

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Beautiful Sentences

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## Beautiful Sentences

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### Overview

We often associate metalinguistic terminology with an adherence to normative language standards in students' writing. Basing metalinguistic practice on students' own writing can also evoke demotivating and damaging episodes in prior educational contexts. A more productive way to incorporate a focus on metalinguistic language into writing courses might be to frame metalinguistic terms as a resource for students to increase the depth and precision of their analysis of class readings. This activity provides space for attention to linguistic structure and metalinguistic terminology in quick bites that supplement major reading and writing assignments.

While engaged with course readings, students select sentences which they find beautiful (or significant, or meaningful), and describe the sentence in terms of an assigned metalinguistic feature (e.g., number of clauses, use of adjectives, evocative or expressive vocabulary choices). These brief responses are easy to assess, and feedback can be provided through instructor comments or in-class discussion. The activity can also be incorporated as a pre-writing activity to generate interpretations of direct quotations students include in text-based written assignments.

This activity takes a positive perspective on metalinguistic terminology, framing it as a means for going deeper into the language used by authors, rather than for labeling errors or non-standard language in students' own writing. The activity provides

rich opportunities to discuss normative language standards and rhetorical effects of particular language structures.

Sequenced versions of this activity on a range of targets can be offered over a semester. Suggested targets are: choose the most significant word in the sentence and suggest a synonym; move another element of the sentence into the subject position; identify and categorize modifying elements.

### Time Commitment

30 minutes, repeatable

### Materials

- class readings
- a prompt sheet for students to add selected sentences and analysis

### Activity Process

- Students identify 3-5 sentences from class readings or other relevant texts that they think are ‘beautiful’ for some reason.
- Next, students add the sentences to the template sheet and complete the descriptive and metalinguistic prompts.
- Finally, students engage in individual or group reflection on learning from activity.

### Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Practice identifying linguistic features and applying metalinguistic terms.

- Develop frameworks for linking meaning, linguistic form, and effect on readers.

### Learning Accommodations

- This activity can be completed in class or independently.
- This activity can be completed on paper or digitally.
- This activity can be assessed through written submission or verbal discussion.

### Assignment Template

#### **Instructions**

Enter 5 sentences that you encounter that you find beautiful, or otherwise catch your attention. For each entry, also answer the questions provided.

#### **Sample**

Sentence “Among her people she is both the law and its transgression.”

#### **Where did you encounter this sentence?**

Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize Speech.

#### **For you, what is the most important word in this sentence?**

#### **Why?**

*Transgression*—I like the way it sounds at the end of the sentence. Also, she’s kind of telling a fable here, and then this word raises the formality of the speech.

**If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?**

*Breaking*

**Now add your sentences**

Sentence 1:

Where did you encounter this sentence?

For you, what is the most important word in this sentence? Why?

If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?

Sentence 2:

Where did you encounter this sentence?

For you, what is the most important word in this sentence? Why?

If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?

Sentence 3:

Where did you encounter this sentence?

For you, what is the most important word in this sentence? Why?

If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?

Sentence 4:

Where did you encounter this sentence?

For you, what is the most important word in this sentence? Why?

If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?

Sentence 5:

Where did you encounter this sentence?

For you, what is the most important word in this sentence? Why?

If you *had to* replace that word with another word or phrase, what could you use?