

Of Boxing Nuns and MatchBox Cars: How to Use Toys to Teach Active Voice and Passive Voice

Introduction

Vigorous writing uses active voice. Strong verbs are essential in news writing, advertising copy writing, broadcast writing and Web writing—in short, in all forms of written and spoken communication in the mass media. Yet, many beginning college students have either never heard of or only dimly grasp the distinction between active and passive voice. Often, they confuse voice with tense. This Great Idea for Teachers uses toys in a hands-on activity to engage them in learning the difference.

Rationale

I have tried many methods to teach students about active and passive voice. Because understanding voice requires students to be aware of the rules of grammar, it can be a dry topic and students are often not engaged in the lesson. Bringing a bag full of toys into the classroom and asking students to play with them enlivens the discussion and drives the lesson home.

Implementation

1. Place a bag full of small toys on the podium. Toys that I have found effective include NERF guns, wind-up toys, MatchBox cars, beanies with antennae or spinners, sponge balls, magnets, toy trains, a Jacob's ladder, Inspector Gadget, and, my favorite, the Boxing Nun.
2. Remove the toys from the bag one at a time. (Part of the fun of this exercise is the surprise of watching what will emerge from the bag next.)
3. Give a toy to a student. Ask the student to play with the toy in some way--shoot someone with the NERF gun, or wind up the toy car and let it loose to pitch off the edge of the desk.
4. Then ask the student to describe what he did with the toy in a sentence using active voice.
5. Ask another student to describe what the student did using passive voice.
6. Repeat the process with each toy in the bag.
7. I always reserve the Boxing Nun for myself, and use her to lightly bop a student in the front row on the head at the end of this exercise as I ask the class to remember to use active voice when writing.

Impact

All students, even nontraditional, older students, find this activity fun, and funny. It captures their attention while it forces them to think about the grammatical construction of sentences and to focus on the power of verbs.

Students discover on their own that describing their play in active voice sounds natural and succinct ("Susan shot the NERF missile into Joe's kneecap"), while describing it in passive voice is often awkward and wordy ("Joe's kneecap was bonked by the missile that was shot by the NERF gun").

This game actively engages students in learning grammar, and they understand better why their professors stress using active voice their mass media courses. In addition, since grammar is often one of the first things covered in writing courses, this activity helps set the tone for the rest of the course. It demonstrates that the learning grammar can be interesting, that grammar rules play a role in helping to communicate messages, and that the teacher has a sense of humor—all invaluable lessons.

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