

The Ape Exercise

The Ape Exercise has the potential to do many things for you in the classroom. You can use it early in the semester as an icebreaker. You can use it for team-building or to teach sentence combining, punctuation, conciseness, clarity, overall style, audience, medium, REVISION....

You need to set up the exercise properly.

First, the prep work:

1. Copy/paste the sentences at the bottom of this page and put them into a separate document. Increase the point size to 18-36 and put space around the sentences.
2. Print one copy for every team and cut the sentences apart.
3. Put no more than 3 or 4 students in a team. Each team will have one set of sentences on slips of paper that they'll work with.

Next, in class:

1. Ask teams to agree on an order for the sentences that makes sense to them.
2. Next, tell the teams to combine the five sentences into a single sentence. Give them the proper guidelines for doing so: they may omit words, they may change words as long as using synonyms do not change the intent of the sentence, and they must use proper punctuation. As soon as they are ready, ask each team to write their single sentence on the board.
3. Count the words in each sentence before the writer sits down. Write the number of words and circle this number next to each entry.
4. Begin a healthy competition by encouraging teams to reduce the number of words in their sentences. Depending on how you present this activity, the competition can be fierce.
5. At some point, you can stop the activity and talk about how meanings may have changed, what choices the writing teams made in their revisions, or about anything else you want to focus on or that presents itself in the activity. You may be surprised at the issues that arise. (I had one student revise down to 8 words which initiated a discussion about losing meaning and when a sentence becomes a headline.)

Hundreds of people dressed up in gorilla outfits.

They ran through the streets of London.

They wanted to bring awareness to the public.

The awareness they want to make public concerns the plight of apes.

The apes are endangered.

The original sentence, as taken off a "crawler" from CNN in 2001:

"Hundreds of people ran through the streets of London dressed in gorilla outfits to bring awareness to the plight of the endangered apes." (23 words)