

Writing: Mini things

Topic: Mini sagas

Aims:

- To help students learn how to edit their writing
- To help students understand that ‘quality’ is more important than ‘quantity’ when it comes to writing
- To develop students’ writing skills

Level: Lower intermediate B1

Introduction

Sometimes when we ask students to write a composition they spend very little time at the important editing stage. In this lesson students will do a couple of ‘short writing’ activities with the focus on editing and accuracy.

Procedure

Lead in: Hangman

- Write this ‘Hangman’ sentence on the board and explain that it is a quotation by Blaise Pascale, a 16th century philosopher and mathematician.

“ _ ’ / _ _ _ _ / _ _ _ _ / _ _ _ _ _ / _ _ / _ _ / _ _ _ _ . / _ / _ _ _ _ ’ _ /
_ _ _ _ / _ _ _ _ / _ _ / _ _ _ _ _ / _ / _ _ _ _ _ / _ _ _ _ . ”

Play ‘Hangman’ with the class, filling in the letters of the quotation until a student is able to guess the complete quotation.

“I’m sorry this letter is so long. I didn’t have time to write a short one.”

Put students into small groups to discuss the meaning. Elicit a few ideas. Explain that writing ‘less’ often requires more skill than writing ‘more’.

Task 1: Mini dialogues

- Demonstrate this pairwork writing activity with you as student A and the rest of the class as student B. Write the first line of a dialogue on the board. E.g. *Did you do anything interesting last night?* Ask students to count how many words you’ve used (7). Elicit a response from any student, to continue the dialogue, but with 6 words. E.g. *Not really, I was at home.* Continue the dialogue with a 5-word sentence; e.g. *Were you at home alone?* Elicit a 4-word sentence, etc. Continue until the mini dialogue concludes with one word.

- Students repeat the activity in pairs; A and B. Both students should write the first line of a dialogue using seven words. Then they should exchange papers and both students should continue their partner's dialogue using six words, etc. Each pair is writing two mini dialogues at the same time. Point out that contractions such as 'don't', count as two words. When students finish, check the dialogues for errors and get students to make any necessary changes.

Students are often curious to read each other's mini dialogues so you might like to display them on the wall for everyone to read.

Task 2: Mini sagas reading

- Write *mini saga* on the board and ask students what it means. Explain that a mini saga is a story, joke or anecdote written in exactly 50 words.

Note: A mini saga is a piece of writing with exactly fifty words. It has to tell a story, have a beginning, a middle and an ending. Mini sagas were 'invented' by the Science fiction writer Brian Aldiss, who thought it would be fun and challenging to tell a story in very few words. The Sunday Telegraph holds a mini saga competition each year.

Give each student a copy of Task 2.

Read the text. There are 65 words. Work with a partner. Take turns deleting one word at a time. Each time you delete a word the text must make sense and be grammatically correct.

"Water should never lie still" the wrinkled old gypsy woman said, joining two small puddles together with a walking stick. The city businessman was quite intrigued and he suddenly had an idea. He later spoke to the government and soon he announced his new plan to join two much larger puddles together. Ships can now sail right through Panama instead of going around Cape Horn.

Make a list of the words you removed here. What kind of words are they?

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Students follow the instructions on their worksheet, working in pairs, taking turns to delete one word at a time from a text until exactly fifty words remain.

- When students finish, read the original mini saga (below) aloud for students to check their answers. If any pair has a different version, check to make sure there are no errors.

Original:

"Water should never lie still" the old gypsy said, joining two puddles together with a stick. The businessman was intrigued and had an idea. He spoke to the government and announced his new plan to join two larger puddles together. Ships now sail through Panama instead of around Cape Horn.

By John Morgan, University of Aberystwyth, UK

Task 3: Writing

- Students work alone to write a mini saga. First they should spend a few minutes thinking of what they are going to write about. Write a few ideas on the board to help: *A description of a favourite object, place, person; a joke, something funny or scary that happened to you; a synopsis of a film you have watched or a book you have read; a letter to an old school teacher, friend or relative; your views on a topic, etc.* Students write their first draft, then spend time editing, cutting out or adding words until the text has exactly 50 words. Monitor students while they work, correcting any errors and offering encouragement.