

A Fourth Grade Nevada “Sparkler”

A *sparkler* is not a perfect piece of writing, but it “shines” in small ways that all students can both identify and discuss. When students talk about *sparkling* techniques used by other student writers, they are more likely to try these techniques in their own drafts.

Ernesto, a Nevada fourth grader, prepared for his state writing examination by composing and revising the following piece of narrative writing nine months before having to take his test as a fifth grader. This was the first of three practice prompts Ernesto’s fourth grade teacher assigned him.



Read the prompt carefully. Then read Ernesto’s response. Be prepared to talk about where his writing techniques *sparkle* as well as where Ernesto might make the writing even better if he wrote just one more draft.

Ernesto’s Practice Prompt: *Think of something you have done that brought you satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment. Tell a story about this activity or event.*

Ernesto’s title: “Into the Mine”

Two years ago during Spring break my mom and I went to visit my dad in Zacateras, Mexico. My dad is a general manager for a silver mining company. One day he wanted to take us down in one of the mines. We all put on our gear, but mine didn’t fit! The miners gave me the smallest suit they could find. We then had to go outside and step into the elevator into the mine. I looked down and said, “That is a long way down.” My dad said that it was 425 meters down. We reached our tunnel at 275 meters.

When I got off, my boots just started squishing in the mud. The cave was dripping with water. The blue tint on the walls was copper. When I saw a pick-axe on the ground I just immediately started working on the walls. In the middle of my excavating, one of the miners gave me a cylinder shaped stick and said, “Here’s some dynamite.” I could tell by the look on my mom’s face that she was not happy.

My dad said it was time to leave and we got on the elevator again. This time it was crashing against the wall making a “screeeeech!” sound. We got to the surface and had to take off our gear. I had so much fun, and all the guys there are really nice! I hope I can do it again soon!

An interactive task for other fourth graders: Ernesto’s **idea development** really stands out in this piece of writing because he includes both explanations and memorable details that assist the reader’s understanding of an event not many experienced before. Sometimes writers add details that end up sounding like a simple list of sensory details: *It smelled like ____.* *It felt like ____.* *It sounded like ____.* Ernesto writes with sensory details in a way that sounds completely natural. Highlight the sensory details you find in Ernesto’s writing sample.

Challenge: Can you add/change sensory details to your writing and make them sound as natural as Ernesto’s?

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Kate, a Nevada fourth grader, prepared for her state writing examination by composing and revising the following piece of narrative writing nine months before having to take her test as a fifth grader. This was the first of three practice prompts Kate’s fourth grade teacher assigned her.



Read the prompt carefully. Then read Kate’s response. Be prepared to talk about where her writing techniques *sparkle* as well as where Amber might make the writing even better if she wrote just one more draft.

Kate’s Practice Prompt: *Think of something you have done that brought you satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment. Tell a story about this activity or event.*

Kate’s title: “The Time I Learned to Hula-hoop”

When I started learning to hula-hoop, I didn’t have my own hula-hoop. On my 8th birthday, my mom got me one. It was black with green stripes. And one day I went to Reno Art Town. They were having a Hoop Jam is what they called it. I could do only one trick and that was having one hula-hoop on my waist and one on my palm.

Then Sarah, an adult I know, showed me how to do the Figure Eight with my hula-hoop. It’s when you make a figure eight with your hula-hoop! It took me a long time to learn it. Next, she showed me the Slinky. I did that in two tries. After that, I went down to the Reno River. I taught an adult how to hula-hoop.

What was really cool is that I kept the hula-hoop on my waist for eight minutes straight on my first try!

An interactive task for other fourth graders: Kate shows **organizational** skills with her use of interesting transition words throughout this piece of writing. In addition, her varied use of both short and long sentences will go a long way in helping her earn an even better **conventions** score on the state test. Highlight three or four transitional words or phrases that help the reader move through Kate’s story’s events smoothly. Then, find one place where Kate uses a complex sentence alongside a short sentence to create an interesting rhythm.

Challenge: Compare the transitions you used in your rough draft to the ones Kate used. Add/change some of your transitions so your story moves smoothly from event to event.

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Joseph, a Nevada fourth grader, prepared for his state writing examination by composing and revising the following piece of narrative writing nine months before having to take his test as a fifth grader. This was the first of three practice prompts Joseph’s fourth grade teacher assigned him.

Read the prompt carefully. Then read Joseph’s response. Be prepared to talk about where his writing techniques *sparkle* as well as where Joseph might make the writing even better if he wrote just one more draft.



Joseph’s Practice Prompt: *Think of something you have done that brought you satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment. Tell a story about this activity or event.*

Joseph’s title: “Joseph, we have Liftoff!”

About a year ago, when my father and I were at the model shop, something caught my eye. A kit for building a bright orange rocket, engines and all! I plucked it off the shelf, walked over to Dad. “Please,” I said, “May I get this?” And after a bit of debating, he said yes.

So I spent the remainder of the afternoon putting together all the bits and pieces of the rocket. Then the next day, I walked over to a wide, grassy field and launched my creation, which I called the Hermes moon lander, into the air. It was a chilly morning with a few clouds and no wind, or if so only a light breeze. I set down the launchpad, attached my rocket, and turned the key, and as I watched Hermes lift into the sky, my father said “Joseph, we have liftoff!”

An interactive task for other fourth graders: Joseph balances both **voice** and **idea development** with this piece of writing. Using dialogue adds voice to any writing sample, but when students add too much dialogue, they sometimes forget to add enough descriptions and details. This is an excellent sample that shows how a small amount of dialogue alongside strong and memorable details makes an overall better piece of writing. Highlight two or three details from Joseph’s writing that you think will be remembered by readers after they put the sample away. Compare your highlights with another student in your class.

Challenge: Find two places to add or change details (so they’re more memorable) to your brainstorm or rough draft, and find two places where a small piece of interesting dialogue might improve your voice.

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Tucker, a Nevada fourth grader, prepared for his state writing examination by composing and revising the following piece of narrative writing nine months before having to take his test as a fifth grader. This was the first of three practice prompts Tucker’s fourth grade teacher assigned him.

Read the prompt carefully. Then read Tucker’s response. Be prepared to talk about where his writing techniques *sparkle* as well as where Tucker might make the writing even better if he wrote just one more draft.



Tucker’s Practice Prompt: *Think of something you have done that brought you satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment. Tell a story about this activity or event.*

Tucker’s title: “Soccer Game”

On April 23, I never thought it would happen. At about 11 o’clock I rushed into my room, threw on my soccer uniform, grabbed my soccer ball, ran out the door, hopped into the car, and we drove away. In the car I thought to myself what might happen at soccer.

When we got there, I hopped out of my car and ran up to all my teammates. We ran to my coach and he assigned us to positions. I was assigned to goalie. With adrenaline rushing, the other team started with the kickoff. The ball went out of bounds. It was a corner kick. I watched as a kid from the other team ran up to the ball. I got ready. He kicked the ball and it curved into the goalie box. I jumped up and caught it. The crowd went crazy.

The next half came and I was assigned to midfield. My team started off. I watched as the ball was passed from teammate to teammate. The ball was passed to me. I ran up to the goal. I kicked and scored!

My team had won the soccer game for the first time ever! We had won!

An interactive task for other fourth graders: Tucker uses strong action verbs throughout his writing sample, and these go a long way in boosting his **voice**. In addition, his introduction invites you in by making you wonder about something. His conclusion makes sure that you understand what he had been referring to in that first sentence; this really helps his writing’s **organization**. Highlight Tucker’s five best action words. Compare your highlights to a friend’s highlights.

Challenge: Re-examine the introduction and conclusion on your rough draft. Can you find a way to make them connect--like Tucker did—when you revise? Also, are there sentences that would be improved if you added/changed their verbs to more interesting actions?