

Incorporating Writing into the Classroom

Shutta Crum

I. Lower elementary: K-1

1. WE ARE READERS! Have students pair up with special reading “buddies” and allow a few minutes each school day for your readers and pre-readers to share books—even wordless books—with each other. They will echo modeling behavior and declare that they are “reading.” Reread favorite books to the class. This reinforces the stories so your students can then “read” them to their buddies.
2. STORYTELLING CHAIR: Children get a turn once a week/month in the chair to tell a story to the group. Announce story-sharing time in a special way. (bells, music, etc.)
3. BEGINNINGS, MIDDLES, AND ENDS: Show students two illustrations from a book; the beginning one, and a middle one. Have them discuss where the story could be going. What might the “end” picture look like? The class as a whole could write the ending. Read the ending and compare it to the class story. No right or wrong results! (Adopt this for older students by sharing only the opening or final illustration.)
 - ⇒ *Art teachers:* have the students draw what they imagine would be the final illustration, after showing a series of earlier ones from a story.
4. WE ARE TALENTED, TOO! (Credit for this idea goes to the many online sites about this book!) Read ***Anansi the Spider*** by Gerald McDermott. Have students make nametags on which is written a name that reflects a talent for each student. Each student gets to wear a special talent nametag all day. Reinforce the various talents during the day. “Strong Man” will get to be the one to lift boxes, chairs. “Good Friend” will get to help others, etc. *(An interesting variation on this is having students name fellow students--only good talents, please! It can be rewarding and surprising for children to discover what good things others think of them.)
 - ⇒ *Phys. Ed., Art, and Music:* When the children come to you, read each nametag and make use of the stated talents. “Fast Runner” gets to be the one to run and pick up the balls, etc. “Beautiful Voice” gets to do a solo, etc. McDermott’s telling of this Ashanti legend draws visually from African design motifs. The pictures echo the traditional woven fabric of the Ashanti, into which they have long woven the rich symbols of their art and folklore. Each son’s talent is interwoven into the design. Art teachers could help students design symbols for their nametags/other artwork.

II. Middle elementary: 2-3

5. JOURNALING: (“Brain-dumping”) Facing a blank page can be intimidating, even for adults. Have students keep a PRIVATE journal in which they *dump out* their thoughts, problems, and concerns every morning. Allow them a bit of time for this. Occasionally, when they need writing ideas *at other writing times*, suggest they refer to the journal as a source book. In other words, you are not putting pressure on them to create new ideas/make new connections while

facing a blank page as one does in brain-storming sessions. *Do not* just use the brain dumping exercise prior to a writing exercise, or the students will know what is coming and will begin to self-censor. Use it regularly to dump out thoughts, but only use it irregularly as a source for writing.



Art teachers: make use of the journals for sketchbooks as well. Seeing the mix of words with drawings can help students understand the connections between literature and art. Art teachers share your own sketchbooks.

6. BECOMING THE “I.” Read a traditional tale such as Little Red Riding Hood, and have students write a diary/journal entry from the perspective of one of the characters. What would grandma’s journal entry sound like at the end of the day? (Don’t read a version in which grandma gets eaten, unless she’s also spit out.) How would the wolf’s diary read? Red’s? Or, Red’s mother’s? (Note: teaching children to see through someone else’s eyes teaches the values of empathy, compromise, anger management, etc., as well.)

7. PLOT STRUCTURE: (from *Deep Revision* by Meredith Sue Willis. 1993.) This exercise can be presented as a puzzle. After introducing and talking about the various types of plot structure, have typed up, about a dozen lines that are the basic events in a story. (Use a story your students won’t recognize.) Cut up the events into strips, so that there is one event per strip. Give them to a group to put into the right sequence. This can be done with large groups—half a class--so that the kids each get an event. They can then discuss among themselves and line up in front of the class in the order they think the story should be told and read their slips. The story can be recorded and discussed. Or small groups can work on different stories, gluing down the strips when they think they’ve got it worked out. Use simple plots; cumulative ones work well.

8. COMPARE & CONTRAST: Talk about how some stories use this technique. Read books with contrapuntal plots such as *Just Like Daddy* by Frank Asch, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch* by Trinka Hakes Noble, or *Click!* by Shutta Crum. Write stories that compare/contrast two characters pulled from a hat. (Have a bunch of slips with types of characters on them, or see #11, below, about a “WHO” box..)

II. Upper elementary: 4-5

9. JOURNALING: Add the idea of “collecting” words. A word a day may be collected from a dictionary or a thesaurus and kept in the journals. This can be at random, or the assignment can be that during the day each child must spend a minute or two perusing the dictionary for a word whose meaning/sound they like. Idea: make it an alliteration journal. Favorite words can be kept on pages dedicated to each letter of the alphabet. Use “Word of the Day” websites.

10. METER: Music and classroom teacher use the same book: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost. (Illus.: Susan Jeffers. Dutton, 1978.) Talk about meter, rhythm, and rhyme. Have the kids beat out the iambic pattern and then try writing something using that pattern. This is an excellent teaching book for alliteration, assonance, and consonance, as well.

⇒ *Music teachers:* clap out the iambic tetrameter meter (soft-hard for 4 beats) using the tune to “Greensleeves.” Or “Fernando’s Hideaway.” Look at other poems that have been made into songs. Have the kids write lyrics to specific beats.

11. THE NECESSITIES: Collect and study good opening lines that provide the *WHO*, *WHAT*, *WHERE*, and *WHEN* of a story. Make a box with a lot of “WHOs” in it written on sturdy card stock. For ex., “a carpenter,” or “a pixie,” or “a mountain lion.” Then make another box with a lot of “WHATs,” such as “wanted to learn to dance,” “making milkshakes,” or “sleeping.” Then have two more boxes with “WHEREs” and “WHENs,” such as “under a rock,” “on the roof of the school,” etc. and “in the middle of the night,” or “during lunch hour.” Kids can take one/several and mix them up from each box to begin a story whenever they’re stuck. Teach that the “HOW” and “WHY” are the story--the bits they have to write themselves.

--Have the kids contribute their own WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN to the boxes.

12. THE “HOOK” OF THE DAY/WEEK: Post a good opening line with a strong hook on the bulletin board, or write it across the blackboard. Students can use it as a jumping off point to write a story. Allow writing time, the way you do free reading time. Don’t grade these or edit them unless a child asks for help. But do suggest each child collect them into a personal anthology. At the end of the year each student will have a collection of stories that—though they may not be polished—will be a start for future work as he or she learns how to revise.

13. WRITING DIALOGUE: Show a short scene from a video that students don’t know by heart, with the sound turned down. Stop and have the students write dialogue between the characters. You may need to rewind and play the scene more than once. What clues can writers pick up from the setting, and the physical attributes and body language of the speakers? What could be the outcome of this dialogue/story? (You’ll have to play the scene again with sound when everyone is done! But emphasize that the idea is NOT to guess what was actually said. No right or wrong answer here.)

⇒ *Music teachers:* for music appreciation, do something similar with video scenes and talk to the students about what would be the appropriate score for this scene. Scary music? Romantic music? Have students try choosing the right music based on setting, events, and characters. And then listen to what was chosen to score the film and discuss. How would they score the scenes they wrote in the classroom?

14. Personification: Define and talk about how prevalent personification is. For ex: “the economy demands,” “slumping expectations,” “yawning chasms,” “fighting words.” Individually, or in groups, have students go through the front section of a newspaper with a highlighter and underline examples. Read them aloud. Practice writing personification using inanimate objects or abstract ideas.