

# Teaching Notes

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## Authentic Tag Question Practice for Avid Environmentalist Teachers

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When I'm not teaching or thinking about teaching, I'm often thinking about environmental issues. And so it was one afternoon when I hesitated to recycle "perfectly good" *outdated* handouts on "Portland Places to Visit" while pondering how to improve my teaching of tag questions. Many grammar textbooks present tag questions, and I've often taught them before, but I've never been satisfied that my students truly understood their use because I had never presented them in an authentic context. Suddenly the recycling and the tag question problems fused into a very successful lesson that even included some dictation—which my students love.

To prepare, I called each place on the handout—the Washington Park Rose Garden, the Japanese Garden, the Portland Classical Chinese Garden, Hoyt Arboretum, the World Forestry Center, the Oregon Zoo, the Children's Museum, the Portland Art Museum, and Multnomah County Library—and corrected all of the outdated information on my handout copy. As expected, admission prices (for adults, seniors, children, and college students with ID) and, at some places, hours had changed.

In class, I introduced tag questions, showing how the verb in a tag must be negative if the verb in the preceding statement was affirmative, and vice versa. I demonstrated the falling intonation of the tag when the speaker thinks s/he knows the correct answer and the rising tag intonation when the speaker is less sure. Students, as usual, seemed confused about when the speaker was sufficiently sure of a statement to use falling versus rising intonation. They were confused about when the statement part should be negative and the tag affirmative, and vice versa. But instead of providing practice with the inauthentic examples in the text,

which they all knew the answers to, I passed out the outdated "Portland Places" handout.

Next, I pointed out the date on the handout and asked the class if they thought that all of the information was still current. They thought not. Then I asked which information would be the same and which might have changed. They correctly guessed that addresses and telephone numbers were least likely to have changed and admission prices most likely to have increased. They thought some places, but not all, might have changed their hours. This provided an authentic context for asking tag questions.

Students took turns making tag questions from the information on the front side of the outdated handout. I answered their tag questions, providing updated information where appropriate. Students wrote down the correct information about prices and hours—particularly for places that they wanted to visit; this provided an authentic dictation.

For the back of the handout, I tore my copy into five "cards," each with information on one place, and gave them to five students. Students circulated asking and answering tag questions, and receiving (dictated) information from other students to correct their handout. Periodically, I rotated who held the "cards," but after a few turns, students could also get current information from students who had previously asked someone with a "card." Students understood how to use tag questions and enjoyed both the dictation and getting useful information about Portland.

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