

A Storyteller's Misguided Guide to Focus

Contributed by Sue Doe (with thanks to Janet Scofield)

Goal: There's nothing like an unfocused story to show students what can happen when a piece of writing lacks (or loses) its focus. This is a simple activity that can be undertaken at any point in the semester. It takes not more than 5 minutes from start to finish and is probably best undertaken at either the very beginning or the very end of class.

Start by telling students that you're a bit concerned about the absence of clear focus, purpose, and sense of audience in their papers. Begin a "lecture" on the importance of clear focus and purpose to the success of a paper, connecting this concern to audience, of course. If you're really bold, you could take a kind of scolding tone with this mini lecture

Then, midstream, begin to digress. Tell them something that happened over the weekend. Or take them on a cruise through your tortuously enervating day. Or tell them in gruesome detail the story of your efforts to get a driver's license at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Be excruciatingly detailed and chronological. In other words, take them on a ride completely off track. You can be amusing at first, but eventually just be downright longwinded, boring, and off-task.

Stop before you have either a riot or a full class of nappers on your hands, but don't stop a minute before you're sure you've lost them.

When you start to see the whites of their eyes, wake them up with a solid thump of your book dropping onto the table. Ask them: What was I talking about and why? A few who actually fell asleep during your epic may be terrified briefly, but their hearts will be pounding and they'll be ALL EARS. A bold one might say, "You were boring us to tears." In any case, don't leave them in the dark for too long before you spill the beans:

Tell them: I lulled you to sleep. I digressed. I lost my purpose, my point, my focus. And then, I lost you, my audience. In essence, I broke the essential rule of the classroom—stick to the point. In fact, I had to shock you with the thump of a big book to bring you back. That's what a weak focus does to readers. It loses them. Think of this moment when you're writing your paper. What does my reader need to know?? How can I convey it efficiently and effectively? How can I keep that reader involved and interested?

Reward them for putting up with you and your tactics! In so doing, show that you value them as an audience. Bring in some candy or cookies.