

Simplifying Instruction  
Fun-Size Practices for Literacy at Home  
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My dad told me once, the mark of a good manager is how well things run when he's not there. This thought helped guide my teaching life for over 30 years, but it has never been more tested than now, in the time of Covid-19. If you've tried to help your own children with assignments at home, you may have grappled with this one truth about teachers: we often overcomplicate things. And though I believe that there is no substitute for a live, up-close teacher, with eye contact and fully-nuanced facial expressions, I also have seen that if we simplify on our end, we can ease stress, frustration, and withdrawal on their end.

Let's look at a few ways to lighten the load for everyone. Is it possible to simplify our lessons without sacrificing complexity? Well yes! It is.

Here are three ways:

**1. Use simplicity in building reading skills**

Naturally, the more students read, the better readers they become. Parents can help them spend pleasurable time at home, snuggled with a magazine, book, reading alone or together as a family routine. Reading creates stronger writers, too. In *A Sense of Style*, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker writes, "Writers acquire their technique by spotting, savoring, and reverse-engineering examples of good prose" (12). We can ask for conversation about the reading, or for written forms of conversational responses.

Consider these two questions for students:

Question A: Read this passage, and identify a metaphor, a simile, and three alliterations. Then summarize the passage.

Question B: Read this passage and underline a word or phrase that you really like. Tell what made you choose it.

Which question is easier?

Which question would parents be able to help with more?

Question B is an infinitely better question, easing students into more complex thought processes, generating thoughts and explaining them. It leads students to engage in writerly talk, exploring through one simple word or phrase what makes language sing. It's also more enjoyable, inviting everyone in to the conversation. It gives students the authority of their own experience.

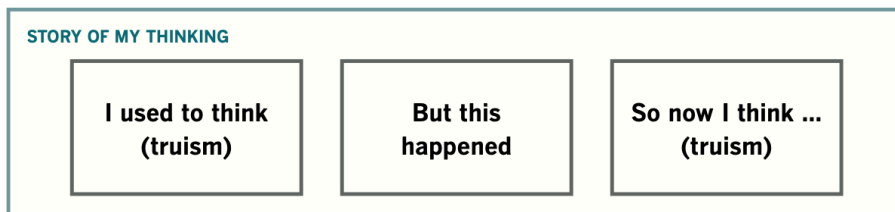
**2. Focus on one thing at a time.**

Maybe we'd like to deepen students' awareness of more targeted moves a writer is making, then we can simplify here too. We can share a piece of writing, like any of the student-written texts in *Fun-Size Academic Writing*, and direct students' attention to one simple piece of craftsmanship in the text. Just one. Maybe it's about writing visual images, crisp dialogue, or a rhetorical device. We notice it and then try it ourselves, weaving a reading

moment into a writing moment. The scaffolding here is simple and clean: everyone can see that one piece of craft in the piece, can color-code it, underline it, share it. There is no chance to get it wrong. Then trying it out is experimental, so there is again, no right answer. We try it out and see how we like what happens in our writing.

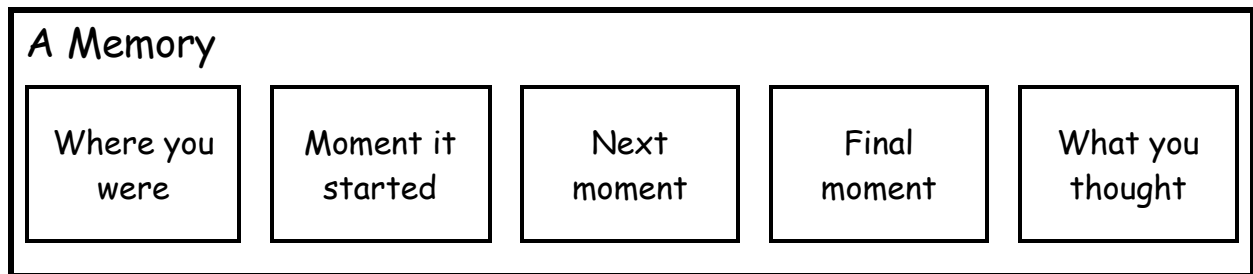
### 3. Simplify writing with writing frames

Also known as text structures, the frames provide students a practical visual to assist them with “tracking movement of the mind,” as Thomas Newkirk says. We lay these out horizontally like a path, with boxes showing each step of a mental process. Students can use these to give their writing a sense of direction, directing the gaze of their reader from point to point. Here is one example:

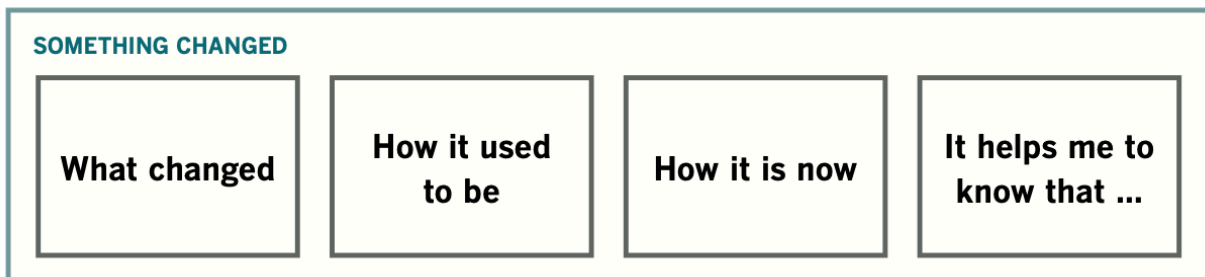


Teachers can simplify further by asking students to create one sentence for each box. The important thing is that students

At home, parents and students can use this to guide their conversation (if it's out loud) or their writing (if it's on paper). Either one is valuable. How about sharing memories?



Many teachers are asking students to keep journals about their lives while sheltering in place, and a structure like this might help students write with some depth.



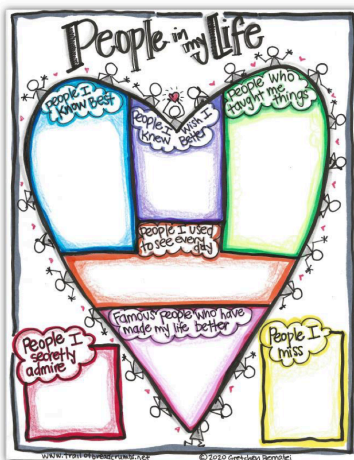
There are hundreds of these structures, and students take ownership of them quickly, becoming the designer of the piece of writing.

#### 4. Reduce the content.

Put aside anything that's not important. Even in traditional classrooms, there will never be enough time to cover everything in the curriculum. And when I've tried to cover more, students have invariably learned less. So what if instead, we look at several ways to get the most stress-free bang for the teaching buck. Pull a Marie Kondo on your content, and ruthlessly separate the joy-sparking, most-meaningful pieces of content from everything else. Whether the students are physically in your classroom or working at home, they (and their parents) will benefit from your focus.

For example, right now while most of our country is awaiting a Covid-19 vaccine and isolating ourselves from each other, our students are experiencing some trauma, from desperately missing normal activities with their friends, and uncertainty about the future, to the specter of "what-ifs." Perhaps expository essays aren't most important right now. Instead, we might help students (and their parents) write messages to people in their lives, to shape into words the pressing thoughts and feelings they are experiencing. To demonstrate what literacy is for in the first place, how literacy serves us, helps us understand each other, appreciate each other. Helps us navigate relationships. Helps us prevent the regret that comes when it's too late to tell someone what was in your heart with clarity and honesty.

How do we break that down into simple, concrete steps? We make a list of people who have impacted us, select one, write the appropriate message. Deliver the message. Repeat.



(See the "Unsent Messages" guide posted at [www.trailofbreadcrumbs](http://www.trailofbreadcrumbs) for detailed examples.)

On the news lately we've seen how thousands of Americans have said thank you to medical workers. While the messages have been touching, most of them have not shown skill in

writing. “Thank you for all you do” is so vague it’s almost dismissive, and rewording the thanks doesn’t help a recipient see through the writer’s eyes at all. Using one of these structures helps a writer convert those feelings into clear words, to achieve the connection the writer felt before the teacher even mentioned the assignment. Recipients of these notes are more likely to keep them forever.

There are plenty of other ways to streamline instruction, and the results are dramatic. Maybe when Covid-19 has been eradicated and we return to our classrooms, we might take some of these thoughts with us.

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