

# Everything I Know About Teaching Language Arts I Learned at the Office Supply Store

KATHLEEN O'SHAUGHNESSY

*In the chaotic real world of the classroom, the tiny things matter. Tiny things make the difference between feeling scattered and lost or competent and in control.*

Okay, not everything I know about teaching came from Office Depot. I did pick up a few pointers along the way from the likes of Linda Rief, Regie Routman, and Nanci Atwell. Those have been the big ideas, the theoretical frameworks I've internalized, ideas which shape my teaching in ways I'm hardly aware of anymore. But in the chaotic real world of the classroom, the tiny things matter. Tiny things make the difference between feeling scattered and lost or competent and in control. And many of the tiny things that prop me up in my classroom have come from the aisles of my local office supply store, where I can be found on many Sunday afternoons discovering some gizmo I never knew existed but now can't live without.

## **Don't You Wish You'd Invented Post-it® Notes?**

Every year, I ask each section of middle school students I teach to bring in one supply to add to the community pile that all classes will share throughout the year.

These treasures may include the usual project-making supplies like markers, glue, and construction paper, but I always ask the largest class to bring in packs of three-by-three-inch Post-it® Notes. We use them almost daily.

**Powerlines.** We use Post-it Notes to tag short passages of effective description. A colleague of mine has coined the word "powerlines" for these. They may be similes, metaphors, or just good writing that is chock full of vivid images. During whole-class mini-lessons, I train students to spot these lines, stopping while reading aloud to point them out and reread them. A powerline is more easily illustrated than defined. Christopher Paul Curtis is one author who provides plenty of powerlines, like these from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, which I read to the class.

The "official juvenile delinquent," Byron, has just thrown a cookie at a bird on a telephone wire and Kenny, the narrator, says, "The cookie popped the bird smack-jab in the chest! The bird's wings both stuck out to

the side and for a hot second with its tail hanging down and its wings stuck out like that it looked like a perfect small letter *t* stuck up on the telephone wire." At these words, most of the boys in my class laughed, and most of the girls squirmed, one protesting, "Aw, that's mean." I pointed out that we must have a powerline here because a characteristic of a powerline is the ability to move a reader with a clear mental image. All admitted they had been moved by this image. I read on: "When I got to Byron he'd picked up the bird and was holding it in his hands. The bird's head drooped backward and was rolling from side to side. Dead as a donut." More laughs, more protests, and at least one, "Hey, that's another powerline!"

Once students begin to recognize powerlines in our shared reading, I send them searching in their independent reading material for samples of their own. When they find one, they mark it with a Post-it Note and keep reading. Later, they copy the powerline, the source, and the page number onto an index card (Office Depot again) to

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turn in for a grade. These are posted on a bulletin board for a while where students can borrow them for inspiration. Students' writing improves as they become aware of the tricks that authors use to add engaging detail and imagery to their work. I've seen my students using powerlines in their own writing after turning in just one or two cards. In one set of personal narratives from early in the school year, I found dozens. Some sounded very much like eighth-graders:

*"You could feel the hot wind blowing against your face like a hair dryer blowing on medium."*

*"You could hear the waves crashing against the beach like a car crash."*

But others were startling to me in their originality and in the strength of the language:

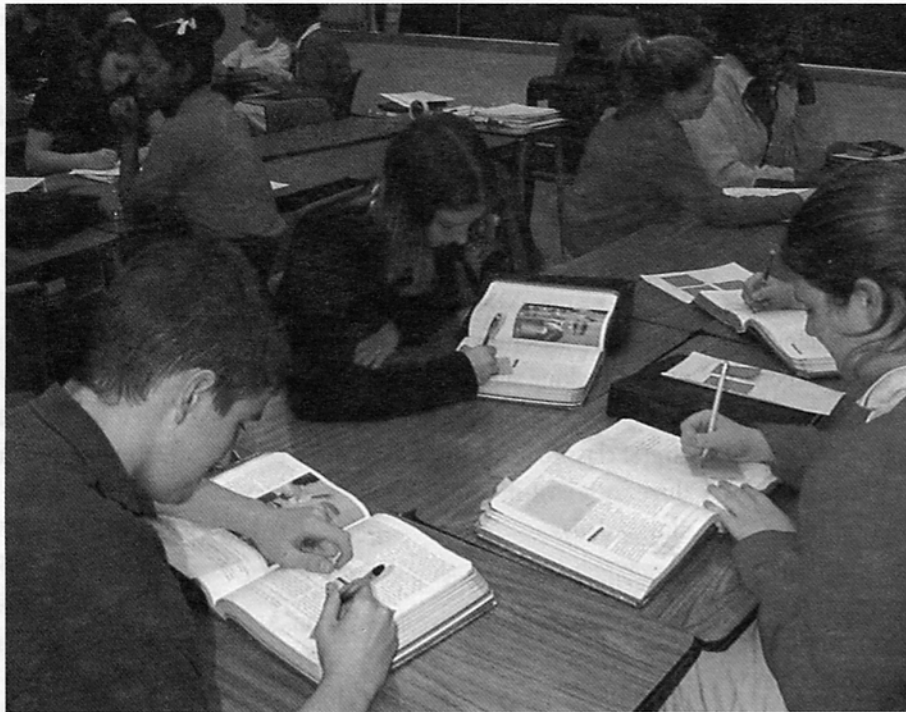
*"My line zoomed out like a dog chasing a mailman."*

*"From around the corner came a nondescript white truck like a huge beast lumbering out of its cave."*

*"I saw [my brother's] spider monkey body fly into the air and hit the ground with a thump."*

*"She was curled up like a rosebud, her back to me."*

I was so delighted with my harvest of student-generated powerlines that I typed them up and attached each to a separate index card. For our next writing workshop, I had students sort through the cards and choose a powerline to use as a first sentence in a piece of fiction. This gave me the pleasure of reading an entire set of students' stories without a single "Hi, my name is . . .



*O'Shaughnessy's students use Post-it® Notes as tools to help them in their reading.*

and this is a story about . . ." first sentence, and the momentum of a powerful first sentence seemed to energize their pieces. The stories they produced were much more lively and detailed than previous attempts, and they yielded a fresh crop of powerlines to read aloud and celebrate.

**Vocabulary.** My students also use Post-its to mark new or interesting vocabulary words as they read independently. There's nothing new about asking students to fish out new vocabulary in their reading. But the Post-it allows them to forge ahead in the text without committing the sin of marking

up a book. Later, they copy from the text the sentence in which they encountered the word, the title of the source, and the page number, adding a definition in their own words and an illustration or example when appropriate. For *disheveled*, Jenna wrote, "When Coach doesn't give us enough time to dress in, I end up disheveled because I can't get dressed and do my hair in two

minutes!" Brian made a card for *dog-eared*, "Don't dog-ear your class novel because Ms. O. doesn't like it when you mess up her books." This was accompanied by a drawing of an open book with arrows pointing to the turned-down corners of the pages. Vocabulary cards are also posted on a bulletin board for a while; then the students who wrote them get their cards back to add to personal word banks in their binders.

**Peer response.** Post-it Notes also make it easier to put into action Peter Elbow's reflective feedback technique, "telling." Telling requires responders to describe their reactions as they read. Telling and other Elbow strategies tend to make students' feedback more useful than the usual, "I liked it; it was good" that I heard regularly back in the days when I didn't direct student responses. I've found that when I require a written response on a Post-it instead of merely allowing students to respond verbally, the responders take their duties more seriously and, with practice, the quality of their

remarks improves. So, for instance, Sean demonstrates the telling technique with this: “While I was reading your piece, I felt like I was riding a rollercoaster. It started out kinda slow, but you could tell there was something exciting coming up. But then it moved real fast and stopped all of a sudden. I almost needed to read it again the way you ride a rollercoaster over again because it goes by too fast.” This response is certainly more useful to the writer than the usual, “I think you could like, add some more details, you know?” that I often overheard in response meetings.

Writers as well as responders make use of Post-its. I often ask the author of a piece to attach specific questions about the draft. We do this to prepare for a “blind conference” in which students use pseudonyms to identify their drafts. I give the piece to a responder in a different class. This is my attempt to remedy the circumstances in which students who work together every day are sometimes uncomfortable giving what might be seen by the author as negative feedback, or in other cases, giving, because of personal feelings about the author, nothing but negative feedback. Blind conferences create a level of objectivity that might not exist in face-to-face meetings and provide a more genuine experience of writing for an audience, since most of us don’t know all of our readers personally.

Typically, a draft will get handed around to several readers, and the author will get more than one answer to each Post-it Note question. One writer, working under the pseudonym Orange Banana, asked, “Do I have a good attention grabber here?” and got four responses. Three were generic: “It’s okay,” “No. Be more specific,” and “Yeah, it was good.” But one was calculated to get the writer thinking in new directions: “Say how

nervous you were before the game.” Now Orange Banana has something specific to consider.

Responders are only required to answer the author’s questions on the same Post-it Note, but they often attach new ones to add further, unsolicited advice. G.I. Joe’s story about a baseball game came back with a yellow note with this advice: “The story doesn’t feel over. What did you gain from the experience? What did you lose? Learn? Did you get a moral? What happens next?” Responders are encouraged to critique the critiques. On a hot-pink Post-it, four different students responded. The first student wrote, “Explode the moment when you were running at him.” Others added, “I agree,” “I agree also,” and “Whoever wrote this was right. What did you feel?” The final draft that G.I. Joe later turned in, under his real name, was quite different from the draft he’d submitted to his unknown responders.

Sometimes, I orchestrate whole-class swaps, requiring everyone to give me a draft with two or three questions attached that I will then hand out to a different class later in the day or the next day. Or I’ll make this activity voluntary. I keep stacking trays (also from the office supply store) labeled with the different class hours. Students who want feedback put their drafts in their class’s tray. Usually, within two days, an early finisher in another class will wander over to the trays, take out a draft, and respond to it. Waiting authors will enter class each day asking, “Did I get a response yet?” Any gimmick that has kids begging for revision strategies is, in my book, a keeper.

**Active reader strategies.** Post-its also provide a tool to help create proficient readers who interact with the text, predicting, evaluating, questioning, clarifying, and

connecting. I model these strategies, one at a time, reading aloud to the whole class, but I depend on Post-its to help monitor whether or not students are catching on. After I’ve introduced a strategy, I give students three Post-it Notes and some text and have them apply the strategy, noting their thoughts on the Post-its in three different sections of the text. Later, when they know more strategies and are becoming fluent in their use, students will keep a pack of Post-its on their desks as they read and use them to record their thoughts about the text. When they’re done, they peel off the Post-its, recording page numbers as they go, and attach them to a piece of paper in their reader’s notebooks. These notes serve as valuable review material if students are required to write a response to the literature or take a test on it, and they allow me to assess students’ mastery of the metacognitive strategies.

Ashley read “Stop the Sun” by Gary Paulsen, a short story about a boy struggling to connect with his emotionally distant father, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder after the Vietnam War. She employs several of the categories of interacting with the text that I have demonstrated. She connects: “My dad was in the Vietnam War. But he doesn’t have Vietnam syndrome.” She predicts: “He’s going to talk to his dad! I just know it!” She visualizes and evaluates: When the father says, “So I crawled to the side and found Jackson, only he wasn’t there, just part of his body, the top part, and I hid under it and waited, and waited, and waited,” Ashley wrote, “AHHH! The top part?! Hid under it?! Gross!” Near the end of the story, she clarifies her understanding of what the story means to her: “Poor thing! His poor dad! Man, Vietnam really messed him up.” Not all students are as spontaneous and genuine as Ashley in their Post-it responses,

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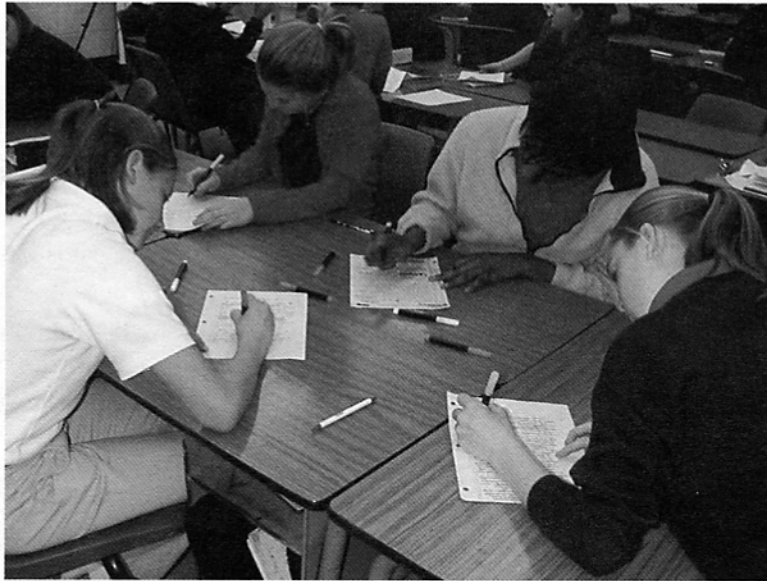
but I can determine from their notes whether or not a student has attended to and comprehended a piece of text.

### Some Uses for Highlighters Other than Drawing on Notebook Covers

My students love highlighters. They love the bright fluorescent colors; they love the snap of the cap. During the first week of school, when best intentions are rampant, or right after report cards have been issued, when middle school students get really serious, I see dozens of students industriously underlining whole paragraphs at a time in their class notes. The rest of the time, I see dozens of enraptured students drawing and doodling and recording the latest loves of their lives on the covers of their notebooks or sometimes on their hands in orange, pink, and lime-green highlighter. Rather than ban highlighters from my room, I decided to take advantage of my students' fascination with them and use it to my advantage, so I set out to find some uses, other than decorative, for highlighters.

**Hot spots.** I give students a hot-colored highlighter while they're drafting. Anytime they have to pause to guess how to spell *believe* or *fascinating*, or to wonder if they need a comma or if they should use "I" or "me," they highlight that spot in the draft and keep writing. Later, when they're ready to consider mechanics, they go back to the "hot spots" and double-check their guesses with a dictionary, grammar handbook, or proofreading partner.

**Sentence structure.** I don't know why so many students still write sentence fragments and run-ons in spite of all the red ink their English teachers have spilled in the cause of eradicating them. The following two highlighter tricks are not guaranteed to succeed where all that red ink has failed, but they do make visual a concept that seems too abstract for many students to grasp.



*Highlighters aren't just for doodling anymore. In O'Shaughnessy's classroom, they help students refine their writing.*

1. I ask students to highlight the ending punctuation marks in a draft, then put an index finger on the first highlighted spot and put the other index finger on the next highlighted spot. If their fingers are two or three words apart, they may have a fragment. If their fingers are waving to each other from across a vast expanse of ink, they may have a run-on. When Joey saw the gap between the first and last words of "It was a sunny day in October and everyone at school was at lunch outside playing soccer or talking about what they were doing for Halloween, me, on the other hand, I was at the soccer

field watching everyone play," he recognized for himself that he had a run on, and I didn't even have to try explaining to him what's wrong with the "me, on the other hand, I..." part of his sentence.

2. In another test for run-ons, I ask students to highlight all the verbs in a draft, then check each sentence for highlighted spots.

A sentence with more than two verbs may be a run-on or it may need careful punctuation, as in a compound sentence. When Patrick counted six verbs in this sentence, he knew he needed to edit it: "Someone all of a sudden *threw* me the ball and when I *looked* up I *saw* the four eighth graders *chasing* me and all I could do was *run* so I *ran*."

**Dialogue.** Here is a query high on my list of life's unanswerable questions: Why is it so difficult to remember that a change of speaker requires a new paragraph? Rather than

repeatedly asking my students this question, I give these directions: Highlight each character's name the first time it's mentioned in a draft, using a different color for each character. Then, throughout the draft, highlight each character's speeches in his/her assigned color. When it's time for a final draft, don't mix colors in a single paragraph. When the color changes, start a new paragraph.

**The five-highlighter exercise.** I ask students to assign a different color of highlighter to each of the five senses, then create a key at the top of a draft so they can remember which is which. As students read

their own or a partner's draft, they mark sensory details with the corresponding color. After the draft is marked, students hold it up and look at it as if it were an abstract painting. If there's very little color, the draft needs more sensory detail. If one color predominates, the student should try to incorporate more of the other senses. If it looks like an undiscovered Jackson Pollock, perhaps the student has gone overboard with description.

Jesse's story of a fight on the playground was a masterpiece of blue, his sense-of-sight color, but the other senses were scarcely represented. So to his original sentence, "All I can remember was me getting on top of him and punching him in his face," he added a pink, hearing detail, "and hearing the kids yell, 'hit him in his face' and his heavy breathing and groaning." Challenged by his peer editors to use senses other than vision and handed a green and orange highlighter, Ian enhanced his description of football practice: "We were having our first practice in full gear on the hottest day of the summer. The heat made us dizzy." He added, "The adrenalin built up inside me like a bottle. I got set and my senses were at their highest level. My hearing alerted me to Coach inhaling to blow on the whistle."

**Not to be.** Highlighters can help students ferret out dull words. Vivid verbs are a hallmark of engaging writing, but students are more likely to use the first words that come to their minds, often the overused and uninteresting forms of "to be." I provide students with a list of these "to be" verb forms and send them searching through a draft, highlighting every "to be" verb. Most drafts end up polka-dotted. I challenge students to eliminate five or more, or every third one of the dots by rewriting sentences with more active, vivid verbs.

### Recent Discoveries for Which There Must Be Uses

Most people go to an office supply store when they have a need and buy the thing that will fulfill the need. But if you're an office supply junkie, you find the thing and then you figure out what you need it for.

**Artist mount spray adhesive.** This comes in an aerosol can and is just sticky enough to hold paper or cardboard to a wall but not sticky enough to be permanent or to remove paint. When you spray it on a sheet of paper, poster board, construction paper, or card stock, you get, in effect, a giant Post-it Note. Here are some ways I use this adhesive:

1. Environmental poetry. Students write short poems, illustrate them, and stick them, with the spray adhesive, to spots around the campus where kids stand and wait in line, places such as at the water fountain or on the serving line in the cafeteria. The poems last for a few days, although I'm never certain if the adhesive gives up first or if some fellow middle-schooler has had a hand in the poem's disappearance. But, since all we have invested is a piece of paper and a couple of spurts from the magic can, we don't get upset about the missing poem. In fact, it's sort of a point of honor if some unknown poetry thief liked your poem enough to take it off the wall and keep it.

For the line at the coke machine, Matt wrote "Wait your Turn."

*When you're standing in line  
You feel like you're dying of thirst  
You push and shove  
To get your Coke first  
All the little kids try to cut in front of  
you  
When they do, you don't know what to  
do*

*After you've done whatever you can  
They cry and tell a teacher  
And you think, "Aw, man!"*

Ian's "What's on the Spout" graced the wall above a water fountain for a short while:

*I'm going to warn you before you  
drink*

*What's on the spout*

*What do you think?*

*After I've told you*

*I hope you'll be upset*

*As you drink that nice water, all cool  
and wet*

*What do roaches do when they crawl  
in the bowl?*

*They crawl and swim around, black as  
coal*

*Silent and swift they take a quick  
drink*

*Now that you're almost done sipping,  
what do you think?*

*Are you upset now because of your  
haste?*

*Is it worth the risk for one little taste?*

*Oh, and I should tell you about that  
mouse who calls the bowl a pool*

*I don't think he minds swimming in  
the water you drink to get cool*

*Should you really drink from the  
fountain at school?*

2. Poor man's magnetic poetry. I write words on small, blank flash cards or index cards, then spray the cards or a blank sheet of paper so students can move the words around, resticking them several times as they try out new arrangements to create a poem. They could be a random assortment of evocative words or the words from a published poem.

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Using the words from Langston Hughes' "Dream Variations," Erin wrote two poems:

### Variations of Me

*dream beneath the dark night  
dance in the pale sun  
whirl tenderly in the evening  
rest till day is done*

### While the Day Is Gone

*dream of a place like the cool  
evening  
and fling the sun gently at night  
wide like a tall tree  
coming to rest in my arms  
Black to some  
white to me*

Or students can play around with a sticky collection of roots and affixes and see how many actual words they can put together, or make up some that don't exist and define them according to the meaning of the word parts. One class put to use a collection of roots and affixes related to parts to create prefix monsters for an illustrated class book. Each page included a creature's name composed of word parts, the definitions of each part, and a picture of the creature. One page, for example, featured the macro-encephalo-bi-cardio-octo-ped, which is, of course, a creature with a large head, two hearts, and eight feet.

**Presentation binders.** These look like regular small vinyl binders except that plastic sheet protectors are permanently bound into the place where the rings would normally be. They come with varying numbers of page protectors. Here's how I use them:

1. Day to day. I keep a presentation binder with ten sheets on each of the student tables in my room. Inside are directions for projects in progress in each class, along with successful samples from previous students, reminders of classroom rules, calendars of upcoming events and deadlines, and anything else I get tired of saying a dozen times a day.



*Creative classroom supplies: small essentials from the office supply store are kept organized in a shoe storage rack.*

Students still ask, "How long does this have to be again?" as often as ever, but now I have an automatic answer: "Look in your table book." Now that students are starting to say "Look in the table book" to each other, I know I'm on to a good thing.

2. Special occasions. For Open House Night or Parent Conference Day, I clean out the mundane material and, with the help of each student, put in the book a sure-to-please-Mom piece of work from each student who sits at the table. It could be

an illustrated poem or, since each page is two sided, it could be a before-and-after display in each sleeve with, for instance, a page of a piece of writing from early in the year in front and a page from a later revision or a later piece of work in the back. Parents appreciate the chance to see their child's progress, and the exercise of requiring students to select what to put in their table book provides an excellent form of self-evaluation.

If you have any money left, stop at your favorite superstore on the way home from Office Depot. For under eight dollars, you can buy a hanging shoe organizer with a dozen plastic pockets just the right size to hold highlighters, Post-its, and all the other tiny and essential things needed to make real and practical the big ideas inspired by Linda, Regie, and Nanci.

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**KATHLEEN O'SHAUGHNESSY is one of the directors of the National Writing Project of Acadiana, Louisiana, at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.**