

1) Ideas--(main ideas supported by good details)

Trouble starts with a general sentence followed by three specific examples. Encourage students to copy the first sentence inserting their own names (“Trouble always found _____”) and support the main idea with three examples from their own lives. Look at Jane Kurtz’s use of five-sense details in Trouble (and other Jane Kurtz books).

Tell students to “zoom in.” Use Water Hole Waiting’s animal descriptions as examples.

2) Word choice (fresh and original with lively verbs)

“Morning slinks onto the savanna and licks up the night shadows one by one.” Water Hole Waiting

“A drizzle starts dripping a long, sad song.” Rain Romp

“A pink cloud of flamingos rippling up from a dark blue lake, wrinkling the cloth of the evening sky.” Faraway Home

“To pile on the agony, she was smiling a twitch of a smile.” Bicycle Madness

3) Sentence fluency (some long, some short, a pleasing rhythm)

Use the very long first sentence of Only A Pigeon as a model. Show how the print on the page gives clues for reading—and challenge students to write about a place they know.

Sometimes writers break rules. Why does Jane Kurtz use “struggling to go up” three times in a row in one sentence in In the Small, Small Night? (The author was trying to capture the voice of the oral storytelling tradition and the way the story was told to her.)

4) Organization--(attention-grabbing beginnings, logical and interesting patterns for beginnings, middles, and ends)

“What an all-overish day this turned out to be at the end of the strangest, saddest year of my life.” Bicycle Madness (Writers plant clues to make the reader curious.)

“I stopped, rocking slightly on my bare feet in the cold mud at the edge of the stream. My heart was flapping as wildly as a piece of cloth caught in the wind.” Saba

Water Hole Waiting starts at the beginning of the day and ends at sunset. Can this provide a model for nonfiction writing in your classroom? Point out that Trouble travels in a circle (students can draw a map or study the map in the end papers.) In the Small, Small Night uses a frame story--stories within a story.

Model how endings often tie in with beginnings. Beginning: “Can we go fast?” asked the boy. “Can’t we blast to the zoo?”/ “It won’t take long,” said his mom. “Sit still, you bouncy kangaroo.” End: “Mom, the zoo was super-fun with you. When I grow up, maybe I’ll be a daddy kangaroo.” Do Kangaroos Wear Seatbelts?

5) Voice--(pizzaz! individuality! unique personal touches)

“Suddenly a cold and skeery feeling swept through me like a stormy wind. What would happen if Miss Frances really got bicycle hands and wasn’t able to hold a jackknife or even a glass of lemonade?” Bicycle Madness (The first person narrator speaks in a way that shows her personality and understanding of women in her 1890’s world.)

“Little silver worms of rain wriggle and slither under our shirts.” Rain Romp (Some of Jane Kurtz’s friends told her they hated this image because they hated worms...but the author has always been intrigued by worms.)

“A bush baby rides on Mama’s back at night—soaring, gliding, sliding, leaping, while the thorn-tree world is sleeping—catching insects in mid-flight.” Do Kangargooos Wear Seatbelts? (A bush baby was Jane Kurtz’s favorite African animal of all the ones she saw as a child.)

“I heard a slap, and the mule with Mesfin on it skittered ahead of ours. ‘*Ayezosh*,’ Mesfin called as he passed. ‘When spiders unite, they can tie up a lion.’ A moment later, there we were, riding through the Gate of the Judges.” Saba: Under the Hyena’s Foot (The characters in this book have many wise sayings at their fingertips because people use proverbs in conversation constantly in Ethiopia.)

6) Conventions (authors use punctuation and other tools to convey how text should be read)

Look at the use of Amharic words in Only a Pigeon or Trouble or Jane Kurtz’s other stories that connect with Ethiopia. How does the writer signal that he or she is using a word from a language other than English? Challenge students to try incorporating non-English words into some of their writing, using the same convention.

Tell students when Jane Kurtz wrote Mr. Bones and Johnny Appleseed, she couldn’t use contractions because they are Ready-to-Read books. Make a game of figuring out (using the notion of sentence fluency) where contractions might improve the rhythm.

Use In The Small, Small Night or Do Kangaroos Wear Seatbelts?—two books that have lots of back-and-forth conversation—to practice dialogue punctuation. After reading Abena’s fear that students in her new school will laugh at her, ask students to pass a sheet of paper back and forth where they hold a dialogue only on paper about something that scares them. Challenge them to use this conversation in a story.

