

Leads Lessons

MATERIALS: Gather favorite books or books you have in the room for examining leads.

CONNECT

Review what a clincher is – the last line of a story that makes the ideas stand out as unusual and meaningful. Check in with your writers. Find out whether they like the progress they've made with writing clincher endings.

TEACHING POINT

Compare clinchers to leads. A lead is the first sentence or two of a story. It sets stories apart. It draws the reader in and makes the reader want to read the story. (See lesson on endings for more on clinchers.)

TEACH

Read just the first few lines from some of my favorite stories I've gathered: *A Wednesday Surprise*, *A Bear's Toothache*, *Asha in the Attic*, *The Night I Followed the Dog*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Christina Katerina* and *the Time She Quit the Family*. Lead a discussion on how the leads pull the reader into the story.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT Day One

1. Ask students to find the first few lines of the stories in the books in the room and reread the first lines of their stories.
2. Lead them to discover what authors do and what they do as young writers. Do they like their leads? What leads do they want to share from their research – either from their writing or from the writing of others? Do they think they have room for improvement? Do they think openings are important?

LINK

Writers spend lots of time thinking about how "to get into their stories." The beginning is critical to the reader. Leads pull readers into stories or make them put stories down. It's a good idea to pay attention to how authors pull us into their stories so that, as writers, we learn new ways to write leads.

REFLECTION (2-3 minutes)

Write an assessment of your ability to write leads in your daybook. Or, write a goal for these lessons – what is it that you want to learn about leads that will help you be a better writer?

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT Day Two

1. Explain that examining leads has been an interest of yours. You've been collecting the first few lines of stories to analyze.
2. Tell the students you selected 8 beginnings that students wrote. (Overhead page 3)
3. Put leads of 8 stories on the overhead. Let children vote for their 2 favorite leads. Usually, there is an overwhelming favorite.

CLOSURE

Examine which leads garnered the most votes. Which leads received 0 votes? Why did some leads receive no votes? These are actual leads that students wrote. What makes one more interesting than another?

LINK

What does this little experiment prove? *Good leads draw writers into the story.* The lead doesn't mean that the story is great. These writers might have written excellent stories but uninteresting leads. However, it's the lead that gives the reader the first impression and will influence whether a reader chooses to read the story.

REFLECTION (2-3 minutes)

Write what you learned by examining 8 leads real 4th graders wrote. Be sure to explain how what you learned related to your writing. Write the reflection in your daybook.

Day Three

WARM-UP REFLECTION

Write in your daybook. Write what you're thinking about leads and the process of writing. Or, write what's on your mind about anything so that you can be ready to focus on writing lessons.

TEACH

1. Put a story of your own on the overhead or under the DocCam. (See the example I included on page 4-5.) Read and enjoy the story.
2. Model how authors go back to revise after they spill their initial ideas down on paper. Show them the 3 new leads you wrote to go with your story. (Mine are on page 3.)
3. Ask students to tell which lead they like and why.
4. Reach consensus with your students as to what makes an interesting, engaging lead. Ask them to record this consensus statement in their daybooks.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT Day Three

1. Ask students to find a story in their daybooks or works-in-progress folders.
2. Tell them to experiment; try to write a different lead for the story.
3. Challenge themselves; try and write 3 different leads for the same story.
4. Tell them to discuss their choices with their partners and make a decision on what one they like best.

LINK

We've spent a lot of time examining what makes the beginning of a narrative story engaging. We've studied the first lines of published works, our own writing and the teacher's writing. As you read, continue to notice what draws you into the writing and why. What is it about the author's words that are so powerful to you? As you discover more ideas, let me know so that we can – as a community of authors – discuss what you're learning. Your willingness to share will make us all stronger.

Vote for 2 Leads!

1. The kids turned their heads to see who was coming in the first-grade classroom door. It was Rachel, a freckle-faced, pretty, brown-haired girl in my classroom carrying a big box of hermit crabs.
2. One hot day, I was at Camp Catawba for Girl Scouts. We were getting read to see a program about animals.
3. In Colorado Springs, on April 30th, Stacey brought a pet monkey to school and made so much mischief, you wouldn't believe it.
4. One day my sister hit me in the face with a shoe and then I got revenge.
5. One day when something funny that made me laugh happen was when.
6. One rainy day I was playing at Rachel's house and my friend Rachel and I started to do our homework.
7. Mrs. Welch screamed as Ralphy's pet snake slithered up her dress. It was February 11th, the day disaster struck Pembroke School.

Which of Mrs. Haag's LEADS is best?

- 1) We just returned from a week in the Smoky Mountains. I loved spending time with my family.
- 2) As a mother, I always thought I'd stand firmly between my child and danger. Boy, was I wrong!
- 3) One summer afternoon during our summer vacation, my oldest son and I went with my husband on one of his famous "short" hikes.
- 4) One time I got really scared on our summer vacation.

Example:

One afternoon during our summer vacation, my oldest son and I went with my husband on one his famous "short" hikes. The trail took us straight up a mountain two miles. The trail was not much of a trail at all. It was covered in rocks, really big rocks, and rutted with roots from the trees. Sometimes I couldn't tell where the trail went at all. I had to stop frequently and catch my breath because the trail never leveled off. Finally, I convinced my husband to stop for a water break.

My son went out ahead and when we caught up with him a few minutes later, he was standing silently in the middle of the trail. The partially blocked vista of the valley below was on one side of him. On the other side, the mountain. He motioned for us to come forward, silently. He whispered, "I hear a noise in those bushes."

"Blackberry bushes," my husband announced. "A whole hill full of them. I bet you hear a bear munching on those berries," he joked.

We listened but didn't hear any thing. We laughed. We lapsed into a conversation about what to do about the vista, the one where we couldn't see anything. Deciding that we must not be far enough along, we started moving up the trail.

We hadn't gone 5 feet when we found a bear! Truly, it was a bear, eating contentedly in the bushes. He was a brown bear standing on his back legs and stood at least

as tall as us. He was so close to the trail, we could touch him if we stretched out our arms. He'd been listening to us the whole time!

My heart raced. This was no zoo bear. There were no fences. I jumped back and practically knocked my son over. Without thinking, I grabbed my son's 6-foot frame and forced him in front of me like a shield between me and that bear. Luckily, the bear had his berries and seemed disinterested in the snacks in our backpack.

I turned and sailed down the trail. I wasn't waiting to see if the bear would attack. Soon, my husband and son came running close behind me. "Nice move, mom!" my son teased. We left without the view of the vista we planned to see, but we had seen a bear. The surprise will stick with probably forever.