Write Early and Write Often

Activities for Student Writers

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I’ve used these activities with students from middle school teens to more “seasoned students” in community college. Some of them are original, while others rest are borrowed and adapted from conference presentations, journal articles, other teachers’ practices, discussions with colleagues, and other places. All are very easy to adapt for students of many different ages and experiences. They can be used for a quick warmup to get writing muscles and mind working. They can be used to focus students on a particular idea for discussion. They can be used to examine and evaluate a text. They can be used to explore ideas for further development. I use them to get students writing, as often as possible. Some I use on a regular basis, while others are pulled out and used as needed. I hope you, and your students, enjoy them.
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Hello, My Name Is...

I like to collect a writing sample on the first day of a writing class. I tell my students that I learn two things: I learn about them and I learn about their writing. Often, I just give them a writing prompt like, “The best Christmas present I ever gave was…” or “Something that makes me really angry is…” With my WR90 students, I wanted to give them something more structured, so I developed “Hello, My Name Is…” and have them write it during the first week of class.

In this activity, I ask them to write a friendly letter to me and include the following information.

1. Biographical details. I tell them that they can choose what to tell me but to give some effort into making it more than a random list of dates and places and names.
2. Something interesting, unusual, or funny about themselves. I learn some very interesting things about my students that might not otherwise come out.
3. Why are they here? The “here” can mean my class, the college, or school in general. This gives me some insight into their motivations.
4. A “P.S.” about their computer and Internet experience and resources. It helps me to know if students have less experience with computers or don’t have Internet or computer readily available.

I have found that giving them a more structured assignment yields better results. In addition to learning about them and their writing, I can also gauge how they interpret and follow directions. The assignment sheet I provide for this activity is on the next page.

This activity works well with students of all levels and can easily be tailored for your own students and needs. You can make it as free or as circumscribed as you wish.
INTRODUCTION
This writing assignment is designed for us to get to know each other during the early weeks in the term. Hopefully the subject will be easy, since it's about you, yourself, and you.

WHAT YOU WILL WRITE ABOUT
Write this assignment in the form of a friendly letter to me, in which you introduce yourself. This letter will have the following parts.

Dear Jean,

In the first paragraph, give me some biographical details about you. I'm not looking for a list of random details or a listing of who, what, where, when, and why. I'm looking for what is important to you. Use these details to convey who you are to me.

In the second paragraph, tell me something interesting or funny or unusual about you. This can be in the form of a story, a description, or an explanation. Use this "something" to convey who you are to me.

In the third paragraph, tell me why you are here. The "here" could mean PCC or my class specifically. I'm interested in your goals and your motivations, so use this "why" to convey who you are to me.

Sincerely,

Full Name

PS. Tell me about your computer and Internet access and experience. Are you comfortable on computers, the Internet, email, attaching files, saving files in different formats, and similar things, or are you still learning? If you are still learning, are you taking a keyboarding class, or have you taken one in the past? Do you use a computer at home, on campus, or at the library? Do you have access to a printer? How often are you able to check your email?

GRADING
This assignment will be read and commented on, but it will not be graded. However, I expect careful thought to go into what you turn in for me to read. I also expect it to be written as legibly as possible with attention given to correct spelling and punctuation as best as you are able. This writing assignment will be a sample of your writing as well as my first picture of you as a person and as a writer, so do your best work.
Critical response journal entry

I took a class a number of years ago with Tony Wolk at Portland State University. The primary means of assessment was something he called a “critical response dialogue journal,” in which we chose what text from the week’s reading that we wanted to respond to and how. Basically, we could write whatever we wanted about what we had read. There was no length requirement, although we had to write a certain number of them over the course of the term. I did a similar activity in another class with Maria DePriest. She called them “response papers,” but the idea was the same: students responding to the texts they read in writing—not by retelling or summarizing, but by critically thinking (analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, even creating). Having used these activities as a student myself, I adapted them for my own students.

For my WR90 students, I provide a specific topic. (For these classes, the writing is referred to as a “topic entry,” but the concept is the same.) The topic is usually tied to the novel we read, but sometimes there are other readings that it is paired with. When we read *The Old Man and the Sea*, a typical topic entry is, “Choose a page from TOMATS between pp. 33-63. Write about what you find interesting, revealing, moving, informative, or confusing about what that page in the story tells and shows.” And when we read *Little House on the Prairie*, a typical topic entry is, “What values do Laura's parents demonstrate to her? These could be spiritual/religious, moral, ethical, or personal. Use examples or quotes to illustrate, including quotation marks and page numbers as needed.” The minimum length for a topic entry is half a page, double-spaced.

With my WR115/121/122 students, I allow a little more freedom, but I do provide suggestions. Their critical response journal entries are written in response to essays we read from the class text. I typically assign 2-3 essays per week for students to read, which we discuss in class, and I ask my students to write about one of them. The choice of what they write about is entirely up to them. Suggestions I give include the following:

- Answer any journal entry questions that precede or follow the essay (in the textbook).
- Write about what you liked or disliked about the essay.
- Write about something that the essay reminds you of.
- Write about something you learned from the essay.

These critical response journals are an excellent writing activity for both students and teacher. First, I know if they’ve read the text. Second, I can gauge their understanding and their reflection on it. Students invariably show a lot of insight about the texts they’ve read. They often relate their own personal experience to the content. I often learn a lot about my students this way. Many have used the critical response journal to share stories, sometimes to vent, even to generate topics for essays.
Word and cultural knowledge entries

This activity arose from an article I read by Heal McKnight from Kirkwood Community College in the May 2010 TETYC journal. It allows students to do two things:

1. Explore unknown vocabulary from an essay or novel, including using context.
2. Practice research skills, including using and citing outside sources.

I use word entries with essays, articles, novels, and other texts where students may encounter unknown vocabulary. They need to complete the following steps, adapted from the McKnight article.

1. Write out the entire sentence containing the unknown word. Use quotation marks and put the page number in parentheses at the end. Underline the word you don't know.
2. Take a guess at the word's meaning; write down and explain your guess.
3. Look up the word and choose the definition that makes the most sense. Write out the definition, exactly as it appears, and put the name of your dictionary/Web site in parentheses.
4. In your own words, explain what the entire sentence means.

I provide examples like the one below, and I walk the students through all the steps before they write a word entry. Students are graded on the completeness of the word entry (including page numbers, quotation marks, and sources) and the quality of their answers.

Example word entry (McKnight)

1. "The corpses of child fighters who had died of thirst marked her way, like cairns." (17)

2. Guess: I know she's lost, and cairns are something "marking her way," so I think maybe a cairn is some kind of directional sign.

3. Definition: "A mound of stones erected as a memorial or a marker." (American Heritage dictionary)

4. Explanation: A cairn can be a marker, but these bodies aren't actual markers. The bodies are marking her way like trail markers. That's a pretty sad image, but it's very effective.

McKnight also describes how students can explore unknown cultural references in similar entries. I haven’t used this much because the word entry seems to have more general practical
use, but a cultural knowledge entry could be used for ESOL/LEP students or when a class is reading a text with a lot of historical or cultural ideas.

**Work Cited**


**Writing journal (contains the critical response and word entries)**

After trying various combinations of critical response, word, and cultural knowledge entries with students ranging from high school to college, I settled on a final version of the assignment. Each week, my student write an assignment called a “writing journal,” which consists of two parts: the critical response entry and the word entry. Each entry receives 5 points using the following rubric:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Excellent thought/reflection; length requirement met; few/no spelling, punctuation, formatting errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good thought/reflection; length requirement met; few spelling, punctuation errors, formatting errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fair thought/reflection; length requirement nearly met; some spelling, punctuation, formatting errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Little thought/reflection (mainly summary); length requirement not met; numerous spelling, punctuation, formatting errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Very little thought/reflection (mainly/all summary); length requirement not met; many spelling, punctuation, or formatting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Entry missing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I find it an excellent weekly assignment for students to practice their writing skills and to respond to the texts we read in class. I can ask questions, engage in dialogue, point out recurring grammar and punctuation issues, and encourage students to explore the material further in a longer piece of writing. Sometimes, essays grow out of a short one-page critical response entry; they’re a great “rough draft” opportunity. In fact, I used to exclude grammar and punctuation from grading, reasoning that students needed opportunities to write where they didn’t have to worry about those issues. But this is still writing submitted for a grade, so I emphasize the importance of developing and articulating ideas clearly and fully as well as correctness.

An example writing journal from my WR90 class, which uses “topic” entries, is on the next page. It is followed by one from a WR115 student.
Example Writing Journal (WR90)

Full Name
Date
WR90
WJ7

Topic entry

I enjoyed the book overall, but I was disappointed in the ending. I thought everything was going to go perfect for Santiago, although I think Hemingway made the book seem like it was going to go in that direction. Hemingway had me wondering what was going to happen next throughout the whole book, from the sharks to Santiago finally being home. I had no idea it was going to end the way that it did. I thought that this sentence was really sad: “The boy was that the old man was breathing and then he saw the old man's hands and he started to cry.” (page 122.) This quote showed me how much the boy cares and loves the old man, but it was also sad because Santiago had suffered so much and now had nothing to show for it. My heart seriously reached out to that whole paragraph and some. I really liked that the boy insists on going with Santiago from there on out. And you don’t know if they will go back out. Santiago doesn’t have much left, and even the boy’s help may not be enough. But Hemingway left the ending of the book wide open for a second one. I hope that the story continues, because I would love to see what happens next and how Santiago and the boy work together.

Word entry

1. Sentence: “He had stayed so close that the old man was afraid he would cut the line with his tale which was sharp as a scythe and almost of that size and shape.” (94)

2. Guess: When he says as sharp as a scythe I think he may be referring to a type of material.

3. Definition: A scythe is an agricultural hand tool for mowing grass, or reaping crops. It was largely replaced by horse-drawn and then tractor machinery, but is still used in some areas of Europe and Asia. The Grim Reaper is often depicted carrying or wielding a scythe. On occasion, Death, the fourth of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is depicted as carrying a scythe while on the proverbial Pale horse.” (Wikipedia)

4. Explanation: In this case the author was trying to compare the fish tail's sharpness to the sharpness of the blade of a scythe. He used the word "scythe" to mean a specific image. He didn't use knife or machete because the fish's tail was curved like a scythe.
Critical Response Entry

As most students probably did when they reflected of a place similar to the one Eudora Welty spoke of in “The Corner Store,” my memory started to flicker of images of the past, of places I had experienced my adolescence. For me, it was at the Marion County skate park. Nestled underneath the bridge that leads you into the western side of our city - away from the dirt, as they would like to think - was where my younger years were spent. It was as if this park was designed with two different types of people in mind: The homeless and the parentless. Not that all of us were orphans (even though some of us were), here is where our real family lived. While safety was never my concern, the smell all but too often reeked of danger. The smell of various drugs and alcohol was a common occurrence, as was the black clouds of exhaust from all of the passing traffic. Despite this, there I was, as if I were bound by duty. I would arrive early, as to avoid crowds and truancy officers, looking for the kids who had skipped school. The sun would barely be breaking over the cement jungle we know as downtown. I would stay throughout the day, pan-handling for enough money to purchase a cheap meal and even cheaper soda to share with my kin. I would stay throughout the late evening, as the city began to fall asleep, I would be riding around on the cement. The skate park had become my home, figuratively and
literally. When no one notices you are missing, it is easy to get lost in the dirt of Salem’s downtown. I would do my part to help clean up my beloved home, sweeping the brittle leaves as they fell from the drying trees. Picking up garbage that visitors had left behind, it was almost as if I was the host; the caretaker if you will.

My skate park was such a memorable place for me, as I had met so many different characters, from transients who were only looking for a way to make it through another chilly Oregon evening to fellow displaced youth, who were also looking for a place to escape. As a result of meeting all of these people, I was actually able to meet myself. I learned a lot about who I was as a human and a strong sense of my beliefs and morals. Although my home was tucked away in the area of Salem that no one wanted to notice, there was a family of individuals who cared about it more than anyone could ever know.

A typical cliché to read is, “If it weren’t for this, I would have ended up here.” Those words accurately describe a situation and place, where if I hadn’t had it, I truly don’t know where I would be today. It meant very little to anyone, but it was all I had for a brief moment of time. Now, I am much too old and fragile to participate in skateboarding, but when I pass by my old home; I reminisce of the days and nights I spent living in the dirt and dust of Salem.

Word Entry

1. Sentence:
"Mr. Sessions, whose hands were gentle and smelled of carabolic" (404).

2. Guess:
First guess was carbo-hydrate, which is associated with sugar. Also, in the context of the story it would seem as though Mr. Sessions tends to deal assisting children with sweets throughout the day.

3. Definition:

Carbolic refers me to Phenol: a corrosive poisonous crystalline acidic compound $C_6H_5OH$ present in the tars of coal and wood that in dilute solution is used as a disinfectant. However, it is noted that Carbolic means: a sweet, musky-smelling chemical once used in soap (Merriam-Webster online dictionary).

4. Explanation:

To me, this sentence is illustrating that Mr. Session has a distinct and familiar feeling and smell: he smelled like a particular kind of soap. We tend to remember smells very strongly, and this was obviously a detail that stuck with Welty. I also like how she described his hands as gentle—his hands were both clean and nice to feel.

Don’t forget the details:

1. Quotation marks around a quotation and page numbers
2. Sources (using titles, not Web addresses)
3. Fully-developed explanations, not a rewording of the sentence or using the word in a new sentence
Read Around and Write (RAAW)

This activity was demonstrated by Bob Dandoy, former past president of the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English and Language Arts, who was the keynote speaker at the 2010 OCTE Spring Conference at Seaside High School. During a session called “Monday Morning Usefulness: Practical Activities & Strategies for Teaching Literacy,” he talked about activities that could be taken home and used Monday morning when teachers returned to class. I took up his challenge and used his “Read Around and Write” with my own students the following week. My fondness for acronyms is well-known to my students, so I quickly dubbed it “RAAW” and told my students that we were going to “get raw” with that week’s text. It was a huge success and has become a regular part of my teaching repertoire.

It’s a good one to use because, as Mr. Dandoy said, students can interact with a text and with each other, plus they can share their writing in a situation that may be less intimidating. Another benefit is that it can be used to generate material for an assignment written in response to a text read by the class. A final benefit is that students’ comprehension and retention of the material is increased because they don’t just sit back and listen; they have to respond and interact.

Procedure

1. Using the popcorn read technique (tell students that whoever wants to read may do so whenever and for however long they wish—and everyone waits until someone reads), the class reads the text. Mr. Dandoy used a short newspaper article, but I often use entire essays.

2. While the text is read, each student underlines/marks at least 3 things that strike them. These can be words, phrases, images, questions, and so forth. If students don’t want to write in their textbook, these items can be written into their notes.

3. Once the reading is complete, each student chooses one item that he underlined. He then freewrites about it for a set length of time. Mr. Dandoy used 10 minutes, but that time could be adjusted. I have used 5 and 10 minutes. Students generally find 10 minutes easier, because they don’t feel constrained to “get it all down” in 5 minutes. But sometimes the shorter time is necessary due to time constraints and can still yield good results.

4. After freewriting, the class is divided into groups of 3-4. Each person is given a "Read Around Log." As each reads his writing the other group members note his name and something memorable from the writing. I don’t often use the log and have students write their classmates’ names and comments in their notes. If you wanted a written record of comments, the log is easy to use.

5. Once all have read, each person writes, "I think ___ should share his/her writing with the class because ____." This is shared with the group.
6. The group comes to a consensus about which member will read his writing to the class.

7. Each group's representative shares with the class and then discussion can take place. Sometimes we make it through all shared writing, and sometimes not. It usually generates a very lively discussion, though.

8. If you want, you can collect the writings and the Read-Around Logs and give a grade for those, or you can read/comment on them, using that information to ascertain what students got out of the material and what you might need to cover/reteach at the next class.

Once the class has completed these steps, I tell them that they now have 3 potential benefits that they can immediately use:

- They have read one of the essays for the week.
- They have the beginning of a critical response entry for that week’s writing journal.
- They have the beginning for an essay, or at least some reflection/reaction that might lead to a topic.
Writing Against Time (WAT)

This activity grew out of something I heard about at the 2010 OCTE Spring Conference in a session given by Jan Priddy from Seaside High School. She talked about an activity that she did called “Reading Under the Gun” in which she gave her students a short text and they had to write a framed essay after reading and annotating the text. I borrowed the idea and adapted it into something I call “Writing Against Time.” Here is what I did initially.

1. Students write about an essay we have read and discussed in class, usually one from their textbooks, but sometimes one I provide.
2. A framed format for each is provided. A typical one might include:
   - Paragraph one: Introduce your essay in an interesting fashion. Ask a question, make a statement, use a quotation from the essay and explain it, or something similar. Then explain what you think the main idea of the text you read is and why.
   - Paragraph two: Discuss the main points the author is making. Give examples, using quotations, summaries, or paraphrases (correctly cited).
   - Paragraph three: Discuss the organization the author uses. Give examples, using quotations, summaries, or paraphrases (correctly cited).
   - Paragraph four: Relate the main point to your own experience somehow through narrating a story or explaining something. Then conclude your essay. What thought do you want to leave your reader with? (You may do this in a subsequent paragraph if you need to.)

What I found is that students were simply regurgitating what the essay said and not really reflecting on the ideas and arguments that the essay proposed. So I altered the framed format slightly.

- Paragraph one: Introduce your essay in an interesting fashion. Then transition to a summary of the author’s thesis and main points.
- Paragraph two: Transition to an explanation of your opinion of the author’s argument, using evidence from the text (summary, paraphrase, or quotation).
- Paragraph three (and four): Transition to a paragraph in which you relate the essay to your own experience. Then conclude your essay. What thought do you want to leave your reader with? (You may do this in a subsequent paragraph if you need to.)

This format works well with all the essay we read in class, and it can easily be adjusted as new essays are added. It could even be used to respond to other literature or even student writing.

Some example WATs are on the next two pages. One is from Writing 90, and the other is from Writing 115.
Time limit: 45 minutes

Directions

1. Look at your notes from the other side of this page.

2. Write an essay that uses the following format for your chosen topic.

   **Paragraph 1**
   Introduce your essay in an interesting fashion. Ask a question, make a statement, use a quote that you bring, or some other choice. Introduce your topic and include your topic sentence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic 2</th>
<th>Topic 3</th>
<th>Topic 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 2</strong>: Describe the situation that was bad. Include details about when, where, who, and what was going on.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 2</strong>: Describe the responsibility you took on. Include details about when, where, who, and what was going on.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 2</strong>: Describe the change that took place in your life. Include details about when, where, who, and what was going on.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 3</strong>: Explain what you learned from the experience. Be specific about what you learned. Use this paragraph to conclude your essay; leave your reader with something to think about.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 3</strong>: Explain what you learned about yourself from the experience. Be specific about what you learned. Use this paragraph to conclude your essay; leave your reader with something to think about.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph 3</strong>: Explain what you learned about yourself in the process. Be specific about what you learned. Use this paragraph to conclude your essay; leave your reader with something to think about.</td>
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</table>

3. Check your writing for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. If possible, carefully correct any errors.

4. Put your full name, the class, the date and "WAT" on the front page of your essay. Turn your essay in.

Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ideas well developed and presented (strong topic sentence present; supporting details fully developed); well organized; minimal spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors; all directions followed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ideas developed (good topic sentence present, supporting details somewhat developed); some organization; some errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar; some directions followed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Some ideas present (topic sentence more vague, supporting details less developed); attempt at organization; spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors impair readability of the essay; few directions followed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No originality of ideas (poor topic sentence or none at all, few to no details); no discernable organization; numerous spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors; OR no work submitted at all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments
Directions


6. Write an essay that uses the following format. As you write your essay, keep in mind that your main idea is to explore and explain your reaction to the essay you read. Please write on one side of the paper only.

   **Paragraph 1**
   Introduce your essay in an interesting fashion. Make a statement, use a quote from the essay and react to it, ask a question, or some other choice. You will be telling your reader something about this essay, so mention the title and the author. Then transition to a summary of its ideas. Do not provide an opinion; simply discuss the essay’s thesis and main points.

   **Paragraph 2**
   Next, transition into a discussion of your opinion about what the author argues and why you have that opinion. Be specific, using examples (summary, paraphrase, or direct quotation) from the essay and the paragraph numbers as reference.

   **Paragraph 3 (and 4)**
   Finally, transition into a paragraph in which you relate the essay to your own experience (something you read or saw, something that happened to you or someone you know). Then transition into the conclusion—what do you want your reader to come away with? Make an interesting statement, use another quote, ask a question, give a call to action or a warning, or some other choice to give your reader something to think about. This may take more than one paragraph.

7. Check your writing for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. If possible, carefully correct any errors.

8. Put your full name, the class, the date and "WAT 1" on the front page of your essay. Staple this sheet to your essay and turn your essay in.

Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ideas clear, original, and well developed with supporting evidence; smooth organization with clear transitions between ideas and paragraphs; all directions followed; minimal spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Ideas developed with some evidence and originality; some organization and transitions; some directions followed; some errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Some ideas present with evidence; organization has bumps or gaps; few directions followed; spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors impair readability of the essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No originality of ideas (all summary or restatement with little attention to directions); no discernible organization; numerous spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors; no work submitted at all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Where I'm From (based on the George Ella Lyon poem)**

This activity grew out of a presentation on sharing stories during the 2005 NCTE Regional Conference in Portland. I developed it as part of a unit plan, which I called “Where I’m From,” and I have since used it separately with my students, usually during instruction in narrative writing.

The poem and the sound recording needed for the activity can be accessed at http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html. The poem itself is reproduced on the next page.

**Procedure**

1. Put George Ella Lyon’s Web page with “Where I’m From” on a projector. This page has a sound recording of Lyon reading the poem. Play the recording. I often do this first without the poem showing.
2. Ask them what images stood out—write a list on a board, in a word processor, or on paper projected by document camera.
3. Play the recording a second time, with the poem on the screen if it was omitted the first time. You can omit this step if you want, but I often find that students pick up images the second time through.
4. Discuss what the images meant in the author’s life. Emphasize that each one of these images probably has an entire story behind it.
5. Have students take out a piece of paper and instruct them to jot down a list of “Where I’m Froms” from their own lives. I ask students to write down at least 10 items if possible. These can be simple words/phrases.
6. Students then choose one item from their list and write for 10 minutes. The time can be adjusted as necessary.
7. I try to involve some sort of sharing time. Possibilities include the following:
   * Compile a list of their “Where I’m Froms,” adding from my own list. This can be done on a whiteboard or flip chart, in a word processor, on paper projected by document camera, or simply shared orally.
   * Share items from the list with a partner.
   * Share the writing with a partner.
   * Share the writing with a small group or the class.

From there, the writing can become a description or other essay, a journal entry, a post to a discussion area/wiki/blog, a poem, a multimedia piece, a source of future inspiration… the possibilities are limited only by the writer’s imagination. Lyon’s Web page has a list of suggestions for “where to go” after the writer is done.

One time, a student wrote about “flour tortillas.” This small description developed into a personal essay about how her family’s women would make flour tortillas. The essay’s focus was about how cooking was a communal activity for the women in her family. The student wrote a rough draft, a final draft which was graded, and a portfolio draft for her final project.
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**Where I’m From**

I am from clothespins, 
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride. 
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.) 
I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember 
as if they were my own. 

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair. 
I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!  
I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself. 

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch, 
fried corn and strong coffee. 
From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight. 

Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.  
I am from those moments--  
snapped before I budded --  
leaf-fall from the family tree.  

** You could do any number of variations of reading the poem. Students could highlight 
images that stand out. The poem could be read in pairs or individually. Students could even 
read the poem to each other as in the large class activity.
Where I’m From activity – YOU TRY IT
A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

I adapted this activity from an OCTE conference session I went to a number of years ago. Perhaps the title is a little clichéd, but you can call it what you want. The idea is to provide the students with a concrete writing prompt and see where it takes them.

I do this activity in a number of ways. Basically, it involves students choosing one picture and writing about it. I project the pictures with a computer, but images can also be passed around in class. Pictures can come from many different sources (magazines or newspapers, pictures you take, the Internet, or pictures the students bring), but they should involve an interesting object, people, or something that would generate writing.

Procedure

1. Explain that they will be looking at a series of pictures and then writing about one.
2. Have students look at each picture in turn. They can make a note of a particular image.
3. After showing or passing around the pictures, I usually ask if students want to look at a particular one; most do.
4. Then I ask them to start writing when they’re ready, using one of the below ideas. I try to have them write for at least 5-10 minutes. Students can also select a second picture if they run out of ideas.
   - Describe an object in the picture.
   - Describe something not in the picture (what might be outside the frame).
   - Narrate a story in the moment of the picture.
   - Explain what an object in the picture is used for or how it is made.
   - Describe the person who owns an object in the picture.
   - Narrate what happened right before or right after the picture was taken.
   - Narrate how an object in the picture was obtained.
   - Compare or contrast two things in the picture.
   - Something of their own choice.

5. After the writing period is complete, students can share their writing with each other and with the class. I usually share my writing, and I sometimes share previous students’ pieces. Once I even used an online discussion forum where students shared their writing.

I’ve used this activity primarily with college students, but it’s useful on just about any level. It’s a great one for teaching narrative or descriptive writing, and it could easily be adapted for use with expository or even persuasive writing (maybe even incorporating media literacy lessons).

An example from a student is on the next page. The picture that inspired the story is a stock one of a squirrel on a deck surrounded by acres (to the squirrel) of bird seed. The student had a good deal of fun writing it and sharing it with her classmates via our online discussion forum. I’ve since shared it with other students when we do this activity.
A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words activity - YOU TRY IT
“A picture is worth a thousand words”

“Ah-ha!” exclaimed Squirt, “It’s finally all mine!”

All day, Squirt had been trying desperately to get the food in the newly filled bird feeder. This was no ordinary bird feeder. This was a top of the line, wooden house of gluttony. This was the essence of bird feeders. The humans that lived in the house next door to Squirt’s oak tree accommodations always put an overabundance of goodies in it. Squirt’s only problem was Bert and Janice, the blue jays that lived upstairs.

Bert and Janice argued constantly, and today were no different. Today it was about remodeling the bird house. Bert liked the outdoors feel of the nest. He felt comfortable in his twig recliner and grass woven bed. Janice, on the other hand, had found some lace and ribbon on a recent trip to the mud bog while searching for worms. She so desperately wanted to add curtains and color in hopes to make the home more feminine. This “discussion” of course had to take place at the only spot Squirt wanted access to, the bird feeder.

“Why the bird feeder?” Squirt thought to himself. “Why don’t they discuss this with the cat? Maybe he can give them some decorating pointers,” Squirt thought with a sly grin. Some nights, Squirt would lie awake in the moss that was his bed, and picture the blue jays going to the cat for help with their most recent argument. The cat would be so happy to help, but he would really be waiting for the right opportunity to make them his dinner.

Squirt needed to come up with a plan. His stomach was beginning to make protest to the time it was taking to put something in it. Bert and Janice never really ate anything out of the bird feeder. They were always too busy arguing to eat. All Squirt needed was a distraction. So he began to think as no squirrel ever has before.

Squirt tried throwing an acorn at them, but that didn’t work. They didn’t even flinch. He tried cawing like a blue jay, but that didn’t work either. Squirt had to be smart about this. All of a sudden, a light bulb went off in his head. “I’ve got it!” he shouted with glee.

Squirt had just remembered that the female human from next door just threw out some old dish towels and sheets. He remembered that some of them had ribbons, lace, and most importantly, sequins on them. Squirt took off across the yard like lightening. He just hoped he got to the trash can before the garbage truck. As he arrived at the can of victory, he noticed that the lid was off. He said to himself, “This is going to be easier than I thought.”

Squirt didn’t waste any time making his way up the silver can. Once at the top, he saw his ammunition. There lay all kinds colorful fabrics and lace. Squirt got as many little pieces as his little hands could carry. Since he knew sequins would be icing on the cake, he carefully placed a few in his mouth to be sure he didn’t drop any on the way back to the bird feeder. Once he got back to the tree, he laid the treasures for Janice just so in the lawn. After they were positioned correctly, he scurried back to the roof top for a better view.
It didn’t take long for Janice to notice the mysterious gifts below. Janice took flight, and Bert followed after. “Look at these beautiful ribbons Bert! See, it was meant to be! Imagine what these would look like in our nest!” Janice said dreamily.

“No way in hell is this stuff coming into our nest!” shouted Bert, putting his foot down.

Before Bert knew it, Janice had a beak full of items and was halfway to the bird feeder to take a closer look. Bert started after her. “Give them to me! I’m not going to live in some ‘girly’ nest! I won’t stand for it!” he yelled as he took a loose end of material Janice was holding.

Janice was holding on for dear life. She wasn’t about to let go. Bert was tugging as if his manhood depended on it. All of a sudden, Squirt’s dreams come true. Bert and Janice were so busy playing tug of war that they didn’t notice how much the bird feeder started swinging. Just as Bert took his last tug towards victory, the bird feeder came off of its hook in the tree and came down with a thunderous band on to the deck below. Bird seed went flying everywhere.

Bert was so distracted by the noise, he didn’t notice Janice frantically flying towards their nest with the lace and ribbon in tow. Bert had no choice but to follow her in.

Squirt was in heaven! The blue jays were gone and the bird seed was all his. He took a minute to just roll in it, savoring the sweet smell of victory.
Who Owns This?

I have used this activity with middle school, high school, and college students, and it can easily be used with younger ones. I usually use it in conjunction with descriptive or narrative writing, but I’ve also used it as a way to show categories of items when discussing division/classification writing.

I start by asking students to think about their rooms at home. Once they’ve done that, I ask what’s there. I then ask, “What do our possessions in our bedrooms have to say about who we are?” That usually gets some thought going.

This activity can be done one of several ways. My favorite is to assemble a bag of objects from around my house. If you do this, try to make them as varied as possible because the objective is to have students write about the “person” who owns these items. Include some gender-neutral objects, unusual objects, whatever strikes your fancy. You can even include the bag as well. The number of objects can be adjusted to fit your schedule, how elaborate you want the writing to be, how much you want to challenge your students. I find that 8-15 is a good range. Any fewer doesn’t provide much scope for imagination, and any more just gets overwhelming.

An alternate way to do this is to find some pictures of objects to use. These can be pictures from magazines, from the Internet (there are a lot of great stock photo sites, plus Flickr, Photobucket, and others), or your own photo album. The photos can be placed on a Web page, projected with a document camera, or passed around the classroom. The number of pictures can be adjusted, also.

Procedure

1. Explain that the items they will be seeing all belong to one person. As they look at the items (or the pictures), they should be forming an image of the person. They can make a note of the items if needed. They will eventually write a description of the person or a story about the person, including as many items as possible.
2. Hold up each item (or picture) one at a time for a few moments. Pass the item/picture around. Allow a few moments in between items if needed.
3. Once all items/pictures are passed around, place them on a table at the front of the classroom. Encourage students to come up while they are writing to examine any object(s) they wish to see again.
4. Allow a period of time for writing. I have done as short as ten minutes or as long as 30. This can be adjusted according to your needs and schedule.
5. I try to involve some sort of sharing time, but it is not essential. Possibilities include the following:
   • Have students share their writing with a partner. Comments can be made if desired. The sharing can even occur in small groups, perhaps with the group selecting one student’s writing to be shared with the class.
   • Share the writing with the class. When I do this, I try to mention a few words, phrases, or images that remained with me. This can lead to a good discussion as other students add their input.
Who Owns This? activity - YOU TRY IT
We Didn't Start the Fire (based on the Billy Joel song)

I first thought of this activity when I got Billy Joel’s Storm Front album and would listen to it on my commute to and from work. I was struck by the lyrics, particularly by how many things I was personally familiar with. I wanted to use it with students but could never think of a way to do so. When developing a unit plan for an NCTE conference project a number of years ago, I found my inspiration. I presented this activity at an OCTE conference and have since used it with my community college students during a discussion of narrative writing.

This activity would work better with older (middle school and above) who remember more clearly the cultural and historical influences on their world.

Procedure

1. In 1989, BJ wrote a song on his album Storm Front called “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” The song has something to do with where he was in his life at that time. Some may have heard of the song.

2. Play song, asking students to listen carefully.

3. Elicit responses: What did you hear?

4. Put BJ Web page with lyrics to song on projector. Instruct students to scan them. What do they notice? Web page can be accessed at http://www.billyjoel.com/music/storm-front/we-didnt-start-fire

5. Play song again—students can follow along or simply listen.

6. Ask students what is going on in the song and how it might relate to BJ’s life. (He turned 40 in 1989 and is reviewing news events and people from all the decades in his life).

7. Have students take out a sheet of paper and do the following:
   
   - Make 3 columns: 0-9, 10-14, and 15+ (these ranges can be adjusted for the ages of your students).
   - As best as they can remember, have them note important events from those age ranges. Example: If a student was 10 when Barack Obama was inaugurated, that could go in the middle column.
   - Students should aim for at least 10 items among the 3 columns. They will probably have the hardest time with the first column; this will be addressed later.

8. Have students jot answers to the following questions:
   
   - Why did you select those particular events?
• How did you remember the events (associating them with something, good memory, etc.)?

9. Have students share their lists with a partner.

10. Students can then write any number of things.

• A poem or song that incorporates the events.
• A short writing (description, explanation, narration) about one of the events.
• An exploration of how an event or events have influenced their life.
• An interview project with a parent or other adult about one of the events and how it influenced that person’s life.

You can start with a short in-class freewrite, or you can ask students to write one of them at home and share the next day. The pieces could be revised, published in a class chapbook, a blog or wiki, a Facebook page, or something similar.

Others have taken this song for their inspiration and created some items that could be used. Here are two links.

• [http://yeli.us/Flash/Fire.html](http://yeli.us/Flash/Fire.html) -- Has images and links to Wikipedia articles about all the people and events mentioned in the song, plus the cheeky attitude makes it a fun one to use.
We Didn’t Start the Fire activity – YOU TRY IT