

The Fantastic Binominal

Submitted by: Wendy Knox and Leif Jurgensen

Developed by: Jack Zipes from Gianni Rodari's Grammar of Fantasy

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Subject areas: Creative Writing and Dramatics

Designed for grade levels: 3rd – 12th

Space required: classroom

Equipment needed: Paper and pencil

Objective:

The cornerstone of the Neighborhood Bridges Program, the Fantastic Binominal (FB) is an exercise that Professor Jack Zipes borrowed and developed from Gianni Rodari's Grammar of Fantasy as a meaning of stimulating storytelling and writing. As an exercise, it sparks the imagination of both the storyteller and the audience. By bringing together an unlikely combination of nouns with a preposition, the FB inspires free association and imaginative thinking so that anything becomes possible in the narrative. The stories are spun on the spur of the moment with no premeditation. Throughout the year, this basic exercise, initially led by the teacher and/or teaching artist, gradually involves the students who can eventually take over the game when prompted by the teacher/teaching artist.

Lesson Progression and Procedures:

1. The teaching artist asks the students whether they know what a preposition or "linking word" is. After discussing the nature of a preposition and how it helps link words or phrases together, the storyteller/educator asks for examples from the students and writes a list prepositions on the board:

about	into	above	of	between	unto
across	off	after	on	beyond	up
against	onto	along	outside	by	upon
amid	over	around	during	with	through
at	to	before	for	within	throughout
behind	toward	below	under	without	inside
beneath	beside	until	from	in	underneath

2. The teacher/teaching artist next asks for two nouns to be quickly selected by a student. For purposes related to the curriculum or area of focus, we might select groups of nouns that are connected with the themes of the lesson. For instance, if we are working with "Little Red Riding Hood," we might ask for names of predatory animals and get lions, leopards, dragons, sharks, etc. We might then ask for articles with colors such as blue dress, pink pants, red car. If we are working with the topic of geography, we might ask for "countries in Africa." If we're studying water biology, we might ask for "fresh water animals without fins." Build a list of nouns in each distinct category.
3. The teaching artist/teacher asks a student to select a preposition for their choice of a linking word; ask another for a noun from the first category; ask another for a noun from the second category; ask another for the order of nouns with linking word. From that combination and order of words, the teaching artist/teacher models spinning a story using the phrase as a title and,

hopefully, incorporating the phrase into the story-- "the panther in pink pants," "the shark below the red car,"-- with the help of the audience.

4. The students are then asked to repeat the exercise on their own: select a linking word, and a noun from each list, use this as a title for a story and make up a story on the spot, writing it in their notebook. Only allow the students to write for 5 or 10 minutes. This is merely a first draft. The point is to get their ideas out and on the paper, correct spelling and punctuation is not important.
5. Students then read the story to the class.

Extensions and Applications:

- The stories can be manipulated to explore theatre exercises that involve character, point of view, setting, and alternative endings.
- The stories can also be used as the text that serves as a basis for a performance by a group of students.
- The stories can be refined, adapted, expanded, illustrated, to fulfill the goal of many other curricular areas.