

## Elaboration: The Power Punch of “Body Language” Detail

Several years ago, Ralph Fletcher spoke to our school’s English Department, stressing a maxim: the bigger the moment, the smaller you write. So simple, yet so profound. *If only I could return to the classroom*, I thought, *and pronounce the words “the bigger the moment, the smaller you write,” and “abracadabra!” my students would maximize their descriptions of key moments. Then September through June would be without angst.*

I leaned into the conference table, thinking. Skilled writers bring their characters to life, including the small body movements unique to each experience. But, alas, even if I pronounced Fletcher’s words, wrote them across the board, and pasted them to the walls—the words themselves would not produce change or improvement in student writing. I needed a new “teaching bag of tricks” that would open a door into a world of elaboration, where writers observe and report the “body movements” that make a moment unique.



Shilpa and Angelica discuss literary gems noted while reading.

When students told their stories, responding to prompts for personal narratives during our study of Roahl Dahl’s *Boy*, they recalled mischievous or homesick moments. Prewriting discussions with one another ignited their memories and increased their eagerness. Despite the appropriateness of the prompt and students’ excitement, however, first drafts seldom contained in-depth images of the characters engaged in life. My goal, as I saw it, was to help them develop an internal lens with which to zoom in on key moments, to capture those telling details of movement—the language of the body—in order to make their scenes more vivid. As Fletcher advised, “The bigger the moment, the smaller you write.”

Building on the metaphor of the writer as a cameraperson, I created several lessons to help students magnify the small moments and make them seem real. Also, I watched for descriptions in our class reading where professional authors zoomed in to “show not tell,” enlarging a moment. In fact, I asked students to tuck a piece of paper into their literature books and write down “gems” of description whenever they encountered them. Then, when we finished reading a piece of literature, the class discussed favorite sentences, and I gave them credit for assembling examples of skilled descriptive clauses and phrases. Even when our focus was not immediately on writing, I tried to maintain attention to various techniques of elaboration.

### Zooming In on Detail

The first classroom use of our internal camera lenses took the shape of a game similar to charades. I placed several prompts in an envelope and asked for volunteers who would enjoy acting out

new scenarios. My first volunteer pulled out a prompt from the envelope and read:

*You are waiting for the teacher to return your latest vocabulary test. You hope you did well because your grade average needs some improving. As you walk up to the front of the room and stretch out your hand, the teacher gives you your test back with a 62% written on the top. Bad news! Act out how you look as you walk back to your seat and sit down. Let your face, shoulders, arms, body communicate your mood.*

After the theatrics, the students guessed the actor’s mood and situation, and I asked what behaviors revealed the mood. I hurried to the board to record all the responses students offered: “His shoulders slumped!” and “His head dropped forward!” and “He sat heaped over his desk,” and “His head shook back and forth in disbelief.”

Finally I asked students to write a paragraph, using the details written on the board. Instead of the flat observation, “The boy took his D- paper from the teacher and sat down, disappointed,” students worked silently and then read descriptions like:

“The boy took his D- paper from the teacher. As he walked back to his seat, his shoulders slumped and his head dropped forward. Then he sat heaped over his desk, and his head shook back and forth in disbelief.”

The charade activity illustrated how emotions and mood are reflected by physical actions; hence, the term “body language details” came to represent the large or small physical movements we needed to enliven our descriptions.

On subsequent days, I asked students to visualize people in particular moods, then use a worksheet I provided to write physical behaviors that would reveal the mood followed by a paragraph incorporating those details (see Figure 1). Here I transferred more of the responsibility to students, supplying them with scenarios and asking each of them to envision the scene: describe the body language details for an angry basketball coach and for a nervous mother waiting with her son in a doctor’s office. They seemed impressed as they shared rich pictures achieved with details about the angry coach’s clenched fists and bowed head or the mother’s fingers tapping nervously as

her eyes move back and forth across the waiting room carpet.

The next hurdle, of course, would be to help students transfer this classroom knowledge of body language and elaboration to their own writing. Thus, I asked them to edit their current narratives, enlarging key images with what we called “body language detail.” Will, an eighth grader, reported,

It [the worksheet] helped you think what you could do to make your paper better and more interesting. When I started I had a sentence like “They came outside and became angry because of the state of their bikes.” After the sheet I had a sentence like, “Their faces tightened and their eyes narrowed as their an-

#### Elaboration Using Body Language Details

Read each of the scenarios described below and try to envision the physical movements of the central character. Use the spaces provided to list the kinds of actions that might be seen in the camera in your head.

- A. A coach who has trained his basketball players carefully stands watching them as the first half of the game ends. Although they are positioned correctly and have rehearsed the play countless times, they fumble the ball, giving the lead to the other side.

His anger and exasperation show in these body actions:

1. He/His \_\_\_\_\_
2. He/His \_\_\_\_\_
3. He/His \_\_\_\_\_
4. He/His \_\_\_\_\_

- B. A mother sits in the waiting room of a doctor’s office, nervous about the infection that has caused her son’s upper leg to swell.

Her nervousness shows in these body actions:

1. She/her \_\_\_\_\_
2. She/her \_\_\_\_\_
3. She/her \_\_\_\_\_
4. She/her \_\_\_\_\_

Choose one of the two scenarios and create a paragraph describing the coach or woman. Use the details that you listed to provide full elaboration. Your topic sentence will state that the coach stood on the side looking angry or that the woman sat waiting nervously.

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**Figure 1.** Worksheet for helping students “zoom in” on body language details

ger grew. Their bikes stood like a person with one leg.” The worksheet that we did helped me find words to describe different actions in my story like anger and things like the way they held their bodies.

Allie, another eighth-grade student whose earlier writing lacked elaboration, analyzed her writing development:

... one thing that really helped me was when we were told to zoom in on certain points showing body language. This makes you add detail to every part of the person’s body: their head, their shoulders, their arms, their hands and everything else. For instance, in the paper I am writing now there is a section where I have detail about how Kaley’s . . . body looks after she hears something that surprises and worries her: “Really?” she said tensely, her voice starting to tremble the tiniest bit. Her face went pale and she leaned in towards the table. At the same time her shoulders slouched in and her entire body sunk into the table.” This shows every part of her upper body. With just those three sentences it adds in everything about how she looks.

Both Allie and Will saw immediate improvement in their enhanced revisions as a result of applying the zoom-in camera technique we practiced in the class exercises. They discovered what Ralph Fletcher meant, saying, “The writing becomes beautiful when it becomes specific” (p. 47).

## Modeling

A second stage of instruction, following the analysis of scenarios where physical movements revealed emotion or mood, is “modeling.” Its effectiveness could be compared to the “Aha!” moment we experience when we see a demonstration of something we’ve heard about, like a demonstration of springing off a diving board that allows us to actually see how energy begins in the ankles and legs and propels us forward. Once we have seen demonstrations of detailed writing, we imitate what we’ve seen; imitation occurred constantly during the revision stages of the narrative assignment. As students read their revised pieces aloud, my reaction stimulated discussion and motivation for future revisions: “Oh yes, now I picture *exactly* how you paced nervously back and forth, head down, before your turn at bat!” Others in the classroom realized that they could make similar adjustments to their drafts. Occasionally, I collected drafts and copied effective sentences for a master list of “Enhanced Descriptions” so that the whole class could study the details of physical reactions that improved their classmates’ scenes (see Figure 2). Other times, I created two descriptions, one without full elaboration and one with greater use of body language and focused detail (see Figure 3). Students enjoyed deciding which description was better and talking about why. Their discussion of the merits of detailed writing influenced them to reexamine their drafts, looking for places where they could zoom in on significant moments. Using models day by day gave students ways to paint a more realistic image.

I used my own personal narratives for another source of modeling, frequently reading aloud from drafts that incorporated the many goals we had identified—use of body language detail, use of internal dialogue, and detail of textures and sound.

### Samples of Student Sentences Effectively Including Body Language

- My body slammed against the car door, my neck twisting sharply to the left. (Alex)
- She [the angry neighbor] started to walk out, her sandaled feet pounding furiously into the gravel. (Paige)
- Standing up straight, her long slender finger pointing to the microwave, my mom demanded, “Go and open the microwave!” (Claire)
- *If I don’t jump at all, I’ll regret it forever. If I go down too deep, I’ll hit my head on the sand.* I started to wring my hands with nervousness, moisture on the back of my neck sliding down my spine. My knees began to shake as I started to bite my bottom lip, trembling, my mind focused on that one jump. (Molly)
- I reached the stair and slid down my grandparents’ banister, my white and pink flowered pajamas rubbing against the railing, clutching my fists with anticipation of what lay beneath the magical Christmas tree. (Emily)
- When I heard the word “go” my leg rammed itself against the dirt and my legs pounded on the ground as I ran around the track. I could feel and hear the thunder of my heart pounding. My arms shifted up and down furiously as I ran. My feet arched as my toes pushed myself off. (Brian)
- Listening to daily announcements, I sat on a wooden bench in between two girls from my cabin. I dug the toe of my shoe into the tiny pebbles on the ground and twisted it down until I reached the dirt below. These particular announcements didn’t pertain to me; therefore, I let my shoulders slouch forward and my head lie limply as my eyes stared at the ground. (Margaret)

Figure 2. Handout showing model sentences using body language details

At the end of the year when students evaluated their personal growth, several mentioned the effects of hearing my stories: “. . . since she [my teacher] is not a professional writer, I feel like I can write something as high quality as hers [and] I realized things that made my stories better.” So, teachers who want to see elaboration in student writing should bring samples (preferably their own) to share during the drafting process.

One night, in an effort to spare myself the depressing tasks of criticizing a batch of uninteresting final drafts, I read quickly through the latest revisions and simply placed checks where paragraphs begged for additional description. The next day, I had brief conferences with each writer, explaining, “I’d like to *see* your arm throwing the ball . . .” or “Could you talk more about stirring that batter; I need a fuller picture of your hands.” I had mistakenly assumed that students could *independently recognize* places where description lacked depth, but I realized that only maturity and experience develop that inner awareness. Brief feedback conferences supplied that welcome guidance and increased enthusiasm for the revising process. By the end of the year, as students peer-edited drafts, they had indeed developed sensitivity to missing description, and they wrote in margins “add body language here.”

## Raising the Bar

I had aided my students’ “vision” of their scenes, sharpened their focus, and helped them zoom in on actions with seven sorts of classroom activities:

- Employing the metaphor of the writer as a cameraperson, carefully analyzing and recording physical behaviors that reveal mood and attitude of characters in stories and narratives.
- Providing opportunities during class for students to act out and visualize the connection between mood and physical behavior, which I call “body language.”
- Creating scenarios and directing students to write sample paragraphs using body language.

- Using writing samples of mediocre and superior description of the same scene, and discussing the important difference that inclusion of “body language” makes.
- Modeling vivid writing by sharing paragraphs—theirs and my own.
- Holding brief conferences during the writing process to identify where student pieces could benefit from greater use of body language detail.
- Having students collect and discuss passages from literature where authors used elaboration effectively.

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### Comparing Two Descriptions: Which One Do You Prefer?

As you read each of the following descriptions, consider how the words allow you to create a picture in your mind. Notice the differences in the two pieces of writing. When you finish, we will discuss your impressions.

- The exhausted boy entered his room. He sat on his bed, took off his shoes, and dropped to his pillow. It had been a grueling three hours of practice.
- The exhausted boy entered his room. He slouched on his bed and, using the toe of one foot after the other, kicked off his shoes. One dropped heavily to the floor, and the other flew in an arc across the room, landing near a pile of dirty laundry. He flexed his back, loosening his tired muscles, closed his heavy eyelids, and dropped backwards on his pillow. It had been a grueling three hours of practice.

What words or phrases help you visualize the scene?

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

In your own papers, you can change flat descriptions to more vivid ones by enlarging moments, giving your reader a close-up view of the body language. Whether you talk about how

- your fingers grip the neck of the tennis racket,
- your eyes squint from the stinging chlorine,
- your arm swings up and back to hurl the snowball in your fist,
- your eyes widen at the surprising news,

your reader will enjoy vivid verbs and body language detail in your description.

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**Figure 3.** Worksheet showing how body language detail enhances description



Was I satisfied yet with the elaboration in student writing? To be honest: no. While I saw growth in their elaborative details, I didn’t like their dependence on simple and compound sentences; and I felt they were only one step away from graceful sentence variation in their elaboration.

I used the terminology offered by Harry Noden in *Image Grammar* to bring participial and absolute phrases to my students and energize their descriptions of “body language.”<sup>1</sup> After I explained that participial phrases use “ing” and “ed” endings, we went around the room taking turns inventing examples like, “Picking up my books, I left the classroom,” or “Hearing my name called,

I turned to see who called me.” Then I proceeded to show how sentences like, “His shoulders were slumping. He walked slowly back” could become an absolute phrase when the verb “were” was removed and the ideas combined” “His shoulders slumping, he walked slowly back.” I distributed a simple worksheet to give students practice using participial and absolute phrases in descriptive sentences (see Figure 4 and our district Web site at [www.winnetka.k12.il.us/cw/washburne\\_links\\_grammaruni.html](http://www.winnetka.k12.il.us/cw/washburne_links_grammaruni.html)). Finally, I wrote the sentences

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1. Editor’s Note: Take a look at Jeff Anderson’s article on page 27 of this issue to see how he uses Noden’s ideas with his students.

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#### Practice Adding Body Language Details with Participial and Absolute Phrases

Sometimes we combine two ideas into one sentence, expressing one of them as a participial phrase (“ing” or “ed” phrase). Read the following sentences, and notice they can be rewritten as participial phrases in several ways:

Original: Margaret massaged her shin muscles. She tried to alleviate the cramp in her legs.

Revision: Massaging her shin muscles, Margaret tried to alleviate the cramp in her legs.

OR

Margaret, massaging her shin muscles, tried to alleviate the cramp in her legs.

Other times we can combine sentences with absolute phrases. In these sentences, we remove a *being* verb (is, are, was, were) to form the absolute. Read the following example:

Original: The runner fell to the ground. His ankle *was* throbbing in pain.

Revision: The runner fell to the ground, his ankle throbbing in pain.

Original: The coach ran to help the runner. His eyes *were* glued to the bleeding cut.

Revision: The coach ran to help the runner, his eyes glued to the bleeding cut.

Practice combining sentences with participial phrases. You can change words or the order of the sentences if that helps you write your sentence.

1. The pitcher turned his head to see the runner on first base. He got ready to throw.

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2. The girl wanted to get her teacher’s attention. She waved her hand wildly.

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3. The boy leaned his weight forward on his bike. He tried to ride up the steep hill.

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Practice combining sentences with absolute phrases (remove *being* verbs).

1. The young mother lifted her baby. Her hand was caressing its head.

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2. The girl walked hurriedly down the stairs. Her skirt was dragging across the carpet.

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3. The nervous student approached the board. Her fingers were clutching a piece of chalk.

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**Figure 4.** Practice with sentence combining using participial and absolute phrases

derived weeks earlier from the charade game on the board and asked for ideas on how they could be combined using participial and absolute phrases. Instead of writing compound sentences as they had done earlier (“He returned to his desk, and his shoulders slumped”), students drafted sentences like, “Returning to his desk, his shoulders slumped” (using a participial phrase) and “Shoulders slumping, he returned to his desk” (using an absolute phrase). Their final version read:

“The boy took his D- paper from the teacher. Walking back to his seat, his shoulders slumped and his head dropped forward. Then he sat heaped over his desk, his head shaking back and forth in disbelief.”

As I slowly read their words aloud from the board, I heard titters of disbelief. Had they actually created such a literary description? Those sentences reminded them of the ones they collected from works of professional authors. How about that! I sent them home with a worksheet that once again provided scenarios and asked them for body language detail to use as elaboration, this time incorporating participial and absolute phrases in their paragraphs (see Figure 5).

By the end of the term, my students shared descriptions with detailed elaboration of body language and sophisticated sentence variety. In a personal reflection, Claire, an eighth-grade student, reported to me that she recognized the striking difference between one of her seventh-grade sentences and one written during eighth grade. The seventh-grade description read: “As the girl was doing her axle, she fell and hurt herself badly.” She preferred a description written a year later:

“As I felt my way through the kitchen, I encountered my mom, staring down at me with evil, upset, and angry eyes. As soon as mine met hers, they lowered and I stood in shame. Tears welled up in the corners of my eyes, my nostrils flared, my jaw trembling, and my eyes squinted—I immediately burst into tears.”

In the later piece of writing, Claire employed both participial and absolute phrases to paint a vivid picture. While there are imperfections in her later sentence, her mention of nostrils, jaw, and eyes shows an improved sense of detail as well as sophistication in sentence structure. In addition,

her selection of these sentences from among the hundreds she had written told me she had internalized the habits and values I tried to instill. She reached this level step by step in a writing classroom that started with charades, worksheets on specific details of body language, models, literature, conferencing, and finally, the internalization of new grammatical structures (Berger, 2001).

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#### Elaboration Using Body Language Details with Absolute and Participial Phrases

Read each of the scenarios described below and try to envision the physical movements of the central character. Use the spaces provided to list the kinds of actions that might be seen in the camera in your head.

After you write the “body language” in the spaces provided, choose one of the scenarios and use your ideas to create a paragraph with a topic sentence like “Ben returned home after practice exhausted,” or “Mr. Arnold grew worried as he read the letter from the government.”

- A. Ben arrived at his home tired after four hours on the baseball field. Pretend you have a camera that follows him into his family room or bedroom. What body language would such an exhausted boy show?
  1. His head
  2. His arms
  3. His shoulders
  4. His hands
  5. His clothes
  
- B. Mr. Arnold took a letter from his mailbox. Underneath the government heading, the message told him that he owed \$50,000 in taxes that he hadn’t paid. He grew worried. Describe him in the moments after he reads the letter.
  1. His step
  2. His head
  3. His hands
  4. His brow
  5. His eyes
  
- C. Write a paragraph in the space provided, using the details you created for Ben or Mr. Arnold. *Use participial and absolute phrases in your sentences.*

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**Figure 5.** Worksheet for practice in identifying detail and including it in varied sentences



As students learn and practice revision techniques, they are more willing to offer suggestions.

David Noskin wrote in the *English Journal* about his role as the teacher during the revising process:

Once they seem to have a “complete” body of writing (whatever that term means), I help them to make the important transition from creating to analyzing . . . Such analytical behaviors must be cultivated in the classroom, and my role is to help students develop these behaviors.

## One Piece of the Puzzle

By revisiting the issue of body language detail in my classes, students cultivated the “analytical behaviors” that revision and successful writing require. For us, the initial writing had been a precursor to days of minilessons on use of internal voice, inclusion of dialogue and visual images, and most certainly on the careful scrutiny of how the body vividly conveys messages that need to be included in our writing. I learned that students desire success, but that rubrics listing good technique are not a substitute for daily classroom discussions and examinations of sentences and paragraphs—to enjoy them, embellish them, or simplify them. When my students participated in a classroom where writing was continually discussed, they gradually became part of the discussion. Their insights sharpened, and they could not only revise their own work, but also offer valuable

insights to others during peer revision time.

In the grand scheme of building writing skill, elaboration is but one element. Certainly, other lessons on limiting use of *being* verbs and using dialogue, inner voice, metaphor, and simile all contribute to writing development, and I would not omit any of them. Nor is elaboration of physical behaviors the only sort of elaboration we strive for in rich prose. Shelly Smede, who writes “that revision is the most critical part of the writing process,” offers a useful and well-designed revision checklist asking students for details of color, texture, sound, and smell, all part of the process of elaboration that I would hope to see during revisions. Using such a list, along with the modeling of excellent examples will, over time, improve student writing.

I have seen the richness of my students’ writing grow exponentially after they have practiced recognizing and including the physical manifestations of emotions in their writing. At the end of the year, not only do I smile at detailed elaboration in final drafts, I also love to hear students knowledgeably tell me, “Making these minor adjustments enhanced the quality of my narratives dramatically.” Isn’t writing success and growth of self-esteem what it’s all about? For me, it makes the journey worthwhile.

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