

Improving writing skills

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Jeffrey Solomon



I teach English Home Language to Grade 12 learners in a high school in the southern part of KZN. Their mother tongue is either Afrikaans or IsiXhosa, so their knowledge of English is often rudimentary at best. However, they have reached grade 12 and, as such, need to be prepared for the final exam. I have found that I can use certain techniques to improve their writing during this short time in order for them to improve the marks they obtain. These suggestions allow the learners to improve their marks enough that they ought to obtain the required 40% to pass a home language.

Emphasise the importance of punctuation by marking primarily the punctuation of a piece of writing. Show the learners the mark before and after correct punctuation is used. It is not necessary to use the mark for a formal task, but it will show the learners that you are serious about punctuation. Concentrate on the full stops, commas, question marks and exclamation marks, as these are usually the ones whose functions are easier to understand and are used more frequently.

Dictate the length of a paragraph by telling them that you will accept only paragraphs between 5 and 8 lines. This will

force them to adhere to a uniform length. I often find that there are no paragraphs in their essays because they simply do not bother to separate their paragraphs.

Write a paragraph with them. Let them choose a topic and the teacher writes the paragraph on the board. This will allow them to see what it means when teachers say 'one idea per paragraph'. You could also choose a topic that appears easy such as 'My Best Friend' and write down whatever they say about their best friend. You will find that they get stumped after two or three sentences. This is because they don't know what to write and it's the reason why so many of their essays are very short. Show them how the physical appearance, history of your friendship, some anecdotes and special qualities can be described in each paragraph.

Get them to vary the length of their sentences. Having only long or short sentences in a paragraph makes their writing monotonous and boring. Let them write only one long sentence and short sentences in a paragraph. This can be achieved if they use more punctuation.

Write an introductory and concluding paragraph so they can see a sample of these. Learners quite often are told to 'Write an essay on ...' without ever having being taught how to do so. They therefore learn to write by default. Showing them samples of writing will help.

Do not accept words like 'shock' or 'nice' which they use to describe virtually every emotion or situation. Let them look for alternatives and in this way improve their vocabulary.

Do not allow them to count the number of words in their essay. This is time wasting and usually unnecessary. They should by this stage have an established writing style which will dictate how many words they use per line and should therefore be aware of how long a 200, 300 or 400 word essay is. Matric markers are also generally not rigid on the length of an

essay, provided it is not ridiculously long or short.

These are some of the ideas I have put into practice over my 20 odd years of teaching English Home and FAL to learners in the FET phase. I hope they provide some solutions to your teaching.

Jeff Solomon hails from KZN. This article was first published in Naptosa INsight, October 2012.