

## What do Writing and Origami Have in Common?

SUZANNE L. MEDINA, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINGUEZ HILLS<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Often intermediate/advanced level ESL students do not fully comprehend the importance of logically sequencing their thoughts when writing essays. Perhaps they would better understand if they experienced first-hand the confusion which frequently results when reading an illogically sequenced set of ideas. I wanted to find a creative, yet dramatic way of bringing this point home to my students. Origami, the Japanese art of paper folding, provided me with a solution.

The writer of the origami instructions, like the writer of the English composition, must pay special attention to how information is sequenced. If the ideas are illogically sequenced, the end product will be incomprehensible for the reader. In fact, unclear instructions could make it difficult, if not impossible, to construct the origami craft.

In short, in both cases, it is critical to logically sequence ideas. So what do writing and origami have in common? Quite a bit !

In this activity, students will attempt to construct an origami craft (e.g., a row boat) using two different sets of instructions. The first instructions will be illogically sequenced, while the second set will be properly sequenced. The frustration resulting from following the poorly conceived instructions will help students realize the importance of logically organizing their thoughts when writing essays in English.

### Aim

To make students realize the importance of logically sequencing their thoughts in written essays.

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<sup>1</sup> The author can be reached at the School of Education, California State University-Dominguez Hills, 1000 East Victoria Street, Carson, CA 90747. Home telephone: (310) 514-2944 (on sabbatical this year). Home fax: (310) 514-0396. E-mail: smedina@dhvx20.csudh.edu.

## **Preparation**

1. Gather together the following materials: scissors, scotch tape, colored Xerox paper (yellow and blue); Origami paper (two crafts per student).
2. Locate an origami book. Avoid books which rely primarily upon diagrams. A combination of verbal instructions and diagrams is best. Identify one craft which requires a minimum of seven steps to complete.
3. Create "Blue" (i.e., properly-sequenced) Instructions: Xerox the book's instructions on blue paper. Make one copy for each student.
4. Create "Yellow" (i.e., poorly-sequenced) Instructions: First, make one Xerox copy of the instructions on white paper. Using scissors and scotch tape, cut out each step's diagram and description. Shuffle steps so that they are out of sequence. Tape steps in their new sequence to a clean white paper. Renumber the steps. Using this as your master, make Xerox copies on yellow paper for each student.
5. Gather materials which students will need for this origami craft (i.e., origami paper, both sets of instructions).

## **Procedure**

1. Distribute origami paper and Xerox copies of yellow instructions (i.e., Poorly sequenced version) to students. Direct students to make their craft following the instructions on the sheet. Allow 5-10 minutes. Then have them place their crafts aside.
2. Repeat the process above, this time using the blue instructions, i.e., Properly sequenced version). Allow 5 to 10 minutes for students to complete their crafts.
3. Have students place each craft on top of its instruction sheet. Then ask students several questions to help them make the connection between the craft experience and writing an English essay. This should take no longer than 10 minutes.

Which instruction sheet was the clearest ?

Answer: The instructions on the blue sheets of paper.

Why were the instructions on the blue sheets clearer ?

Answer: The instructions were organized in a logical sequence.

What is the relationship between the sequence of ideas and clarity ? Answer: When ideas are logically sequenced, it is easier to comprehend what is being written. When the ideas are not logically sequenced, the written information is unclear.

How is this related to the essays which you write in English? Answer:

If we want our ideas to be clearly understood by the reader, then we need to logically sequence our ideas.

### **Variations**

This same exercise can be used to teach a related principle: The importance of not leaving "gaps" of information when writing an essay. In Step 3 of the preparation, instead of reorganizing the origami steps, several steps need to be deleted so as to create the "gaps" in the sequence. When discussing the outcome, the teacher will want students to realize that the instructions with missing "gaps" lead to confusion and a lack of clarity.

### **Outcome**

This activity surpassed my expectations. Not only did students learn a valuable lesson, but they enjoyed the hands-on nature of the activity. Furthermore, this simple 30 minute activity greatly facilitated my task. Whenever my students failed to logically sequence their ideas in essays, I would refer back to the origami activity. I simply reminded them of the feelings of confusion which they experienced from reading illogically sequenced origami instructions. Upon hearing this, students would respond immediately by carefully revising their essays. Not only was there a new-found understanding of the importance of sequencing ideas logically, but an energy and motivation to correct the situation. I had not witnessed this before.