

by Vivian F. Daughtry

Relay Races ... in the English Classroom

Two of the most difficult aspects of the teaching job are figuring out what to do when there are odd bits of time left at the end of the class period and knowing how to perk students up when a lesson goes flat. A few idle minutes can quickly turn to chaos if the teacher is unprepared (or underprepared).

This activity solves both problems. The basic concept is borrowed from the track and field or swim team concept of the relay race. Who can forget the excitement of Michael Phelps or Usain Bolt, and the drama of the baton exchanges of Olympic relay races? However, since the Olympians are probably unavailable, we *can* bring in pictures or posters of them to arouse interest in this relay-style activity. In this version, students work from their desks (either quietly or with talking allowed) to complete assigned tasks as quickly as possible. Added bonuses include building community spirit, working cooperatively, attending to details, and practicing specific skills.

To begin, I prepare copies of short ‘problems’ (editing topics work well, as do short answer questions and names, dates, and places) that can be solved in a few seconds to keep the activity moving along. Grammar and usage exercises work very well in

relay races. For example, the focus can be on punctuation with a difficulty level from the very simple—adding end marks to sentences—to complex—punctuating compound-complex sentences containing conjunctive adverbs. A sample grammar relay that I have used in English 111, a college composition class, is appended.

Lynne Truss, in her New York Times best-seller *Eats Shoots and Leaves*, acknowledges the difficulty of being a grammar stickler today when so many have become slack about many Edited American English conventions of usage. She writes, “True, one occasionally hears a marvelous punctuation-fan joke about a panda who ‘eats, shoots and leaves,’ but in

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general the stickler’s exquisite sensibilities are assaulted from all sides, causing feelings of panic and isolation (Truss 2).” And although Truss may be a bit over the top for many, using editing tasks for relay race offers students an opportunity to better understand the importance of conventions of usage for communication across varying populations. More usefully, the Truss book comes with a punctuation repair kit that includes stickers of oversized periods, commas, apostrophes and semi-colons that can be used in any editing activity. Students

should, however, be reminded that outside of the classroom (and inside it, too, for that matter), most people do not appreciate being corrected. As an egregious example, two self-styled members of the grammar police were banned from national parks for one year for vandalizing an historic marker (using white-out to make corrections) at the Grand Canyon (“Vandals in Hot Water ...”).

Before I start a relay race activity, I even out the rows if possible. If that is not possible, students take turns serving as a timekeeper, collecting the sheets, or helping check the finished products. If all students need to do the exercise, I sometimes add a bonus sentence or two

so that everyone can participate. The last person in the row who completes the sheet is responsible for bringing it to the teacher, who then records the time on the top of the page. The row that finishes first with the most correct answers sometimes wins bonus points on the next test or quiz.

To add individual accountability, I also sometimes have students initial each sentence they complete. For cooperative learning when a larger block of time is available, I place students in circles, have each student complete one sentence, and then pass the sheet to the next student. Each student in the circle checks the work for accuracy before the group turns it in. The speed element can be removed and all of the credit depends on accuracy. Students in the group who find errors also have to explain the mistake to

the group and suggest corrections. Everyone in the group signs the bottom of the sheet to indicate agreement, and everyone earns the same grade or bonus points.

English relay races can be adapted for use from the elementary grades through college composition classes. Only a few sheets of paper are needed (as many sheets

as there are rows or groups), and the activity can be saved to perk students up on a rainy day, to review before a test, or to fill in the odd bits of time that accumulate when a lesson ends early. Teachers are limited only by their imaginations when it comes to relays. For example, creative writing classes can

use relays to write stories or essays cooperatively with an end product of one sentence per group, one scene or paragraph per group, or even one entire story or essay per group. Finally, for the teacher, added incentives include such advantages as having fewer total papers to grade, having students more fully engaged, having better control over the time devoted to a specific task, having an activity that requires minimal preparation, and best of all, making learning more fun.

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Works Cited

- Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. New York: Gotham Books, 2003.
“Vandals in Hot Water for ‘Fixing’ Typos on Historic Grand Canyon Sign.”²⁷ August 2008 < <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,409382,00.html>>.

Appendix

Grammar and Punctuation Relay
Ms. V. F. Daughtry, Instructor

Follow the directions below to complete this sheet and earn extra points.

Directions: Each person in a row will write his or her name in front of one sentence, follow the directions to complete the sentence, and then pass the sheet back to the next person. If you do not know how to complete any of the sentences, write your name at the bottom of the sheet, write the word “pass” beside your name, and hand the sheet back to the next person. The first row to correctly edit all the sentences wins an extra three points on the next essay. Students who do not complete a sentence do not receive points.

Names:	Sentences:
	1. _____ I completed my essay. (Add an introductory adverbial clause)
	2. _____ Jane broke the heel on her shoe. (Add an introductory participial phrase)
	3. I left my assignment _____. (Add a prepositional phrase)
	4. I started a new job today _____ I don't really like it. (Join these sentences with a conjunction and appropriate punctuation)
	5. _____ I am making better grades now than I did in high school. (Add an introductory adverbial clause)
	6. I will probably make an “A” on the next assignment _____ _____ (Add an adjective clause)

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