

It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

Is there a teacher who, in the midst of a morning shower, has not desperately wished for an inspiration that might bring to life that day's deadly dull grammar lesson? But as Philip Ireland demonstrates in this article, writing teachers are not exempt from the warning "Beware of what you wish for; you might get it."

PHILIP IRELAND

How to make prepositions interesting? That was my question. The answer: a preposition walk. That's it, I decided. I'll take my seventh-graders out for a walk around the campus. Walking in pairs, they'll tell each other what they're doing.

"I'm stepping *off the grass*."

"I'm talking *to my friends*."

The morning class had a ball. Walking, laughing, pointing: they soon discovered that everything they did contained prepositional phrases. I walked among my students prompting answers.

"I'm crawling *under the tennis net*," Amanda proclaimed from her hands and knees. "The prepositional phrase is "*under the tennis net*."

"The preposition?" I asked.

"*Under*."

"And the object of the preposition?"

"*Net*," Livie chimed in as she politely held the net up for her friend.

They were all getting it. It was perfect; a dry grammatical subject turned into a kinesthetic, interpersonal, linguistic, logico-mathematical gas. I imagined myself squinting into the hot lights of television news cameras as multimodal teaching guru Howard Gardner himself congratulated me.

"Stunning my boy," he'd wag. "First Einstein proposed relativity and now you. . . . Amazing. You've discovered the educational equivalent of the Grand Unification Theory?"

And then came the two words teachers simultaneously pine for and fear most: Friday afternoon. My students seemed a bit giddy, but I figured, hey, what could go wrong? I'm a trained professional. I can handle it. So out the door we walked in search of new and exciting prepositional phrases.

All went well until squeals and cheers spun me around. Fifty feet away, Leo and Cory crouched side by side on the ground together. Running toward that human hurdle at a full sprint were Randall and Nick, one just inches behind the other. Apparently the idea of these spirited and creative darlings was to be so close together when they launched themselves that both would be *in the air at the same time*. I can't be sure, but I think Randall, mistaking me for a dispassionate judge, even gave me a twinkling wink.

But how could my Olympians have known that Cory would sprout intelligence at the very instant the first of these hormonal Flying Wallendas left the ground? Predictably, Cory's proto-intelligence took the form of the survival instinct known simply as "fight or flight." He chose flight, which began with him standing straight up into the path of my

proud hurdlers. It was a game of milliseconds. Randall pirouetted in midair to miss Cory and his newfound brain by my new gray hair's width.

As I closed the space between us, visions of my meeting with the principal played in my head.

"Yes. That's right, Mrs. Clendening. It was a preposition lesson."

"I see," she would reply through clenched teeth. "And can you explain to me why Cory's nose is broken in three places? Why Leo's eyeball has been torn from its socket?"

Just feet away now, I pointed a bony finger at the fallen Wallendas.

"Randall and Nick! What do you think you're doing?"

His ear-to-ear smile, the same smile that will someday get him elected, lit Randall's face. With the confidence and composure of a king, he proudly replied, "I was flying *over my classmates*. '*Over my classmates*' is the prepositional phrase. '*Over*' is the preposition. '*Classmates*' is the object of the preposition."

PHILIP IRELAND teaches seventh grade language arts and social studies at San Marcos Middle School, San Marcos, California. He is a teacher-consultant with the San Marcos Writing Project.