

# Inspiring an Aesthetic Appreciation of Language

Kay Parks Haas  
Olathe District Schools  
Olathe, Kansas  
Kpbhaas@yahoo.com

---

I've always had an appreciation of language—its rhythms, sounds, wordplay, dialects, usage variations, and powers to manipulate. In fact, unlike most English teachers who gravitated to the profession through their love of literature, I was attracted to the opportunities of sharing my love for language. Reflecting on how I came to this appreciation, I remember my father reciting poems to me when I was a little girl, particularly Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" ("By the shores of Gitche Gumee / By the shining Big-Sea-Water"). I was enthralled by the rhythm, the rhyme, and the sounds of the words—both familiar and unfamiliar. In contrast, my mother was more concerned about my speaking correct grammar, always correcting my every error, allowing no room for what we now know as a natural development of language. Thanks to my mother, however, all throughout school grammar was easy for me. I was intrigued by the rules as well as when and why they were broken. And thanks to my father, I was also intrigued by wordplay and took pride when I could use my wit to instill laughter—or groans—through punning jokes and riddles. Language became for me a fascinating mystery, a venue of entertainment, and a highly respected tool.

In my early years of teaching, I dutifully brought out the Warriner's, thinking it my main responsibility to drill students using the language correctly just as my teachers and mother had done for me, but it didn't take long for me to realize two things: first, my appreciation for grammar was not rubbing off on my students; and, second, drilling on grammar was driving my students into a dislike of English class altogether. Worse, because I was

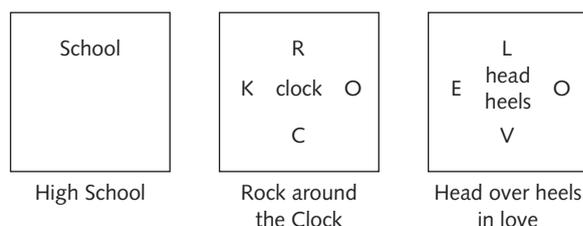
not alone in my methods, many of my students were entering my Freshman English classes with the misconception that English class was synonymous with grammar instruction, and they dreaded it! As a result, besides teaching the curriculum, including grammar, I made it a goal to expose students to other areas of English language that were interesting, useful, and even fun.

My overall theme for several years was "Language Is Alive!" and I dedicated a wall-sized bulletin board to it, encouraging students to bring in samples of language uses and devices we were addressing in class. We started the school year examining and playing with creative aspects of the language from hink pinks and hinketty pinketties (e.g., "What do you call a heavy mattress? A lead bed." or "What is Santa's advice? Remember December."), concrete language frames (see fig. 1), and Tom Swifties (e.g., "I wasn't there,' Tom said absently" and "'I missed the target,' Tom said aimlessly"). We then moved on to more serious concepts, such as figurative language and effective, specific word choice. In our journals and on our walls, we created lists of vivid words and made it a

---

FIGURE 1. Concrete Language Frames

---



game to see who could best revise dull sentences to those so specific we couldn't help picturing them; e.g., "The guy moved into the room" became "The shifty-eyed, balding senior staccato-stepped through the half-closed, arched doorway." We read Dylan Thomas's "My Love Affair with Words" with each student creating a top-ten list of most beautiful or coolest-sounding words, and we posted them on the bulletin board. Throughout the school year, we continued to note clever usages of language and cool-sounding words to lace these early lessons into everything we read.

When we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we studied the dialects, not only looking at those of the Southern whites and African Americans but also making comparisons to our Midwestern dialects and to those in the Northern United States. We looked at the history of dialect immigration in the United States, reading from J. N. Hook's *The Story of American English*. Usually we had enough students who had moved here from a variety of areas of the country to make these lessons real while students who had lived here all their lives were shocked to learn that, for example, not everyone pronounced *towel* with one syllable. As a part of the dialect study, we also looked at how the characters from various social levels, from Atticus to Bob Ewell, spoke in formal versus informal manners and why, like Calpurnia, we often need a "command of two languages" (Lee 180). In turn, these aha moments provided a solid foundation for our ensuing grammar and usage study during the year. We even administered surveys on dialect and grammar to family and friends of all ages to get their opinion on what language choices mattered—and what didn't—in the workplace and throughout the community.

While reading *Romeo and Juliet*, we took a new look at creative language devices as we studied Shakespearean puns and insults as well as more advanced language devices, such as anastrophes and oxymorons. Students could infer the tones of these varying devices ranging from hilarious to serious, as well as substitute expressions and syntax that we might use today. We broke into groups to study the history of our language, with many students surprised that Shakespeare's English was not Old English or even Middle English, but actually Early Modern English. To exemplify the point further, we listened to readings of Old and Middle English

poetry and compared readings of the Lord's Prayer throughout the centuries. Finally, we returned to our dialect study to look at the comparisons between American and British English, providing further emphasis with readings from Shaw's *Pygmalion*. In all cases, we played with the language we discovered by rewriting it into more modern-day language styles (formal and informal) and reciting it.

We ended the year by reading George Orwell's *1984*, with *The Power of Language* being one of its major themes. Frontloading the reading with activities on connotation versus denotation and on euphemisms and doublespeak, we watched for the language manipulation Big Brother and O'Brien used to keep Winston and others in the society under control, including analyzing the slogans "War Is Peace," "Freedom Is Slavery," and "Ignorance Is Strength." Similarly, we made connections to the language of advertisers and politicians—and even to our teachers and parents—to improve our roles as conscientious consumers of personal and societal persuasion. At the same time, we discussed how we could best use language responsibly yet to our own advantage, and we practiced our skills by incorporating these components into persuasive writings and speeches, revising to create variations based on our audiences and purposes.

Over the past couple years through social networking, I have been fortunate to become reacquainted with many of my former students—many now well over 40 years old—and I've been amazed by the number who remember and comment on the "Language Is Alive" theme from my classes. Although several of those students have contacted me about grammar questions, they have more eagerly shared a corny pun or an outrageous example of doublespeak they've encountered. These communications always make me smile as I'm confident that many of these students inherited my aesthetic appreciation of the various roles of language. Granted, at times these word studies were just plain fun, but, more than that, they proved interesting, filled with new information about our language heritage; most importantly, these studies beyond the world of grammar—whether emphasized on high-stakes assessments or not—promoted critical and creative thinking that are applicable to the everyday lives in which we live. I still consider these components of language to be our responsibility to teach. (5)

### Works Cited

- Hook, J. N. *The Story of American English*. New York: Harcourt, 1972. Print.
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1960. New York: Harper, 1999. Print.
- Orwell, George. *1984*. 1949. New American Library, 1961. Print.
- Shaw, George Bernard. *Pygmalion*. 1912. New York: Penguin, 1957. Print.
- Thomas, Dylan. *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. Ed. Daniel Jones. New York: New Directions, 2003. Print.

A classroom teacher for 27 years, **Kay Parks Haas** is currently an instructional projects specialist for the Olathe District Schools in Kansas. She is former president of ALAN and is chair of the Secondary Section and member of the NCTE executive committee. She has written several articles and columns in *English Journal* and *The ALAN Review* and has co-authored *Teaching English Creatively* and *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* with John H. Bushman.

---

## How Long Does My Poem Have to Be?

As long as a jump rope  
an alligator  
a garden hose

as long as a fire drill  
morning announcements  
the bus ride home on a Friday afternoon

as long as the Trail of Tears  
an algebraic equation  
a school year

as long as the Magna Carta  
The Song of Hiawatha  
the Pledge of Allegiance

as long as the shortest distance between two points  
a doctor's note  
a cafeteria line

as long as the fight for emancipation  
the Cold War  
40 days and 40 nights

as long as she doesn't mind  
as long as you both agree  
as long as there's enough for everyone

as long as you do your homework first  
as long as your father says it's okay  
as long as you're living under my roof

as long as you're asking . . .

—Arlyn Miller  
© 2011 Arlyn Miller

**Arlyn Miller** teaches poetry and creative writing in schools and in the community in the suburbs of Chicago. Her work with kids and teens and their teachers is described on her website, [www.poeticlicensinc.net](http://www.poeticlicensinc.net). Her students' work has been published through the Pioneer Press, in The Muses' Gallery, and on the website for the Illinois Poet Laureate. Arlyn is also a poet, journalist, and essayist. Her writing has appeared widely in magazines and in literary journals. E-mail her at [arlyn2@comcast.net](mailto:arlyn2@comcast.net).