

## **Kinesthetic Writing Skills Activities as Guiderope: Scaling the Print Barrier in the ALPs**

**Presentation by Jenia Walter  
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### **OVERVIEW**

*Academic writing is a challenge for many students at all levels, and dealing with grammar or editing skills is often met with groans of frustration or fears of failure.* Across the disciplines, many instructors (or sometimes fellow students within ALP-based comp courses) may react to developmental student writers' work in ways that negatively impact students' motivation and that are not effective for student learning. Within the English department, instructors may find themselves wondering if there are more effective, engaging ways to teach sentence-level skills. ALP-based comp courses face special challenges with the wide range of student levels, knowledge base, and relationships to academic written English.

*How can we give all of our students the best possible support for developing strong academic writing and editing skills?* Hands-on activities can provide a foundation for *all* composition students while forging a vital link between comp class and ALP cohort group. Using multisensory activities specially designed for ALP, students can draw on their multiple intelligences to develop conceptual knowledge of grammar and sentence structure for editing skills. Higher levels of scaffolding support the learning process of the cohort students, progressing from hands-on activities to print mode to students' own writing.

*Starting with kinesthetic activities helps developmental learners to cross the "print barrier";* once students have gained ownership, moving in sequenced progression to academic skills keeps concepts accessible. Hands-on instruction makes focusing on editing skills engaging and enlightening, demystifying grammar while bonding the full class and allowing students at all levels to contribute their intuitive understanding, experience, and growing knowledge. Instructors have a framework for talking about communication concepts that keeps the learning environment fun, energized, and alive.

### **BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

*I began developing the kinesthetic approach by bringing games and activities from my ESL background into my sentence-level college writing classroom.* I started out with "Dancing Wildly," a charade-like verb-adverb matching activity I had learned from a colleague, and began to realize how useful acting out verbs, adjectives, even nouns could be to the process of understanding parts of speech. THEN one day I realized we could act out Subjects and Verbs, as simple sentences—that we could connect them as compound sentences—that we could transform them into complex sentences!

*The further we went, the further I realized we could go.* And as the ideas spread, we needed the help of our colleagues across the disciplines. I wanted a way to demonstrate the subordinate nature of the dependent clause kinesthetically. My colleague, who did his own hands-on teaching in the Carpentry program, had his students build us a see-saw—which evolved into a seated-fulcrum, double-planked behemoth that can hold a couple of football players on each side.

*I intuitively knew that fragments of pottery would help students understand the true nature of the incomplete sentence.* In a creative, evolving process of interdisciplinary collaboration, my colleagues in the Ceramics department began supplying me with the bisque practice pieces that were bound for the dumpster. Instead, my students wrote complete ideas on them, took them outside, and smashed them, picking up the pieces to study. (No injuries or liability suits yet.) None of my students ever forget the concept of fragments—and one even re-took the class just so she could smash more pottery!

***A conversation about sentence fragments was opened that changed the way students (and faculty) approached grammar.*** The exchanges were full of humor, energy, and enthusiasm. Suddenly this grammatical concept was demystified, accessible to all—engaging students in their editing process in a new way.

***From the Subordinating See-saw and the demystification of fragments, it was an easy leap to playing with relative clauses,*** essential and non-essential punctuation, a solid understanding of *who* vs. *whom*. Students at all levels grasped advanced grammar concepts naturally through engaging in hands-on activities, looking at me as if to ask, “It’s easy. What’s the big deal?”

***I remembered a second brilliant colleague from graduate school, teaching bored students appositive punctuation from a workbook, who engaged students in a clapping game: “I’m John [clap], the carpenter [clap]...”*** I began to experiment with kinesthetic activities for teaching punctuation: clapping, stomping, walking, talking, breathing punctuation, macro-editing by pounding Stop Sign periods on the board. We stood on desks with our arms spread wide to get the sense of whether our “complete ideas” could stand on their own. I was a maniac. My students loved it.

***And then I began to explore brain-based learning research,*** especially neurologist and educator Judy Willis’s work on its applications to classroom teaching. I found that the trial-and-error, intuitive experimentation I’d been doing was more than backed up by research on how the brain learns best. When information enters the brain along multiple sensory pathways, it is more effectively processed, retained, and recalled. And, as Willis explains, “The more ways something is learned, the more memory pathways are built” (3). The learning brain thrives on experiential learning, novelty, and positive emotional states, all of which hands-on activities can offer.

***For college students who struggle with concepts of reading and writing,*** or who tune out from traditional teaching methods, the hands-on approach provides a new means of accessing understanding. Leave written words out of the picture for a while. Let our bodies, movements, voices be the instruments of structure and punctuation. Students use other well-developed multiple intelligences to get the point, and once they get it, they are much more willing to cross over the “print barrier” to work with the same, now-familiar and owned, concepts in two dimensions.

***Further, when students are engaged in the learning process,*** when personal interest and meaningful connections are used as hooks to memory, the brain processes information more successfully. When the classroom is a comfortable learning environment, with enough challenge and stimulation but not too much stress, a place with energy, laughter, and connectedness, students learn well. Moreover, most of our students are social learners, and all need to be active participants in, not passive recipients of, their education, as basic writing pioneer Mina Shaughnessy pointed out back in another century (83)—and now brain research corroborates her findings. Kinesthetic activities draw on all these features of effective learning, with important implications for successful developmental educational models.

## **THE HANDS-ON PROCESS**

***Kinesthetic activities can be used at many points*** of the learning process: to provide breaks and variety from reading/writing based instruction, to teach or emphasize an embedded concept, to consolidate understanding. Most often, I use these activities as an introduction to the concept. Students can then “hook” their understanding to further study in written form. Often, the students and I will refer back to an activity in class, to make sense of a structure or a punctuation pattern, reminding others:

***“Remember when Jeremy and Martha were a Subject and Verb standing next to an AAAWWUUBIS dependent word, and Tabitha and Ellie were the independent clause standing next to them, and then the two clauses switched places, and we took out the comma between them...”*** The images and multisensory input are retained in memory much more vividly than lecture or written explanations.

***The integration of an activity is generally most effective when used in the following progression:***

Starting with the kinesthetic activity, moving to → group representations of the concept on the board → written models that students record in their own notes → hands-on and written practice activities → transfer of skills to the students' own writing. In ALP-based comp courses, two branching progressions may be used, introducing the concept in a full-group activity, with additional stages of practice with the ALP cohort.

Starting with the hands-on activity hooks students' interest; however, an alternate approach is to begin with a print-based concept, and then turn to the hands-on activity to elucidate it, then returning to the printed page/lecture with more clarity, energy, and engagement.

The final stage of using the concept in the students' meaningful writing is essential; decades of studies show that discrete grammar instruction does not transfer automatically to skills in written communication. Use it or lose it—students need to *apply* these skills for them to matter.

***Thoughtful introduction of kinesthetic activities is important to their success.*** Most developmental learners—and advanced students too—are very positive about hands-on learning, and light up when the topic is even mentioned. When students understand the range of reasons I am introducing these activities, and the theoretical foundation for their effectiveness, they usually take part willingly. Most adults love to play when given the opportunity!

Everyone should be expected and encouraged to participate, but no one should be forced, as this can mar the positive tone of the experience. Often, the more advanced the students are, the more willing they are to take a break from the seriousness of their lives. (One just-out-of-high-school student finally asked me if we could close the classroom door, as she said, “People I *know* are passing by.”) Now and then, an older student or a very self-conscious student will ask what the point is; if possible, I try to create a teachable moment and ask other students to explain how the activity might be useful. Most often, though, I am surprised by the willingness of students to try something new, in the interests of successful learning.

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES: The Four Pillars (with Students at the Center)

### 1. Trust your gut and learn from what you do (Learn by doing—teachers too!).

- ✓ **Listen** to your inner voice for creative ideas.
- ✓ **Dare** to try things out.
- ✓ **Reflect** on the results and use your reflections to inform future teaching.

### 2. Provide input for multiple learning styles/intelligences (students respond to multisensory input: when information enters the brain along multiple pathways, it is retained and recalled more easily).

- ✓ **Provide multisensory input:** not only kinesthetic but visual, verbal (reading/writing), tactile, and auditory—my research has shown that many students remember my voice, and their classmates' responses, as I elicit, question, prompt, provide scaffolded concepts, explain incorrect choices, praise attempts at rule formation.
- ✓ **Use students' well-developed multiple intelligences** (such as bodily-spatial) to help them to grasp concepts in non-print-mode, then drawing on ownership of concepts as they work with printed texts.
- ✓ **Provide memorable input, creating conditions for optimum learning** (using brain-based learning theory: novelty, connections, social interaction, memorable moments and images—activity moments serve as Mnemonic Prompts for concepts).

### 3. Use a scaffolded progression from hands-on activity to students' own writing (a “spiral into control” of language).

- ✓ **Try a seven-stage sequence** from hands-on activity, to representations on board/screen/paper, to controlled practice identifying and then using concepts at sentence and then paragraph level, and then applying the concepts and skills in students' own writing.
- ✓ **Use multimodal technology**, document camera, Smartboard (if students enjoy it) for the group print-mode stages of practice.
- ✓ **Encourage questions and model asking;** foster experimentation and model/point out articulation of concepts, analysis, and attempts at rule formation.
- ✓ **Praise and support steps of improvement;** explain puzzling results from a constructive view.

### 4. Integrate hands-on activities into the learning experience (for memorable learning, find creative ways to reach students as you introduce, demonstrate, clarify, and reinforce concepts).

- ✓ **Use active learning** as part of every topic.
- ✓ **Use hands-on activities purposefully**, creatively, and strategically as a break or shift in focus; to raise energy through movement and flow of oxygen; to make connections; to increase engagement.

### 5. Keep students in the CENTER: build energy and connection (*fun matters!*).

- ✓ **Keep in mind that discussion and ongoing conversation are the HEART of the hands-on process**—articulation of concepts and questions leads to ownership of grammar and writing skills—hand it over! Learn from students!
- ✓ **Involve students in prep** (and take-down/cleanup) and when possible frame this as part of the learning experience (for example, asking students to post conjunction families by mnemonics).
- ✓ **Encourage students to help shape activities** (let the digital natives implement technological innovations like using tablets instead of word cards, taking photo notes of board demos, etc.).
- ✓ **Explain the rationale for hands-on learning** to adult students, and get them to articulate it too.
- ✓ **Raise students' confidence** as they learn.

## Tips for New Teachers (and the Rest of Us)

*Most of these suggestions are common sense and a matter of learning by doing, but here are some of the practices I've developed over time (or would like to develop!).*

- **Give clear, step-by-step instructions**, posting reminders or details on board/screen/wall if possible.
- **Plan group setup in advance, thinking through contingency plans as well** (colored cards for numbered groups work well to avoid confusion).
- **Create alternative plans** (develop a habit of thinking about possible permutations—expect the unexpected!). Plan for different numbers of students, squirrely groups or days, technology glitches, activities a flop.
- **Learn from each experience**: if things don't go well, ask students how to make it work; let them know you value their input and learn from them—make them the experts. They will appreciate your efforts to make their learning engaging!
- **If possible, keep a mobile supply stash** of tape, scissors, cardstock, markers, easel paper handy.
- **Use bright colored cards, and multiple colors, to organize categories** (but not reflective or neon colors, and not dark shades); use large working markers, dark colors and thick lettering to provide accessibility for the many developmental students with visual challenges.
- **Move from kinesthetic activities to verbal/visual representations** when possible by posting cards or writing sentences on board.
- **Create space for debriefing and plan enough time at the end of activities** for students to make notes and sketches, take cell phone photos (if appropriate), reflect, absorb ideas, discuss, ask questions—make this a meaningful part of the process and use reflective quickwrites, CATs, Muddiest Point cards, exit tickets with suggestions for next time, to focus.
- **When dealing with the very real challenges of organization and limited time/resources**, remind yourself that hands-on learning is *real* learning ... which means sometimes messy, unfinished, in progress... Have faith that you are learning from each experience, that you are consciously or unconsciously using your results to make improvements, and that we all learn better and remember longer with laughter!

*All of these processes and activities are free-flowing and ever-changing. You may have or may find a completely different way to work with the same activity, or to work with your own student populations. I'd love to hear about it! Share your ideas... model for others!*

## **REFERENCES**

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“Clapping Commas” activities were adapted from ideas shared by Sarah Jasper Noreen (Northern Arizona University, ~1999), now Communication Skills instructor at Wisconsin Indianhead Community College, New Richmond, WI.

“Dancing Wildly” adverb activity was shared by Robin Nitzky Persiani (post-NAU, ~2000), now ESL professor at Sierra College, Sacramento, CA.

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**Presenter Background:** Branching out from her roots as an ESL instructor, teacher and writer Jenia Walter spent over a decade conducting action research on hands-on learning in the college writing classroom, working as an Associate Professor of English at San Juan College in northern New Mexico. For the past three years, she has been on an extended contract at Aims Community College in northern Colorado, teaching ALP-based comp courses while completing her textbook, a hands-on approach to developmental-level college writing skills, titled *Building Writing Skills the Hands-on Way*—now in print! She welcomes ideas, questions, and networking at [Jenia.Walter@gmail.com](mailto:Jenia.Walter@gmail.com).

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