

Empathising with a sentence: how to write a long sentence

Activity 1

In pairs or a small group, one person slowly read the following poem aloud whilst the rest listen and follow on the page.

Elk River Falls

*is where the Elk River falls
from a rocky and considerable height,
turning pale with trepidation at the lip
(it seemed from where I stood below)
before it is unbuckled from itself
and plummets, shredded, through the air
into the shadows of a frigid pool,
so calm around the edges, a place
for water to recover from the shock
of falling apart and coming back together
before it picks up its song again,
goes sliding around the massive rocks
and past some islands overgrown with weeds
then flattens out and slips around a bend
and continues on its winding course,
according to this camper's guide,
then joins the Clearwater at its northern fork,
which must in time find the sea
where this and every other stream
mistakes the monster for itself,
sings its name one final time
then feels the sudden sting of salt.*

- Billy Collins

Activity 2

When finished, continue in your pairs/groups and discuss answers to the following questions:

1. Why do you think Collins describes Elk River Falls [a waterfall] in one long sentence?
2. Can you find and explain any pattern to the placing of phrases/descriptions on separate lines? Select three examples to support your explanation.

3. Presented as a poem, the description of Elk River Falls is highly visual, but there is also an element of ‘hearing’ the shifts in movement when the poem is read, especially aloud.

Find and quote a section of the poem describing changes in the waterfall’s movement, and the rhythms of it, and then describe this in your own words. Think of how sounds change within a song.

Activity 3

Individually, write the poem out in prose. Begin with *Elk River Falls is where...* and continue to write the rest as a paragraph using the exact punctuation in the poem.

From what you have discussed about *Elk River Falls* as a poem, how does this re-writing into prose help you understand the use of punctuation in its one long sentence? You can discuss further, but then write an explanation for yourself.

Activity 4

It is unlikely that you and most other people would ever need or want to write a single sentence as long as the one Collins produces for his whole poem!

However, exploring the effect of a long sentence – in this case to mimic the movements of a river flowing into a waterfall and beyond – helps you to appreciate the impact a long sentence can have.

This Writing task, in two parts, will help you to put what you have learned into practice.

Firstly, by choosing a ‘topic’ of movement – natural or man-made – write a poem that captures that movement, with its many shifts and turns and stops and starts and so on. Like Collins’ poem, use enjambment [movement onto following lines] to mirror these actions.

The first two choices below are very similar to Collins’ writing and you can stick with either of these if it helps you with existing ideas.

Whatever your choice, think about and/or undertake some research about your topic and the movements it will make. Compile a set of notes to use for your writing, and like Collins, organise them into a logical order for that movement.

‘Topics’

- the fall [journey] of a river
- a waterfall
- the ocean’s waves [what you ‘encounter’ on the way: boats, islands, debris, beach...]
- a storm [researching the meteorology of this]
- movement/motion of a train
- any other mode of transport
- a bird in flight [crossing various terrain]
- a plane
- anything similar to above ideas....

Activity 5

Secondly, now turn your poem into prose. Write this out as one paragraph, but it does not have to be one long sentence – there can be two or three. However, make at least one of these quite long!

Do not overcomplicate the punctuation, but make it as accurate as you can. Use commas and connectives/conjunctions to separate as well as link the shifts in the movement/action you are describing. The enjambment of your poem should give you the clues to where these are already or need to be placed.

If it helps, refer to the two resource sheets that highlight either the placings of the punctuation in Collins’ poem or some of the connectives and conjunctions he uses.