

The Resourceful Writing Teacher

A Handbook of Essential Skills and Strategies

Jenny Mechem Bender

Foreword by Lucy Calkins

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

For my boys:
To you, Harrison, for being my inspiration.
And to you, Josh, for being my hero.

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Developing Tension

I love roller-coasters. I love the excitement of standing in line knowing something big is soon going to happen. I love the anticipation on the way up, the release on the way down, and the relief when it is all over and done. Being on a really good roller-coaster is like being in a really good story. My breath tightens as I go up, up, and up—or as I flip pages in anticipation of what is to come. My eyes pop in wonder as I go down—or as I uncover the latest plot turn. When I reach the end, even though I know it won't be the same, I wish I could do it all over again; I envy the people who are about to get on the ride, or read one of my most beloved books, for the very first time.

Of course, not everyone loves roller-coasters the way I do, and not everyone responds to books in the same way. But a good story should take us on a ride of some kind. The tension need not be a negative experience; I might feel tense because something bad is about to happen, but I might also feel tense because I have been holding my breath waiting for something wonderful to occur. Furthermore, the tension may exist because of an external or internal problem. Lost homework and a fight with a friend are examples of external problems, problems that occur outside the character. Internal problems, on the other hand, occur when we gain insight into a character's inner struggle; such problems are usually developed by more sophisticated writers and often unfold alongside an external problem.

Whether a love tale or a scary tale or a tale that makes us laugh, whether a problem unfolding outside or inside the character, we should experience places of tension when we read—places where we are not quite sure how the characters will react or what turn the plot will take. If your students' stories seem flat and predictable, without turns or dips, it is probably

because they do not yet understand how to build tension. Most likely, they simply state or summarize the desire or conflict at hand. Though introducing a problem of some sort is a good first step when writing stories, we eventually want to teach students to take their readers on a journey from the discovery of the desire or conflict on to the character's response to the issue, and then on again to the resolution. To help your students accomplish this goal, you might teach the following strategies.

Use Repetition: *One way writers build tension is by repeating the problem or a character's attempts to attain a desire.*

It is easy to recall the myriad ways in which repetition causes tension in our daily lives: the child who asks again and again to do something we keep refusing; the student who never completes her homework; the days that pass one after the other as we eagerly await a vacation.

In a minilesson Rebecca Victoros did with her fifth graders, she used an everyday experience from her own life to introduce her students to the notion that repetition causes tension: She told them a story about how she waited and waited for the subway to come, and then when it finally did, it was too packed with people for her to get on. "It made me think about how in life, things get tense when we want something and are waiting and waiting to get it (like our birthday party), or when there is a problem and it keeps coming up again and again (like a little sibling who keeps getting in the way). The exact same thing is true when we write stories."

Teaching

Tell

"No matter what our stories are about, we always want to develop tension of some kind because it keeps our readers hooked into our stories, waiting and wanting to find out what will happen. Because repetition often causes aggravation and anticipation, one way to develop tension is to repeat the problem or to repeat characters' attempts to reach their desire."

Show

"Let me show you how, in one of the stories we love, the author uses repetition to build tension and keep his readers hooked into what's happening, eager to discover the resolution," Rebecca said before pulling out a copy of *Wings*, a picture book by Christopher Myers. "Remember how first, on this

page,” Rebecca said as she placed a copy on the overhead, “everyone in the neighborhood points at Icarus flying above the rooftops and shouts that he’s strange? Then the problem repeats itself on this page: *The whole school was staring eyes and wagging tongues. They whispered about his wings and his hair and his shoes.* The problem repeats itself on this page when the teacher complains that Icarus is a distraction and tells him to leave. And again on this page: *At recess, the snicker grew into a giggle and spread across the playground.* On and on this goes until almost the end of the book, and each time the problem repeats itself, the more tense we get, right? The more we worry about Icarus and the more we wonder what is going to happen.

“Imagine if Myers instead wrote, simply, that everyone in the neighborhood points at Icarus and shouts that he’s strange, and then resolved the problem. Not only would there be no tension, we probably wouldn’t love this story like we do because we would never get a chance to actually engage with it. It would be over before we ever really cared about the character or what happened to him!”

Active Engagement

Tell

“I want you to try this now with your partner. Most of you were here for the fire drill this month, and even if you weren’t, you can imagine how it went. I want you to take a couple minutes to write the story of what happened, focusing on a part where you could build up the tension through repetition; remember, tension keeps readers reading to find out what’s going to happen, so with your partner, figure out the exact words you could write to build that tension.”

Coach

“Let me get you started: *All of a sudden, we heard the fire alarm! First, we. . .* OK, turn to your partners and write the first problem that happened, and then build the tension by writing the next problem and the next and the next.” To support students, Rebecca said:

- “What is the problem in this story? Remember, the central problem usually arises when the characters want or need something but obstacles get in their way, so what do the characters want or need to do in this situation?”

- “Would it make sense for your characters to do this same thing multiple times?”
- “What else do the characters do to try and overcome the problem or reach the desire?”
- “What might get in the way as characters are trying to overcome the problem? What do the characters do in response to these new obstacles?”

Before Rebecca sent everyone back to their seats, she reminded her class that everyone should be building tension in their stories in order to keep their readers engaged and waiting to find out how characters overcome the problem. Rebecca told them to add “repetition” to their repertoire of ways to build tension, reminding them that they now had several ways to move toward their goal. For the next day and night after the minilesson, Faizah drafted the story in Figure 6–1.

Faizah successfully draws from a range of strategies for building tension, including using repetition. She could have very quickly solved the problem in her story by having Masrur break the vase as soon as the narrator asks him to give it back. Instead, Faizah keeps her readers in suspense by repeating the narrator’s attempts to solve the problem: first she jumps off the couch and insists Masrur put down the vase; then she chases him; eventually she catches hold of his sock, but he breaks free; finally, she takes his favorite toy and uses it to bribe an exchange. On and on the problem goes, keeping us in suspense as we journey alongside Faizah’s characters, wondering what will become of this precious vase.

Include Clues About How the Story Will Go: *One way writers build tension is by using setting, characters’ feelings, and/or verb choice clues that hint at the problem.*

Like many people I know, I often get a little anxious or blue toward the end of a vacation. I start to think about going back to “real life”—to cleaning house and waking up early in the mornings, to hours of emailing and late-night planning for work—and my stomach tightens. But usually, once I get settled back into my home and my work, I find that things are not so bad after all.

In my experience, fear, anxiety, sadness often come with the anticipation of something to come, rather than with the “thing” itself. Knowing this, it makes sense that when we write stories, we can create tension through the buildup of some unknown to come. There are several different kinds of clues we can leave readers, but generally I only teach one or two at a time.

The Broken Vase

I was sitting on the fluffy couch on that blazing afternoon, trying to focus on my homework, but my eyes were glued tight on my brother.

"What are you doing with Mom's GLASS vase, Masrur? You know how important it is to her!" I cried. "Give it to me before it breaks and the flowers get destroyed!" I was ready to run after Masrur. To me it felt like a daily chore.

I hopped off the couch and took a step forward. My brother moved back and a frown spread across his face.

"Mom's not home now so no one is going to stop me," he barked as he turned his back at me. This was one of the times I wanted to strangle Masrur.

"Mom may not be here, but I am. And if that breaks, I'm gonna break you!" I roared.

Masrur just looked at me with a what-ever stare. Before I could blink, he was lost.

I raced to the bottom of the staircase and glared at that ferocious boy. I took a few steps pretending I never saw Masrur. He came up just one itty-bitty step

Figure 6-1 Faizah's draft: using repetition to develop tension

Teaching

Tell

When I conferred with fifth-grader Tywynn, I said, "Another way writers build tension and hook readers into our stories is to hint at before actually

and then I grabbed his foot. Just as soon as I was about to catch his arms, he tared his socks apart, slipped his puny foot out and ran like a cheetah. I remained in pain on the rough, wooden stairs.

"Ha-ha!!!" Masrur guffawed. He formed a huge smile, ear to ear.

Just then, I tip-toed to his toy chest and stole his most favorite toy.

"If you want this toy to survive, then hand me Mom's vase"

Masrur's eyes widened. He was ready to shriek his best. His life was inside that toy. All he was left to say was, "Okay, I'll give you the vase."

"Now that's a good boy. Come down here and return it."

"Wait," I thought. "Masrur never does that. Somethings wrong!" It was too late.

"Catch!" Masrur hollered.

Before I knew it, pink roses and lavender tulips spread across the shiny floor. Water spilled out of the container, forming a thick, glistening stream. My mom's most favorite vase shattered into tiny pieces. So tiny I had to squint to see them.

Figure 6-1 (continued)

revealing a problem. There are several ways to do this, such as choosing very specific action words or letting readers know how characters feel before we know why they feel that way. These kinds of clues build tension because they string readers along, leaving them uncertain yet eager to find out what's going to happen."

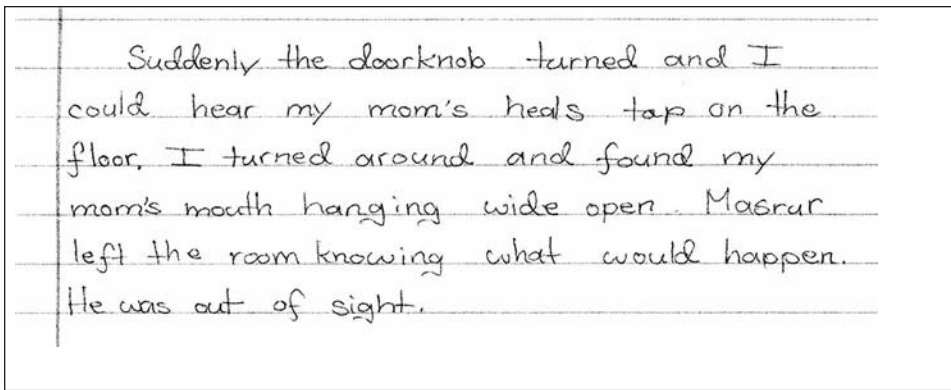


Figure 6-1 (continued)

“In a separate conference with Tywynn, I reminded him of my earlier teaching, after assessing that he internalized it, and I said, “Writers can also use setting details to hint at a problem to come and build tension.”)

Show

“For example, here’s a draft of my story about a girl who is teased at school. I start my story on the playground with her being bullied. But another way to build the tension would be to start before the problem occurs and leave some feeling and word choice clues that hint at something about to happen. To leave a feeling clue, I might have my character say or do or think something that shows her mood. So in my story, since Kassy is being bullied, I might start with a clue that she feels sad or afraid or anxious. I’m thinking about what Kassy might do before even getting to school, or before she even comes face-to-face with her bullies that would show these kinds of feelings. Maybe I could write: *As soon as Kassy woke up, she rolled over and pulled the covers over her head. She wished and wished that she would disappear.* Writing that would let readers know that Kassy feels bad about something, and it would be a clue that something not too good is going to happen in this story.

“I could also think about word choice clues, like really strong and specific verbs that also hint at the mood. So down here, where I write that Kassy walked onto the playground, maybe I could think of a different verb to show she hated going to the playground. I’m trying to think of other verbs that mean something similar to walked but send a different feeling. *Ran?* No. *Skipped?* Definitely not! *Skipped* feels happy, upbeat. *Dragged?* Oh, that could work because it feels negative and would show that she really doesn’t want to go. Or *trudged*, or *forced*. So I could write: *Kassy*

dragged herself onto the playground. Or: Kassy forced herself onto the playground.

“Do you see how I’m building tension by showing how my character feels and choosing very specific words that hint that something is going to happen? In my story, it’s something bad, but in another story, I could hint that something wonderful is going to happen. Clues get readers wondering and reading on to find out how the story will turn out.”

(The next time I conferred with Tywynn and taught him how to use setting details to hint at something to come, I said, “In my story about Kassy being bullied at school, I could write toward the beginning that she watched the sun move through the trees and felt its warmth on her arms, but that would set my readers up to feel good because don’t we usually feel better when it’s warm and sunny outside than when it’s cold and gray?

“Since I want my readers to know that something bad is going to happen, I might instead write something like: *A chill moved through the air. Kassy looked up at the trees and wished they hadn’t lost all their leaves.* Don’t those setting details create a gloomy feeling? They are clues of a problem to come.”)

Active Engagement

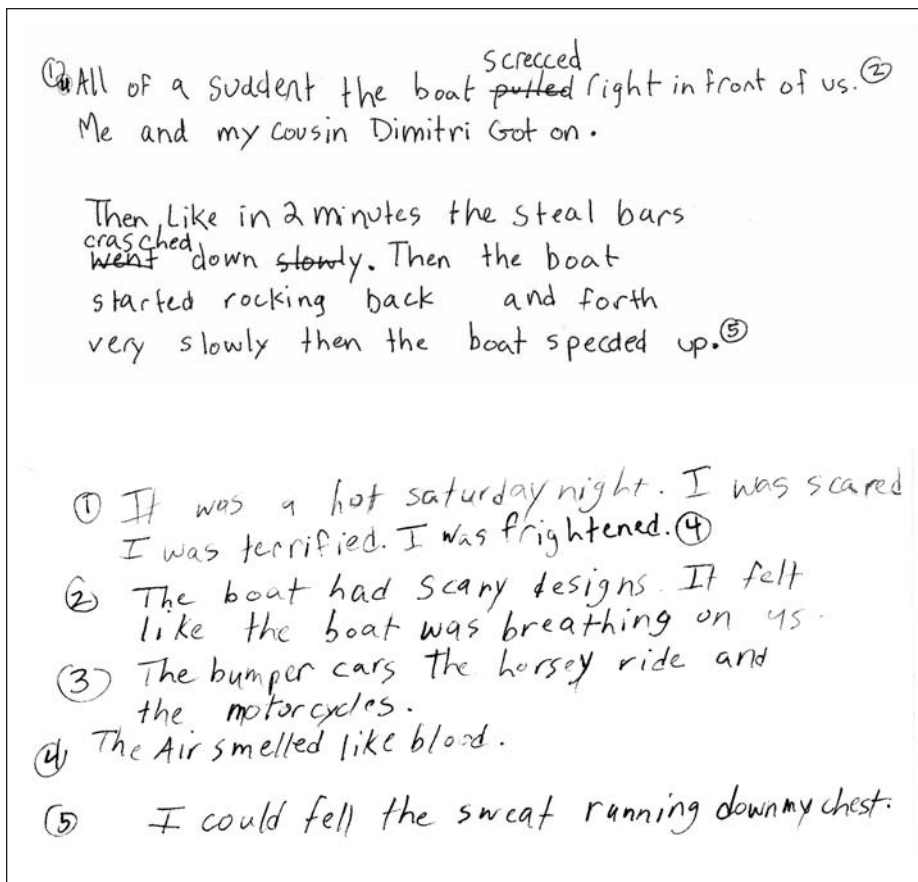
Tell

“Can you practice these strategies in your draft? Try revising your piece by building even more tension, adding in feeling and/or word choice clues about what’s to come. How might that go?”

Coach

To support Tywynn further, I said some of the following:

- “What’s the problem in this story? Point to where readers first discover the problem. Now rewind in time and think about what might happen before this that would show how the characters feel without showing why they feel that way.”
- “Underline your verbs—your action words—in the first few sentences. Brainstorm words that mean the same thing, looking for one that will make your readers feel what you want them to feel.”



It was a hot Saturday night.
I was scared. I was terrified. I
was frightened. The air smelled
like blood. All of a sudden the
boat screeced ~~putted~~ right in
front of us. The boat had scary
designs. It felt like the boat was
breathing on us. Me and my
cousin Dimitri got on. Then in
like 2 minutes the steel bars
crashed ~~went~~ down slowly. Then
the boat started rocking back
and forth very slowly then the
boat speeded up. I could feel
the sweat running down my
chest.

Figure 6-2 Tywynn's revisions: using setting, feeling, and word choice clues to develop tension

- Close your eyes and paint a detailed picture of where your characters are. What's in your picture that reflects how your characters feel?
- How do your characters feel? What kind of weather makes you feel that way?

When I left Tywynn, he revised the beginning of his piece as shown in Figure 6-2.

Tywynn began to build the tension in his original piece, but now that he has more strategies from which to draw, he is able to take the tension to a deeper level. In his first draft, Tywynn relies on repetition alone to build the tension: first the boat rocks violently, later Tywynn screams, even later his cousin feels like throwing up. With repetition, the tension unfolds along with the events themselves.

With Tywynn's revisions, however, he sets up the tension before the problematic event even begins. Tywynn uses setting clues (*It was a hot Saturday*

night. . . . *The air smelled like blood*), feeling clues (*I was scared. I was terrified.*), and word choice clues (*the boat screeched*) to put his readers on edge before we even know why we are on edge—before we know anything about the actual events.

Show Indecision Around a Choice: *One way writers build tension is by showing a character’s indecision around an important choice.*

Mary Ehrenworth taught me that we can develop ideas about the stories we read and the world in which we live by considering and exploring a range of questions about choice: Are characters conflicted about choices they make in the face of struggle, and if so, why? How do their choices affect them and others? What do their choices tell us about the choices we make, or could make, or *should* make in our own lives? Especially (but not only) if we are having these conversations with our students as readers, it makes sense to have similar conversations with them as writers. As our students compose stories, we can teach them that being thoughtful about the choices they have their characters make means being thoughtful about the messages they want to send to readers. We can also teach them that one way to reveal and build tension is to show their characters struggling with difficult decisions.

Teaching

Tell

In a minilesson for my seventh graders, I said, “One way to build tension is to show your characters indecisively moving back and forth between possible ways to respond to a central problem. The more a character struggles, the more the reader worries and wonders about the outcome, which engages readers with the story.

“When you use this strategy, you want to think long and hard about what you want your readers to think is possible *and moral* in the face of certain problems, and have your characters make their decisions accordingly; the outcome of a story inevitably sends a message to readers about people and the world.”

Show

“Let me show you how Lana does this in her story,” I said before showing them one part of a student draft.

I was in the mall with Tiffany and Maryana today. We were going down the escalator when I saw Jenna and Carolina and Ali. Lately, I've been thinking about them a lot. I don't know why. I mean, I've been having a great time with Tiffany and Maryana, but something is missing. We never laugh like I did with Jenna, Carolina and Ali. It's always about looking pretty and new styles, it's not about real friendship.

So, Tiffany and Maryana and I got off the escalator and I waved at Jenna, Carolina and Ali. Tiffany and Maryana scowled. For a second I thought I shouldn't have waved, but then I just ignored them. Jenna and Carolina and Ali walked over to us and said, "Nat, we need to talk." I swallowed hard. I thought about how much I wanted to talk with my old friends, and also, about how much I wanted to stay popular.

"She is not talking to you," Tiffany spat.

"Don't talk for her," Ali shot back.

"Ugh, at least my 'friend' didn't pick someone over me."

"You little . . ."

"Stop! Listen, what do you guys want?" I said.

"What do we want?! We want you to look in the mirror! Jeez Nat, do you get it? You're about to make the ultimate sacrifice. You're on the brink of being sucked in." Carolina was bright red.

Part of me wanted to go with Tiffany and Maryana. Part of me knew they were right. I took a step towards them, but then I stepped back towards my new "friends" and said, "I think you should go."

"Do you see how the narrator in Lana's story is struggling with her decision, wanting and thinking she should do one thing, but then also wanting and thinking something very different? Notice how Lana shows the narrator waffling around her decisions when she writes things like, *For a second I thought I shouldn't have waved, but then I just ignored them*, and, *Part of me knew they were right. I took a step towards them, but then I stepped back towards my new 'friends' and said, 'I think you should go.'*

"We really feel the narrator's struggle because of that waffling, don't we? We really wonder what she'll decide in the end, how she'll feel about her decision, what will happen as a result, all of which keeps us hooked into the story, right? If she just made a decision right way, decided in the first paragraph or two to choose one group of friends over the other and was fine with it, we probably wouldn't think twice about the issue.

"Now Lana needs to decide what she wants her readers to think when they read her story. If the narrator happily chooses her new, popular friends, the story will send a very specific message to readers about what we could

and should do in similar situations, whereas if she chooses her old and true friends, the message will obviously be different.”

Active Engagement

Tell

“I want you to try this now. Think about your own characters and talk briefly with your partner about the choices your characters might make when they come face to face with their problem. Also discuss what you want your readers to think is possible and moral in the face of a certain problem, and how the choice your character ultimately makes will convey this.”

Coach

As I listened to my students work, I said things like:

- “Brainstorm a list of possible choices. Now pick one to start. What are the pros and cons of that decision?” You could show your character struggling by having them think or talk about those pros and cons.
- “What might your character think or say or do that shows him or her veering toward one decision? Now, what’s the next thing they might think or do to show they are second-guessing themselves?”
- “What message will that decision send to your readers? Is that in line with what you want them to think about the problem and how one should respond in a similar situation?”
- “Fill in the rest of this sentence: *He thought to himself, On the one hand. . . .* Now fill in the rest of this sentence: *But then he thought, On the other hand. . . .*”

Before I sent students back to their seats, I reminded them that they knew a variety of ways to develop tension in their stories, and that it was their job to draw from that knowledge in ways that made the most sense for them as writers and for their current stories. Over the next two days, Dean drafted a story about a boy whose peers tease him by calling him gay. One way Dean builds tension and lures his readers into the life of his character is by having his character struggle with and change his mind about how to respond to the problem. Excerpts from Dean’s story are shown in Figure 6–3.

When I read Dean's story, I feel Luis' torment and am tormented in turn. In the first scene, when Luis wonders whether he should try acting like a regular guy, lies there "thinking and thinking" and then, "feeling ashamed and scared" tells Miranda and Lizzy that he can't hang out with them anymore, I feel the familiar knot in my stomach that comes when I have a hard decision to make. In the middle scene, when Luis questions what he's doing on a baseball field, we again sense his uncertainty and

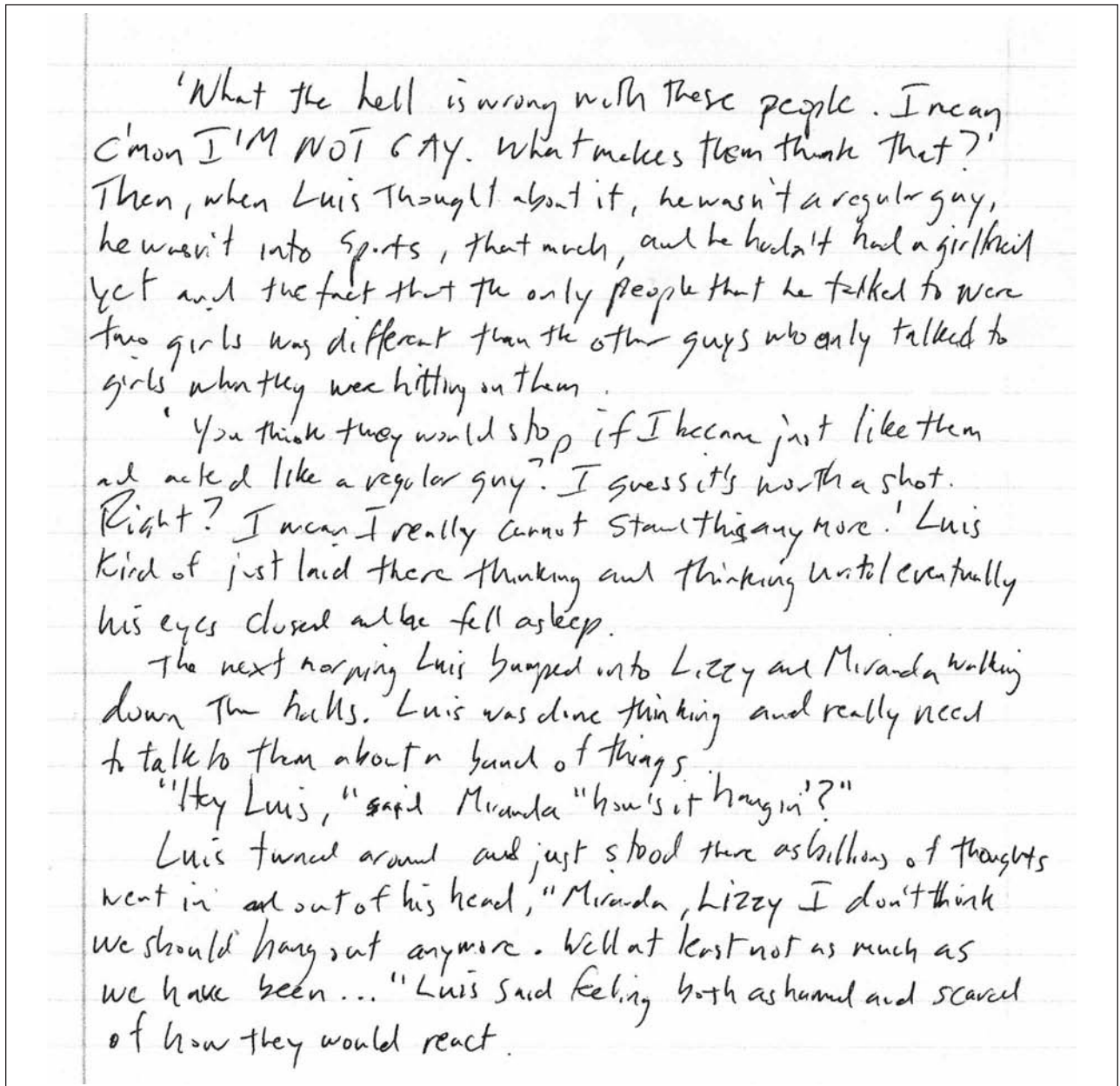


Figure 6-3 Excerpts from Dean's piece: showing character indecision around an important choice to develop tension

'What am I doing here? Luis said to himself as he was sitting by himself on the other side of the bench. 'I'm no jock. I look like an idiot with my cap and sweat pants on. God! I guess everybody was right, I have been hanging with girls too much. I'm on a baseball field and while other guys are talking about sports and girls, I am thinking about how I look. Oh man. Think... think like a regular, sports playing, immature regular guy.

Luis twirled his thumbs, stomped his feet, nodded his head to a beat. Trying to look cool when he felt out of place and alone.

'Why am I here I have two perfectly good friends. I'm so stupid. Did I really think that kids would willingly come hang out with me if I tried out for the baseball team?'

Figure 6-3 (continued)

turmoil. In the last scene, when Luis considers what he would lose if he chose Miranda and Lizzy versus what he would lose if he chose his new, jock "friends," I have the sensation of going up and up on the roller coaster, knowing something big is about to happen. By having his character struggle and vacillate around an important choice, Dean not only takes his character on a roller-coaster, he also takes his readers on one. We experience, alongside Luis, the confusion and uncertainty and anxiety around the problem at hand.

What's more, by thinking long and hard about what choice his character will make in the end, Dean sends an important message to his readers. He lets us know that it is possible to be true to oneself, and to one's friends, in the face of peer pressure, and he encourages us to follow our hearts in situations of similar torment.

Contrast Words and Thoughts: One way writers build tension is by showing a clear difference between what a character says and thinks.

A few weeks ago, I was waiting to speak with a principal when a student came into the office. "Hello," I said. "How're you?"

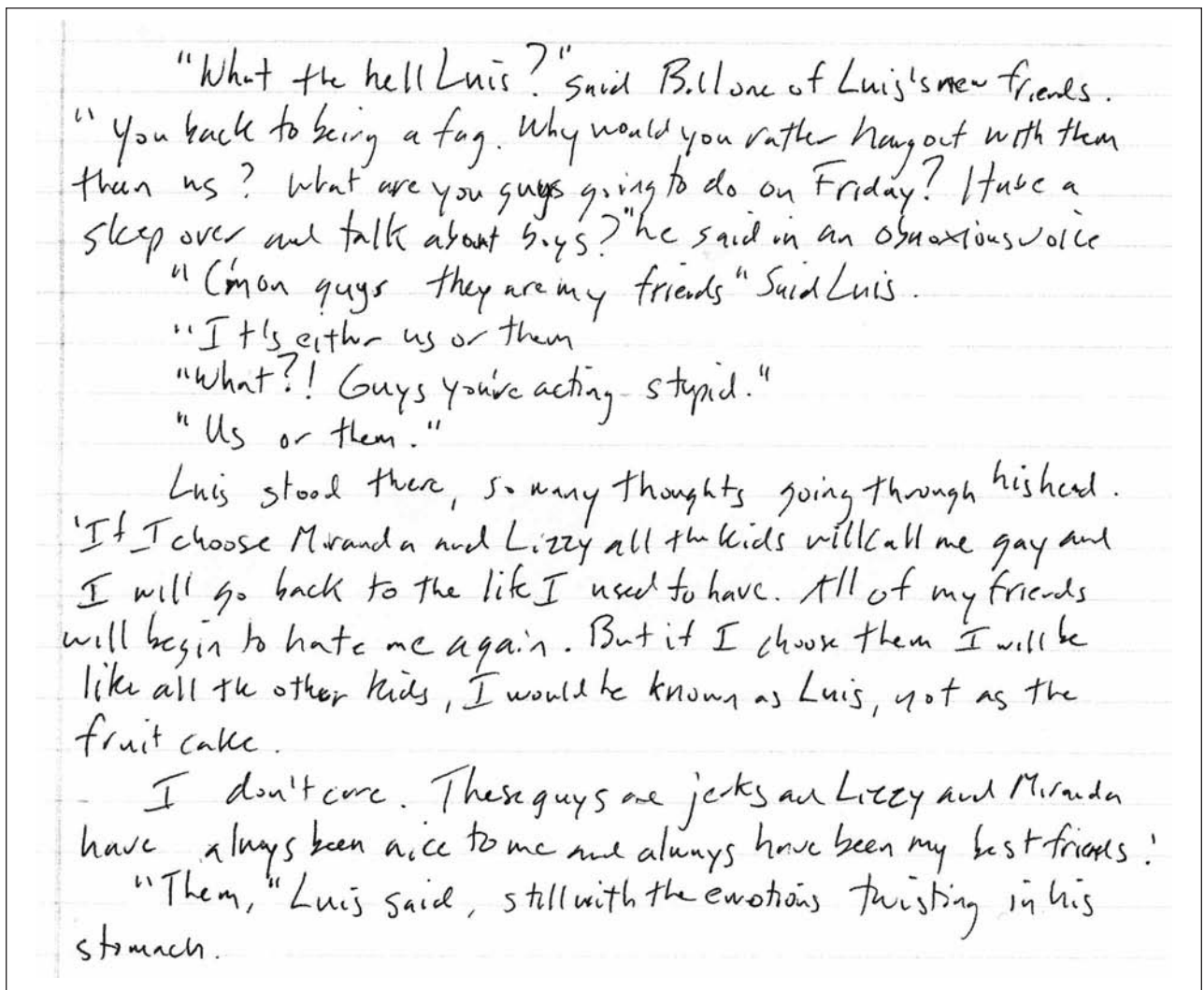


Figure 6-3 (continued)

"Fine," she said. At first I didn't think anything of the interaction and simply went back to my work. But a couple minutes later, I noticed she was staring blankly at the wall.

"Are you sure you're OK?" I asked again.

"I'm fine," she repeated, trying on a little smile to convince me.

"Are you here because you're in trouble?" I persisted.

"I guess," she said. In that moment, the principal came in and asked the student to wait outside for a few minutes.

"I hope you feel better," I whispered after her as she stepped into the hallway. I thought about how often in life we say one thing but think or feel something very different. How many times have we *all* insisted we were fine when, in fact, we were nothing close to it? I thought about how as writers, we have the power to reveal (and of course to create) the discrepancies between our characters' words and thoughts. Doing so

gives readers insight into and builds tension around characters' internal struggles.

Teaching

Tell

When I stopped a fifth-grade class for a teaching share, I said, "You can develop the *internal* tension in your stories as well as the external tension. That's the tension your characters experience on the inside. One way to develop internal tension is to show when your characters say one thing but then think something very different because it shows that the character is conflicted. As you know, when characters face conflict, readers worry and wonder about the outcome, which engages them with the story, and we all want to write stories that engage our readers."

Show

"Alex just tried this. Alex, would you read what you wrote, and class, listen to how he builds tension by having his character say one thing but think something else. He's going to read something from the middle of his story, after two of his characters get into a big fight."

Alex read: "*I'm sorry for yelling,*" I said to my sister. And then I thought, "*But maybe if you weren't so annoying all the time, I wouldn't have to yell.*"

"Writers," I said. "Do you see how Alex starts to resolve the external problem when the narrator apologizes to his sister? At the same time, do you see how he builds tension around an *internal* problem by showing how the narrator thinks something different than what he says? Clearly, the narrator has an unresolved, internal struggle about his relationship with his sister. Knowing this, don't you want to find out more about what happens between Alex and his sister? Alex effectively hooks us into the story."

Active Engagement

Tell

Remember, many of my teaching shares simply have a "tell" and "show." In this case, I said, "Take a moment to read over your drafts so far, and see whether your characters ever say one thing but actually think something dif-

ferent. If you find a place like that and you haven't yet shown this difference, take a minute to add in what your character says that is different than what he thinks, or add in what he thinks that is different than what he says."

Coach

To coach students, I said things like:

- "You might look closely at places where there already is tension of some kind. Look where the problem first gets introduced, or later in the story where a character faces the problem yet again, and see whether your character might say one thing but think something different."
- "You might look closely at places where your characters interact with one another. Do they ever say something that might be different than what they think?"

When Christina drafted her story, she drew from the myriad ways she had learned to develop tension to craft a piece that draws out the conflict and draws in the reader. Excerpts from her piece are shown in Figure 6-4.

Christina uses several strategies to develop the tension in her piece, one of which is to contrast the narrator's words and thoughts. In the beginning of her story, when her mom asks her to get the pudding, the narrator thinks, *I always get the heavy stuff*, but then without resistance responds, *K, ma!* At the end of the story, Christina again contrasts the narrator's words and thoughts when she writes, *I wanted to yell, tell her no. 'Yeah, I'm fine,' I responded.*

By this time, we already know that getting the pudding creates an external problem for the narrator; she falls, drops the bowl, makes a mess. By contrasting the narrator's words and thoughts, Christina creates and conveys an *internal* problem, as well; she illuminates internal tension between the narrator and her family members. Doing so shows more sophistication on the part of the writer and allows for deeper meaning on the part of the reader. We are no longer merely tense about the pudding; we are also tense about the narrator's relationship with her family.

* * *

Life is a journey, and so our stories about life must also be journeys. And every journey has its dips and turns. Whether our students are writing about falling off their bikes or about waiting to open their presents at a birthday

"CHRISTINA!!!! Don't forget the pudding!" my mom reminded me. I always had to get the heavy stuff. . .

"K, ma!" I shouted in response. I went to get the bowl from the 3rd floor fridge.

"Christina!!!!!!" It was my little sister, Stephanie. "Mom said if you don't hurry up you're gonna be in trouble!"

"Okay!" I said.

What does she know? She's the one who's always getting in trouble, I thought. I picked up the bowl.

Suddenly my legs gave way. In less than 20 seconds, I was tumbling down the seemingly-endless stairs. I thought I was going blind.

I shrieked. What was I supposed to do?

My mom was at the bottom, helping Stephanie down the last step. They both looked up, only to see me tumbling down the stairs. A few stairs in front of me, was the 3ft. by 3ft. stair. My savior. I landed on my side.

"CHRISTINA!!!! Are you okay?" My mom asked.

I wanted to yell, tell her no.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I responded, in a harsh voice.

My family still laughs about it . . . I don't understand what is so funny!!!!!!!

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Figure 6-4 Excerpts from Christina's piece: contrasting character's words and thoughts to develop tension

party, we, their readers, should feel a rising and falling of emotion as we move from beginning to end. Just as in life, there should be places in the stories we read where we hunch forward, hold our breath, move quickly to discover what happens next; and there should be places where we sit back, sigh in relief, or laugh out loud with a joyous discovery.



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