

Voice Activity

Goal: This activity encourages students to engage texts on a formal, stylistic level through imitation. By seeing that language can always describe things *otherwise*, students begin to understand that style, as well as content, is always a choice. The *how* matters just as much as the *what*. Ancillary benefits include understanding the differences between “weak” and “strong” constructions, the nature of connotation, and the use of coordination and subordination.

Implementation: I have students complete this activity individually, at first. We devote about five minutes of class time to each of the descriptive exercises. After the exercise has been completed, I ask a volunteer or two to read their responses to each. We talk about the places the authors have chosen to focus on and try to parse out the logic behind and the effect of each alteration. Then, I have students get into groups, choose the strongest response among them, and revise it. For the last fifteen minutes of class activity time, I ask one group to volunteer to share their work; they write their responses to each altered description on the board, and we go over the choices they made as a class.

Write a description of something in the room.

The chalkboards are black. Someone has washed them, and they are clean and smooth. So blank, so calm, I think they stare at me. There is a number stamped in the corner of one board; it reads, “20.” The chalkboards surround us, daring us to exceed their limits.

Change sentence length but not the order of the sentences.

The chalkboards. So black, someone has washed them. Clean and smooth, blank, calm. I think they stare. A number is stamped in one corner. “20.” Chalkboards surround us. A game of dare: do not exceed our limits.

Change sentence length and order; check for weak constructions.

After each day’s classes, silent workers wash these chalkboards clean, destroying any trace of an argument. Each morning, the boards shine newly black, smooth, cool, and calm. Their stubborn blankness, heightened by the indelibly stamped “20” in the upper corner, challenges us. From both walls, they stare at us; they surround us.

Now change the paragraph to include subordination and make an argument. Try to reveal a particular attitude or judgment about your object.

So black, so smooth, cool, and calm: the chalkboards are obsessively clean. Impudently, from two walls of the room, they stare at us, trapping us in their gaze. A strange, stencil-stamped number—20—permanently inhabits the upper corner of one board, and its permanence dares our chalk markings into meaning. Their whispers fill the space of the room: “Try us. We can hold anything you give us, and we will always win.”