

The Cut-`n- Paste Race for Focus, Organization, and Unity

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Goal: To engage students in an engaging and fast-paced activity that forces them to read critically, work cooperatively, and think analytically about the effectiveness—at many levels--of the piece of writing before them. This activity works well after students have a draft and are trying to improve it. With the activity, you can focus the debriefing period on focus, development, organization, or transitions—wherever you see fit. It might best be applied to a sample paper, but it could also be applied to the draft of a willing student in the classroom, perhaps one who was ahead or one who was seeking additional help with a paper.

Take a paper (preferably not a published or extremely polished one), make four copies of it, and cut it at the paragraphs. (Make sure that you maintain one intact copy of the paper so that you know the proper order of the paragraphs.)

Shuffle the paragraphs and randomly number them.

Place the numbered and loose paragraphs into an envelope, taking care not to order them in any way.

Break the class into four groups and tell them this is a race. The first group to complete the task you're about to give them wins a piece of candy (or cookies or some small prize). Remember if you're handing out food to give everybody SOMETHING or you'll have some very sad students at the end of the game. Maybe give the winners two cookies and everybody else one.

Now the task is for each group to assemble the essay in its proper order. If the paper is 15 paragraphs long or more, this activity will take them a while, especially if the transitions are fairly weak.

Roam around the room and check on their progress. Give updates about the groups that are getting close. Decide how much time you want to devote and if no one is done when time expires, close the race and announce as winner the group who came closest.

Now the most important part, the debriefing of the contest: Ask students what made the reconstruction of this essay difficult. They will probably say “lack of focus” or “weak organization” or “poor transitions.” Have them assemble the paper in the proper order and read it straight through. What would have helped? What would have made the paper better?

As a result of this activity, students will have read this essay much more closely than other items they read during the semester. Remind them of their discoveries at various times during the semester; this activity is now a shared memory with shared lessons that can be referred to whenever you see fit.