

Dogteam by Gary Paulsen

Writing Strategies

"Close your eyes and try to imagine the feeling of driving a dog sled on a cold, crisp, clear night. Gary Paulsen recreates this image through the rhythm and cadence of his writing," Ruth Culham praises.

And we enjoy the ride alongside the dogs as Gary Paulsen gives us a chilling, powerful example of the Sentence Fluency trait. He alternates very quick and concise sentences and phrases with lengthier, very descriptive, almost rambling sentences. His sentences mimic the feeling of a long, cold night run with his dogs. In the quiet still of the night, the dogs' movement is very repetitive, the cold wind unchanging, and too his sentences have an element of repetition and steadiness to them.

Before reading this book aloud to your students, it would be a good idea to provide them with a little information about Alaska at least, if not the Iditarod race itself. Mr. Paulsen actually ran the Iditarod, and spent years training dogs to run that race across the state of Alaska. This story is an account of the night runs that he used to make with the dogs that he was training for the Iditarod. Try to conjure up images and feelings of the bitter cold, of the stillness of a winter's night, of the look and sound of snow covering the ground. The actual race usually takes between 9 and 17 days to complete, and the dogs must have the strength and endurance to run, pulling the Musher, the sled, and all their gear, for more than 1,100 miles. Having that background will give your students a better understanding of the story he tells.

Here are a few definitions that will help your students to better understand the story...

- Iditarod – An 1,100+ mile dog sled race through Alaska
- tremble – to shake involuntarily (as with fear or cold)
- gangline – The gangline is a single line to which each dog is attached, usually in pairs, and it keeps the dogs in a tight formation ahead of the sled.
- pace – to set or regulate the speed of

*** Teaching Sentence Fluency ***

According to Ruth Culham, one reason that teaching Sentence Fluency is a challenge is that what sounds right doesn't always look right. We are trained, and we train our students, to recognize and create sentences that look correct, with capital letters, subjects, predicates, commas in all the right places. But the trait of Sentence Fluency teaches us that every sentence does not need to "look correct" in order to fit!

Dogteam is a perfect example of this. And to be honest, I had to reread the book three or four times before I could get past the fragments and run-ons and hear what Mr. Paulsen was saying. Take a look at these examples from the text...

- "But silent."
- "The dance."
- "Through the trees, in and out, the sled whipping after them through the trees with no sound but the song of the runners, the high-soft-shusshh-whine of the runners and the soft jingle of their collars."
- "Into the night."

Mr. Paulsen uses a great variety of sentence lengths and patterns, and many of his "sentences" aren't really "sentences" at all! But they work. They all work together to give us a sense of the run, of the cold, of the excitement and the exhaustion and the love that these dogs have for the race. As the audience, we take off with the dogs as they first break through the snow, and we hold on for the long and exciting ride! This story must be read aloud in order to hear how the sentences really work, because simply looking at the words doesn't do them justice.

For lessons on teaching students to vary the lengths of their sentences, see the Sentence Fluency chapters of *6+1 Traits of Writing* and *6+1 Traits of Writing for the Primary Grades*. "Standing Sentences" and "Grandma Is..." are two great ideas for primary students. "Sentences and Fragments Bee" and "Picture Your Sentences" are good for intermediate grades.

Additional Ideas:

1. Have your students describe a time when they were so cold, it hurt! Could they feel the cold air tingling in their lungs? Did their hands hurt from the cold? Were their fingers stiff? Did their nose sting from the wind? Ask them to describe how the bitter cold made them feel!
2. Do a little research on the Iditarod, and then have your students write a journal entry as if they are a musher. You don't have to go too far

to find some great online resources for information about the race, and it's easy to see how challenging the weather is in Alaska. Try <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/iditarod> and "Explore the Trail" for a description of each checkpoint, and the terrain that the mushers must cross on their way to each stop.

3. Ask your students to pretend that their parents have informed them that the family is going to Alaska for spring break! At <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/iditarod> check out "All About Alaska", and ask your students to respond to their parents' announcement in letter form. Are they up for the challenge, or would they rather head somewhere warmer for their vacation? If they like the idea, they should use details and factual information in their agreement. If not, they should explain the specific concerns they have.
4. Keep a log of current weather conditions both in Lambertville, Michigan, and at each checkpoint along the Iditarod trail. Go to www.iditarod.com and click on "Go to Weather Center" at the top of the page. You'll see a list of each of the checkpoints and their current conditions. You could even throw in a little math, and have the students compare the rain/snow fall and the temperatures in both places.

At the same website, www.iditarod.com, you can read the postings of Zuma, the Iditarod K-9 Reporter. Near the top of the page, click on "For Teachers" and then select "Zuma's Paw Prints". There's a link to email her if you have questions about Alaska and the preparations that the mushers are going through as the Iditarod draws nearer. This year's race begins on Saturday, March 3, 2012.