

Vary Sentence Beginnings

L-13

THINKING We need to teach students to stand back from their writing every once in a while and say: “Hey, that doesn’t sound right.” We need to tune their ears to what happens to the voice in a piece of writing when all the sentences begin with “I.”

PREP

- Two versions of “Fishing”

TEACHING Let’s start by taking a look at this paragraph.

- Read the first version of “Fishing.”

Try to imagine that this is a rough draft of something you have written. Whenever you reread, it’s important to get in the habit of asking yourself the same two questions over and over: What works well? What needs work? What works pretty well in this paragraph?

Discuss. Students may point out the lead sentence and the use of details.

What doesn’t work? When I read it out loud, did you hear anything that sounded “off”?

Discuss.

You noticed that each sentence started with “I.” Beginning every sentence in the same way works against the voice you want to create in your writing. Of course, you can begin a sentence with “I,” but when you write a series of them like that, it begins to sound repetitious and annoying.

Look what happens to the paragraph when we rewrite some of those sentence beginnings.

- Read the revised version.

Did you notice the difference?

Discuss.

Let’s experiment with how you can rewrite sentences that begin with “I.” Here’s a hint: see if the information that comes later in the sentence could work at the beginning.

- *I drove to the store with my mother.*
- *My mother drove me to the store.*
- *I have to fix my own dinner whenever my mom works late.*
- *Change to: Whenever my mom works late, I have to fix my own dinner.*

Read over your drafts. You may need to rework some of your sentences so they don’t all begin in the same way. I’ll be available if anyone needs help.

FOLLOW UP This lesson focuses on sentences that begin with “I.” Eventually, you’ll want to help students become aware of when they use other redundant beginnings.

Conference Questions:

When you reread your writing, where are the places you’ve got a string of consecutive sentences that all begin with “I”?

How could you begin some of those sentences in a different way?

Fishing

Original Paragraph

I love to fish, even if it means getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning. I went fishing with my Uncle Ted last Saturday on the Great South Bay. I had a huge breakfast of steak and eggs at the diner. I even got to steer my uncle's boat out of the harbor. I was surprised at how many people were boating so early in the morning. I baited my hook and cast out after we set the anchor. I felt a strong tug on my rod. I thought: bluefish!

Revised Version

I love to fish, even if it means getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning. Last Saturday Uncle Ted took me fishing on the Great South Bay. We went to a diner, and he let me order a huge breakfast of steak and eggs. He even let me steer his boat out of the harbor. I was surprised at how many people were boating so early in the morning. After we set the anchor I baited my hook and cast out. I felt a strong tug on my rod. Bluefish! I thought.