

Author's Stylebook: Pacing

ACTIVITY
2.5

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PLAN

Materials: various commercials from YouTube
Suggested Pacing: 1.5 50-minute class periods plus homework

TEACH

- 1 Remind students that this activity is part of a series of lessons that will provide them the opportunity to study mentor texts and to practice the technique in their own writing. The focus of this activity is pacing.
- 2 Review the term *narrative pacing* and discuss the impact of pacing on a narrative. Use several commercials to look at the impact of pacing on the audience. Use commercials that are fast-paced or slow-paced so students can understand the effect of pacing on audience reaction.
- 3 Read the Preview and the Setting a Purpose for Reading sections with your students. Help them understand the instructions for annotating the pacing of the essay, as well as for circling unfamiliar words. Explain to students that as they read the narrative this first time, they should annotate where the rhythm of the writing changes. Students should also pay attention and note how these changes affect the narrative pace.
- 4 **FIRST READ:** Based on the complexity of the passage and your knowledge of your students, you may choose to conduct the first reading in a variety of ways:

- independent reading
- paired reading
- small-group reading
- read aloud

Text Complexity

Overall: Complex
Lexile: 1000L
Qualitative: Moderate Difficulty
Task: Moderate (Analyze)

- 5 Direct students' attention to the Grammar & Usage feature, and discuss the information about the semicolon. After students read this text, return to this page and have them review and respond to the note. Then discuss how the writer's use of semicolons affects the pace of the essay.

Learning Targets

- Analyze the narrative techniques writers use to create a sense of pacing in a narrative.
- Apply pacing to my own writing.

Pacing

Narrative pacing is an important part of telling a good story. A writer controls the rhythm of a narrative with specific choices in sentence length, word choice, and details. For example, a series of short sentences can heighten suspense and increase the pace, while a series of long sentences may slow the pace.

Preview

In this activity, you will read an essay and analyze its pacing. In addition, you will write your own narrative using the techniques you have learned so far in this unit.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

- As you read the following essay, mark the text and write notes about where the pacing or rhythm of the narrative changes and how these changes in pacing affect you as a reader.
- Circle unknown words and phrases. Try to determine the meaning of the words by using context clues, word parts, or a dictionary.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Matthews is the author of the memoir *Ace of Spades* published in 2007 by Henry Holt and Co. He is the son of an African American father and a Jewish mother. In his memoir, Matthews tells of growing up racially mixed in Baltimore, Maryland during the 1970s and '80s. The following essay was adapted from his memoir and printed in *The New York Times Magazine* on January 21, 2007.

Essay

Pick One

by David Matthews
The New York Times

1 In 1977, when I was nine, my father and I moved away from the protected Maryland suburbs of Washington—and away from his latest wife, my latest stepmother—to my grandmother's apartment in inner-city Baltimore. I had never seen so many houses connected to one another, block after block, nor so many people on streets, marble stoops and corners. Many of those people, I could not help noticing, were black. I had never seen so many black people in all my life.

LEARNING STRATEGIES:
Graphic Organizer, Think-Pair-Share, Marking the Text

Literary Terms

Narrative pacing refers to the speed at which a narrative moves. A writer slows pacing with more details and longer sentences. Fewer details and shorter sentences have the effect of increasing the pace.

GRAMMAR & USAGE Semicolon

Writers use a semicolon to join independent clauses when two or more clauses are of equal importance. In paragraph 2, notice the sentence "I was black, too, though I didn't look it; and I was white, though I wasn't quite." In this sentence, the two independent clauses are about two aspects of the same problem. In paragraph 7, notice the sentence "I didn't contemplate the segregation; it was simply part of the new physical geography, and I was no explorer; I was a weak-kneed outsider, a yellowed freak." How do the independent clauses relate to one another?

My Notes

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Focus Standards:

RI.9–10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

W.9–10.3b: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

L.9–10.2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Additional Standards Addressed:

W.9–10.3a; W.9–10.3c; W.9–10.3d; W.9–10.4; W.9–10.9; W.9–10.10; SL.9–10.1a; SL.9–10.1c; SL.9–10.6; L.9–10.2a; L.9–10.4; L.9–10.6

- 6** As students are reading, monitor their progress. Be sure they are engaged with the text and annotating the narrative pacing. Evaluate whether the selected reading mode is effective.
- 7** Have students review the information in the Grammar & Usage feature on the use of the dash. Ask students to discuss whether using a dash speeds up or slows down the pace, and give evidence for their choice by referring to the text. Remind students to apply this information as they respond to the narrative writing prompt on page 127.

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GRAMMAR & USAGE

Dashes

Dashes can provide emphasis. Notice the dash used in this sentence: "I froze, and said nothing—for the time being." Here, the phrase "for the time being" is emphasized. Dashes can also set off parenthetical information, as in this sentence: "And though I was used to some measure of instability—various apartments, sundry stepmothers and girlfriends—I had always gone to the same redbrick single-level school." With this usage, the dash places more emphasis on the set-off content than parentheses would do.

- render:** pronounce
- equine:** horselike
- stumped:** baffled
- partisan:** of one belief
- avidity:** eagerness
- clause:** part of a legal document

My Notes

vicarious: lived through another person

2 I was black, too, though I didn't look it; and I was white, though I wasn't quite. My mother, a woman I'd never really met, was white and Jewish, and my father was a black man who, though outwardly hued like weak coffee, was—as I grew to learn—stridently black nationalist in his views and counted Malcolm X¹ and James Baldwin² among his friends. I was neither blessed nor cursed, depending on how you looked at it, with skin milky enough to classify me as white or swarthy enough to **render** me black. But before moving from our integrated and idyllic neighborhood, I really knew nothing of "race." I was pretty much just a kid, my full-time gig. And though I was used to some measure of instability—various apartments, sundry stepmothers and girlfriends—I had always gone to the same redbrick single-level school. Nothing prepared me for walking into that public-school classroom, already three weeks into fourth grade. I had never felt so utterly on my own.

3 Mrs. Eberhard, my new homeroom teacher, made an introduction of sorts, and every student turned around to study me. The black kids, who made up more than 80 percent of the school's population, ranged in shades from butterscotch to Belgian chocolate, but none had my sallow complexion, nor my fine, limp hair. And the white kids, a salting of red and alabaster faces, had noses that were tapered and blunted, free of the slightly **equine** flare of my own, and lips that unobtrusively parted their mouths, in contrast to the thickened slabs I sucked between my teeth.

4 In the hallway, on the way to class, black and white kids alike herded around me. Then the question came: "What are you?"

5 I was **stumped**. No one had ever asked what I was before. It came buzzing at me again, like a hornet shaken from its hive. The kids surrounded me, pressing me into a wall of lockers. What are you? Hey, he won't answer us. Look at me. What are you? He's black. He looks white! No way, he's too dark. Maybe he's Chinese!

6 They were rigidly **partisan**. The only thing that unified them was their inquisitiveness. And I had a hunch, based on their **avidity**, that the question had a wrong answer. There was black or white. Pick one. Nowhere in their ringing questions was the elastic **clause**, mixed. The choice was both necessary and impossible: identify myself or have it done for me. I froze, and said nothing—for the time being.

7 At lunchtime that first day, teetering on the edge of the cafeteria, my eyes scanned the room and saw an island of white kids in a sea of black faces. I didn't contemplate the segregation; it was simply part of the new physical geography, and I was no explorer; I was a weak-kneed outsider, a yellowed freak.

8 In some way I wasn't fully aware of, urban black people scared me. I didn't know how to play the dozens or do double Dutch. I didn't know the one about how your mama's so dumb she failed her pap test. I didn't know that with the wrong intonation, or the wrong addressee, any mention of one's mama could lead to a table-clearing brawl. The black kids at school carried a loose, effortless charge that crackled through their interactions. They were alive and cool. The only experience I had with cool had been **vicarious**, watching my father and his bebop-era revolutionary friends, and feeling their vague sense of disappointment when I couldn't mimic their behavior. The black kids reminded me of home, but the white kids reminded me of myself, the me I saw staring back in the mirror. On that day, I came to believe that if I had said I was black, I would have had to spend the rest of my life convincing my own people.

¹ **Malcolm X** (1925–1965) was an African American minister and civil rights activist who was assassinated in 1965.

² **James Baldwin** (1924–1987) was an African American writer and social critic.

SCAFFOLDING THE TEXT-DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

- 1. Key Ideas and Details (RI.9–10.3) What contrast does Matthews make between his old neighborhood and his new one? When Matthews discusses his old neighborhood, what words does he use to describe it? How is the description of the way the students in his new school focus on the question of his race different from that situation?**
- 2. Craft and Structure (RI.9–10.6) Identify Matthews's purpose in telling this story from**

his childhood. How does his use of narrative elements in the essay help him to achieve his purpose? To identify Matthews's purpose, think about what all the details of his first day in his new school focus on. Then reread the last paragraph. What decision does he make in his last paragraph, and how does he word that decision? Next, reread the text and focus on the narrative details of indirect dialogue and description. How do those details help to make his main point?

9 Lunch tray in hand, I made a final and (at least I like to tell myself) psychologically logical choice, one I would live with, and wrestle with, for a full decade to come: I headed toward the kids who looked most like me. Goofy bell-bottoms and matching Garanimals? Check. Seventies mop-top? Check. Then a ruddy boy with blond bangs lopped off at the eyebrows looked up from his Fantastic Four comic book, caught my eye across the cafeteria, scooped over in his seat and nodded me over.

10 That was it. By the code of the cafeteria table, which was just as binding in that time and place as the laws of Jim Crow³ or Soweto⁴, I was white.

Second Read

- Reread the essay to answer these text-dependent questions.
- Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

1. **Key Ideas and Details:** What contrast does Matthews make between his old neighborhood and his new one?

Matthews writes that his old neighborhood was integrated, so he didn't have to think about his race at school. In contrast, in his new neighborhood, the students segregate themselves in groups of black and white kids. RI.9–10.3

2. **Craft and Structure:** Identify Matthews's purpose in telling this story from his childhood. How does his use of narrative elements in the essay help him to achieve his purpose?

Matthews's purpose is to show that in 1977, social pressure forced him to identify as a white person although he was of mixed race. His use of narrative elements, such as indirect dialogue and description, help show how rigid the other students were. RI.9–10.6

3. **Knowledge and Ideas:** Matthews makes the point that the "code of the cafeteria table ... was just as binding in that time and place as the laws of Jim Crow or Soweto." During the 20th century, the laws Matthews refers to enforced segregation of black and white people in the United States and South Africa. Does his essay prove that his comparison is valid?

Matthews says that "Nowhere in their ringing questions was the elastic clause, mixed," which would have allowed him to give the correct answer. Instead, they are unified in forcing him to choose. He also says he had to "identify myself or have it done for me." Furthermore, he describes the segregation in the cafeteria, which again forces him to make a choice. Although the laws he is discussing are social rather than political, his essay does prove that his comparison is valid. RI.9–10.8

³ **Jim Crow** is a name given to laws that enforced racial segregation in the United States from after the Civil War until 1965.

⁴ **Soweto** is a part of a city in South Africa where black Africans lived under the policy of apartheid.

My Notes

Blank lined area for taking notes.

8 After the first reading, ask students to **share** their thinking about the essay with a partner. Discuss the parts of the essay that are telling a story rather than explaining thinking. Ask students to focus on the one piece of dialogue. How does this dialogue become the impetus for the entire essay?

9 Based on the observations you made during the first reading, you may want to adjust the reading mode. For example, you may decide for the second reading to read aloud certain complex passages, or you may group students differently.

10 **SECOND READ:** During the second reading, students will be returning to the text to answer the text-dependent comprehension questions. You may choose to have students **reread** and work on the questions in a variety of ways:

- independently
- in pairs
- in small groups
- together as a class

11 Have students answer the text-dependent questions. If they have difficulty, scaffold the questions by rephrasing them or breaking them down into smaller parts. See the Scaffolding the Text-Dependent Questions boxes for suggestions.

SCAFFOLDING THE TEXT-DEPENDENT QUESTIONS

3. **Knowledge and Ideas (RI.9–10.8)** Matthews makes the point that the "code of the cafeteria table ... was just as binding in that time and place as the laws of Jim Crow or Soweto." During the 20th century, the laws Matthews refers to enforced segregation of black and white people in the United States and South Africa. Does his essay prove that his comparison is valid?

The question asks if Matthews shows that the segregation in his new school is as binding as if it were enforced by laws, rather than society. To answer that question, consider: What is the one thing that his classmates want to know about him? Do all the students want to know, or just some of them? How is the seating arranged in the cafeteria?

