

TRAIT FOCUS: ORGANIZATION

Lesson Objective

Students use transition words and phrases to organize details into a narrative paragraph.

Transitions in Student Writing

Young writers just learning their craft highly benefit from organizational frameworks that help them structure their thoughts into a clear and concise stream of writing. Using graphic organizers and other template models is an excellent way of laying a solid base of understanding. However, the ultimate goal should be to slowly wean students off such blackline master frameworks and have them structure their writing on their own.

To that end, transition words and phrases provide both a structure for the writer as he or she crafts the first draft and also a road map for readers. Moreover, the transitions employed during prewriting can be inserted directly into the writing itself. Transitions ultimately take the place of graphic organizers, becoming an effective tool in the young writer's repertoire.

The book *The Ballad of Mulan* by Song Nan Zhang is an excellent mentor text with a clear, linear plot path that is perfect for illustrating the use of effective transitions. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your prewriting curriculum on narrative writing to help students organize their details.

Story Overview

Based on the ancient Chinese poem of the same name, Zhang retells the story of Hua Mulan, the fierce heroine whose father is conscripted into the army. Cutting off her hair and dressing as a boy, she enlists in his place. Disguised, she fights in the army for 10 years, eventually rising to rank of general.

When she returns home after the war, her true gender is revealed. Zhang echoes the original poem's final message of equality—that women can do anything men can do.

One Step at a Time

1. Use the following exercise as you teach prewriting for narrative paragraphs that retell an event in the writer's life. Students will have selected a topic and brainstormed a list of details they wish to include. Next comes the time when they organize their thoughts into chronological order.
2. Define transitions as words and phrases that help keep events or steps in a process in order. They are like a road map that shows both the writer and the reader where they are in a piece of writing. They help guide you along from beginning to end.
3. Write these common transition words in a vertical line on the board or overhead: *first, second, then, next, after that, and finally*.
4. Read the book to your class. Discuss the pictures, the historical significance of the story, and the artwork. Be sure to accentuate the steps in the plot as Mulan goes from young girl to army general.
5. Use the transition words from Step 3 to list the chain of events in the story. Call on students to help you match the events with the transitions. Use the following as a guide, if you wish.
 - First—News of invasion
 - Second—Father called to fight
 - Then—Mulan dresses as boy and takes his place
 - Next—She fights for 10 years
 - After that—She becomes a general
 - Finally—She returns home and reveals she is a woman
6. With this exercise fresh in their minds, have your students do the same for details in their own narrative writing. Have them list the transition words on a sheet of paper, then match up the details in chronological order. They now have an organizational structure and transition words to use as they write their first drafts.