

## Bertrand Russell - Teaching tips

Narrative topics — stories and such — have a natural chronological organization so students usually do not have much trouble organizing their writing. Thus, it is usually not as important for the students to have done a lot of preparation before writing a summary of a story.

However, essay topics have no such natural organization. With such topics, students often have a great deal of trouble organizing their writing — especially in a second language.

Thus, it is quite important that much of the following reading lesson will also serve to prepare the students to write — in a way, this is a bonus we receive for planning ahead.

When we prepared this material, we had matriculation or even teacher training college students in mind.

But then, as always, you know best what level and class it is suitable for.

Prepare students to read Bertrand Russell's speech by talking about his life and then by examining the title of the speech.

In Bertrand Russell's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, as its title suggests, he tells about what he tried to accomplish in his life.

To prepare the class to read it, tell them a little about his life and work. For example, tell them that he gained international fame in two areas.

Early in his life, he became famous for his work on mathematics and in philosophy. Together with Alfred North Whitehead, he did pioneering work on mathematical theory.

In the later years of his life, Russell devoted much of his energy to the cause of world peace.

Next, put the title of his speech on the board and examine it — a good strategy that can be used with most texts.

Even if we did not know that he is giving a speech accepting the Nobel Prize, the title “What I have lived for” suggests that Russell will tell us what he has spent his life trying to do.

Handout Student Worksheet 1, and have the students do the activity in pairs. While they are working, write the title and the first line of his speech on the board — the title and the first line are also on the Student Worksheet 1.

If you intend to have the students do the writing activity at the end of the lesson, this is a good time to provide them with some short-term motivation by letting them know that later they will have to write a short summary of Russell's speech (without notes!).

After the students have completed Student Worksheet 1, discuss the answers together.

Handout out Russell's speech and Student Worksheet 2, and have the class work through Activity 1, again in pairs. After they have completed this, discuss the results together.

At this point, you need to decide if the outlining activity is going to be done individually, in pairs, or by the class as a whole (or, of course, skipped entirely). The purpose of this activity is to make the organization of the essay even clearer, in preparation for the writing that they will do at the very end of lesson.

The vocabulary exercise can be skipped, if you wish, without impairing the flow of the lesson.

Postscript: We have made some changes in the Bertrand Russell speech. For this, we make no apology; without doubt, the original is more moving, more poetic, and better written. But, without changes, it would not be as useful for teaching, and, teaching is what we are trying to do, isn't it?

## Student worksheet 1

In pairs, examine the title and the first line of Bertrand Russell's speech and try to predict what can about what he will say and how he will organize it. Use the questions below as a guide.

### What I Have Lived For

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the desire for love, the search for knowledge, and great sadness at the suffering of mankind. ...

1. What has Russell lived for? That is, what has governed his life?
2. What are Russell's 'three passions'? That is, what are his three topics?
3. You can make some guesses about the overall organization of the speech from the order in which Russell introduces the three topics. Which one does he mention first, which second, and which third?
4. From the order that he mentions the three passions in the first line, what order do you think that he will mention them in the speech?
5. From the order in which he first mentioned the three topics, which one of the three do you think is most important to Russell? Love? Knowledge? Or, human suffering?

## Student worksheet 2

### Activity 1: Overall organization of the essay

1. One sentence summarizes the main idea of the whole essay.
  - a. Where is it found?
  - b. What two words in this sentence suggest how the essay will be organized? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - c. What three phrases give more details about the two words you listed to answer question (b)?  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, and  
\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.
2. In a word or so, what is the main idea of the second paragraph?
3. In a word or so, what is the main idea of the third paragraph?
4. In a phrase, what is the main idea of the fourth paragraph?
5. In various places, Russell evaluates his achievements.
  - a. Where does he evaluate his search for love? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Where does he evaluate his search for knowledge? \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. Where does he evaluate his attempts to lessen the suffering of mankind? \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Where does he evaluate his life as a whole? \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity 2: Outlining (optional)

Prepare a quick, informal outline of the main ideas in Russell's speech. (Note to the teacher: This activity may be done either individually, in pairs, or by the class as a whole).

### Activity 3: Vocabulary

Sometimes, with the help of hints in the text, you can guess the meaning of a difficult word. In this exercise, you will have to examine how words and phrases are used in this essay and then choose the correct meaning of the word.

Instructions:

- (1) Find each of the words and phrases from Column A in the essay and then underline them twice.
- (2) Then, study each word or phrase in the sentence that you found it in and decide its meaning. Choose the meaning from Column B that best describes the way the word is used in the essay. Put the appropriate letter in the blank spaces.

|                        |    |  |
|------------------------|----|--|
| _____ brings ecstasy   | a. | guided how he lived                      |
| _____ edge of despair  | c. | a very great pleasure                    |
| _____ governed my life | e. | things not understood                    |
| _____ the mysteries    | f. | close to extreme sadness                 |
| _____ a heavy burden   | d. | without enough food                      |
| _____ in famine        | b. | something that makes life more difficult |

**Activity 4: Writing assignment**

Imagine that you actually heard Bertrand Russell give his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, but you were the only one from your class who was present. Write up a short description of the speech for the rest of the class. (150 words or less)

# What I Have Lived For

Bertrand Russell

Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the desire for love, the search for knowledge, and great sadness at the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have sent me from one task to another, over a deep ocean of sadness, to the very edge of despair.

I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy — a pleasure so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness — that terrible loneliness that exists in the absence of love. I have sought it, finally, because in love I have seen a small part of the vision of heaven that saints and poets have imagined. This is what I sought, and though it might seem too good for human life, this is what — at last — I have found.

With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to understand the mysteries of mathematics. A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.

Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always great sadness brought me back to earth. Sounds of cries of pain fill my heart. Children in famine, victims being tortured, helpless old people a heavy burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make human life less than it should be. I want to lessen the suffering of mankind, but I cannot, and I too suffer.

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

An Example:

In their book for intermediate learners *Reading on Purpose*, Fraida Dubin and Elite Olshtain show what can be done using the following passage from Bertrand Russell. Even the physical format is worth noting:

- (1) The paragraphs have been numbered for easy reference, a procedure which solves a host of problems for the teacher and the students.
- (2) For vocabulary comprehension, difficult words have been underlined, with the meanings of the underlined words listed at the end of the passage. [Note: the underlining is not shown below.] Authentic passages seldom come with a carefully limited vocabulary.

The lesson itself begins with two pre-reading activities designed to get the students thinking about the content of the upcoming text:

- (1) The title is examined—a good strategy that can be used with most texts—and the reader is told in effect that the passage will answer the question implicit in the title "What I have lived for" that is it will answer the question "What have I lived for?"
- (2) The reader is then told to read a short biographical note about Bertrand Russell and then told to consider what sort of writing style a philosopher might use.

Both of the above, help set up expectations about the text, while hopefully creating some reader interest.

Exploitation for essay structure or for outlining: In addition, throughout the book, Dubin and Olsh-tain (1987:135-138) approach part of the task of adaptation differently depending upon the special characteristics of each passage. In this case, it is the classic example of essay structure in this passage that the authors want the students to focus on, so the third part of their pre-reading prepares the students to examine the essay organization. [Note: the organization has been highlighted through the use of underlining and through the use of **bold**-faced type.] The reader is guided to pay attention to the essay organization through the following instructions:

C. Look for the organization of this selection. There are five paragraphs in it: the first gives a summary answer to the question raised in the title; the last presents an evaluation of the whole answer. Read the first and the last (fifth) paragraphs before you read the whole selection.

1. Which three elements are essential in the answer:
  - a. l \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. k \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. p \_\_\_\_\_
2. Which of the three elements do you think will be stressed most by Russell?
3. What is Russell's final evaluation of his life (Paragraph 5)?

D. Read the whole selection, looking for the elaboration on the three main elements in C(1) above, in the three central paragraphs (2, 3, and 4) of this passage.

The above instructions serve two functions, one quite general and the other quite specific. The general function of these instructions is to give the reader a purpose for reading the passage; in this sense, any reading should from the reader's viewpoint have a purpose. Only now does the student actually read the passage, but now certainly the student has a good idea about what he will encounter in the reading.

The specific function of these instructions was to highlight the passage's carefully crafted organization, one version of which is presented for your convenience below:

1. Three goals in his life:  
search for love,  
search for knowledge,  
relieve the suffering of mankind  
[= an overview or summary]
2. the search for love,  
first, because it brings ecstasy  
next, because it relieves loneliness  
finally, because in ...  
achievement: I found love
3. the search for knowledge  
wanted to understand the hearts of men  
wanted to know why the stars shine.  
achievement: A little of this, but not much, I have achieved.
4. pity: a longing to relieve the suffering of mankind  
achievement: I cannot, and I too suffer.
5. evaluation of his life: I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

Exploitation for writing: Once the students have produced a version of the above outline either individually or with the help of the teacher, the original piece of material can be collected (to prevent simple copying). The students are then asked to imagine that they were reporters who were present when Russell gave the above as a talk and they are to write it up for the local newspaper.

Dubin, Fraida and Elite Olshtain. 1987. *Reading on Purpose*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.