase wall is read, students will recall the valuable lessons about writing that were revealed when these wonderfully crafted sentences were selected to represent our efforts as authors. It is clear that our class looks forward to the ideas yet to come.

The phrase wall now serves as a gathering point for our class when working with the writing process. As we assemble near these delicious sentences, there is an atmosphere of a literary community. My students and I savor these hard-earned words. The phrase wall serves as a guidepost or landmark, inviting and directing young authors to dig deep into their thoughts to find combinations of words that add the personal touch of their voice to their writing. The phrases are memorable and represent our

entire classroom's efforts at writing. The authors of these initial ideas have gladly given permission to our entire class to emulate these phrases in their writing.

As for me, it will always be pleasant seeing a young boy springing around his room, experiencing the feeling of worms between my toes, having a cool-spooky wind blow on my excited face, spotting glowing eyes on a frosty night, and feeling ice as rough as a cat's tongue. The simple idea of a phrase wall now serves our classroom well. Our classroom looks forward to its growth for the remainder of the school year as each young author lovingly tends the small garden plots of writing held within their writer's notebooks.