

Literature/Writing Connection: *I, Too*

TRAIT FOCUS: SENTENCE FLUENCY

Lesson Objective

Students convert their writing into stanzas of free verse poetry as a way of revising for sentence fluency.

Using Free Verse Poetry to Teach Fluency

As students progress into the higher elementary grades, the level of their reading comprehension becomes more sophisticated. Most will have moved beyond the short, simple, declarative sentence structures of the lower grades (*Jack sat on a mat. Jack has a fun hat*). As they are expected to read more fluent text, they will also be expected to produce more fluent writing.

The first step in mastering sentence fluency is to employ varying sentence lengths. Some student writers are able to use their ears to pick out choppy sentences. However, many benefit from seeing it visually as well. Free verse poetry is a useful way of displaying sentence lengths using strategic line breaks. This exercise allows writers to experiment with the flow of text and to be creative with how they construct their sentences.

The poem “I, Too” by Langston Hughes is an excellent mentor text for illustrating the poetic use of varying line breaks and sentence lengths. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your instruction as a way of exercising your students’ mastery of sentence fluency.

Story Overview

Written by the prized African American poet Langston Hughes, “I, Too” is a tightly-constructed few lines that pack a significant punch. They symbolize strength of resolve in the face of racial inequality and discrimination in America’s history.

Written in response to Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing,” Hughes’s verse is as poignant today as it was at the time it was written, and it provides an important lesson for young readers from all walks of life.

Crafting a Few Lines of Poetry

1. Use the following lesson as you teach the trait of sentence fluency as a strategy for revision. Students will have completed a first draft of their papers. Next comes the time when they revise their writing for flow and rhythm.
2. Define for your students what sentence fluency is. It is the flow and rhythm of language. It is using a variety of sentence lengths to keep your writing alive and interesting. Fluent writing is smooth and pleasant to read aloud, not jarring or choppy.
3. Read the poem as an example of fluent writing. Take time to discuss the poem’s meaning and significance. A great deal of its beauty comes in the poetic construction of its sentences and the overall way the piece is crafted.
4. Highlight the varying sentence lengths Hughes uses to create fluency. Reread the poem, this time emulating prose. Only pause at the ends of sentences, rather than at line breaks. Some are short and some are long, but all work together to build a fluent piece of writing.
5. With the poem fresh in their minds, have students rewrite a paragraph of two of their own writing as though it were a free verse poem. This exercise will not be part of their final drafts, but it will help them visually experiment with their sentence lengths so their writing becomes more fluent.
6. They may start with each sentence as its own line of poetry, so they can compare lengths. They then may combine or split sentences to vary those lengths. Have them next break the lines wherever they wish to create a poetic pause. The only goal here is to play with free verse language in their writing.
7. When your writers are ready for their final drafts, have them recopy their “poems” into paragraph form. They should come away with text that is not necessarily poetic, but should still flow more fluently than before.