



# LANGUAGE AND CULTURE BULLETIN

*Information and Tips from the Office of Multilingual and Multicultural Programs*

Portland Public Schools  
150 Ocean Ave., Portland, Maine 04103

Donald L. Bouchard  
Tel. (207) 874-8135  
Fax (207) 756-8421 Vol. 9, No. 3 Fall 2005

## GUIDED TASKS FOR IMPROVING CONTENT WRITING

Academic texts have the following characteristics: they overwhelmingly consist of declarative sentences, with restricted or non-existent use of exclamations, direct questions, and imperative forms; sentences are often long, with many embedded phrases and clauses; there is frequent use of commas and semi-colons; there is common use of the passive voice; the technical vocabulary consists of Greek/Latinate and Romance language-based words; and in writing there is a lengthy, multi-layered process of revision leading to a linguistically and conceptually accurate text.

Students need practice and support with understanding the above-described academic text features. Teachers can engage students in tasks with guided writing using familiar academic texts driven by the curriculum needs in language arts, social studies, science, and math.

This *Bulletin* examines fifteen different writing tasks that teachers can use to help ELLs expand their content language use.

### TASKS

1. **Jigsaw Sentences.** Students correctly match and write out halves of several jumbled sentences from a content passage.

2. **Copying with Corrections.** Students rewrite a paragraph changing incorrect details to the correct form.

3. **Gapped Passages.** Students fill in and rewrite a passage with missing specific content words or language features (e.g., transition words).

4. **Find and Copy.** From a text, ask students to locate and write out certain aspects of the content. For example: *"Write out the words in the passage that give an impression of stability and durability;" "Write out the sentence that tells us why Sherman went on his slash and burn march through Georgia."*

5. **Dictogloss.** Choose a challenging sentence from a content passage. Read it once, with students listening. Then have students reconstruct the sentence, first individually, then in groups.

6. **Pair Dictation.** Prepare copies of a text, split into two parts, each with missing phrases complementing each other. Pair students facing each other, each dictating his/her portion of the text to be filled in by the other:

*Student A: The Anasazi homes \_\_\_\_\_*

*Student B: \_\_\_\_\_*

were grouped around plazas, etc.

**7. Moving Dictation.** In pairs, students take turns going to designated places in the room where there numbered sentences from a text are posted. Partner A goes to an odd-numbered sentence, memorizes it, and returns to dictate the sentence to partner B. Partner B goes to an even-numbered sentence and repeats the process, etc.

**8. Notched Up Dictation.** Students are provided with a dictation of a familiar content passage with added words, phrases, and/or clauses added to create a more complex text. Teacher discusses added features with students before and after dictation.

**9. Sentence-Combining.** Students are given a passage written in short sentences for combining into longer sentences with appropriate connectors and transition words.

**10. Reducing.** In this activity, students in pairs are given a grade-level passage; then take out all unnecessary words and phrases without losing the essential meaning.

**11. Headline Expansion.** Teacher collects a variety of newspaper headlines for students to elaborate in written form.

**12. Sentence Synthesis.** Students construct meaningful sentences in a quick-write fashion, using three or four key words from the lesson. The sentences are then analyzed in the ways in which the key words are used.

**13. Question All-Write.** The teacher interrupts a lecture/discussion/video to pose relevant questions for students to respond to in their notebooks. Student responses may then be used to add to the lecture, enabling them to think more about what is being discussed.

**14. Outcome Sentences.** Students respond to a writing prompt in the form of a sentence stem, such as "I learned that . . .", "I wonder if . . .", "I feel that . . .", after reading a paragraph.

**15. Sentence Stretching.** Have students

create as many short sentences as they can in X number of minutes, based on their knowledge of a particular topic. Collect them. Pair students, each with a sheet of paper turned lengthways and divided into three columns. The first column is labeled 'Before,' and the third column is labeled 'After.' Choose and dictate sentences randomly. Students write them in the middle column. Have students write one, two, three, or four words before or after each sentence (one student in the pair is responsible for the 'Before' column, the other is responsible for the 'After' column. Have students read their sentences.

\*\*\*\*\*

There are two registers of language use operating in the classroom: *interactional*, the language of conversation characterized by high frequency vocabulary and informal language; and *academic*, the language of texts, consisting of more complex sentences, Greek and Latinate low frequency words, and formal, unabbreviated word usage. Students need to practice academic forms of language, particularly as these forms relate to specific content areas. Writing activities such as those described above, and generated *after* content has been learned, can help students focus on the form, word choices, and language features characteristic of content texts. In this way, students can practice new forms of expression that are typical of texts and learn more meaningful ways to accurately communicate in academic, print language.

#### SOURCES

- Anonymous. "Putting Gel Pen to Paper."  
Cross, David (1992). A Practical Handbook of Language Teaching. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.  
Davis, Paul and Rinvoluceri, Mario (1988). Dictations New Methods, New Possibilities. New York: Cambridge University Press.  
Schleppegrell, Mary (2004). The Language of Schooling. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.  
Swales, John. "Academically Speaking." Los Angeles, CA: Language Magazine, April 2005, Vol. 4, No. 8.