

7 Narrative Writing Activities

Narrative writing serves an "informing" function, reporting events that happened or telling stories. Two skills involved in this kind of communication are the placement of events in an appropriate sequence and the selection of details to include in the story. The "Personal Experience" paper, for example, is a valuable exercise for developing these skills. The following activities are some others that I have used with my students:

Telling a Story One-Word-at-a-Time

The series of activities below serves to focus students' attention on the skills involved in narrative speaking and writing. It can also be used as an introduction to the presentation and discussion of the essential elements of a story.

Step 1. "Today in class we are all going to participate in the telling of a story. Now, I want to be fair about this and make sure that each person has an equal chance to contribute, so let's tell the story *one word at a time*. I'll start with the first word, and then Raymond, you add a word, and then we'll continue up and down the rows until everyone has had a chance to contribute. Feel free to start a new sentence whenever it seems appropriate, and don't take a long time to think of what to say next; just listen carefully to how the story is developing and then add on your word quickly."

This activity not only leads students to focus on the idea of "sequence"—it also develops their listening abilities. Students are careful to listen to the words contributed by their classmates, knowing that their turn will come to add on a word that will "fit," that will build on the words and events that have already occurred and so keep the story moving along. This will be difficult to do if one has not been listening closely to what students have said before and how the story is developing through the various one-word contributions. If, for some reason, the story seems to be going nowhere, simply stop and then start a new story with the next student in line volunteering the first word.

Step 2. It won't take students long to catch on to the way the above exercise proceeds and to be able to contribute their word quickly to the building story. The problem is that the students don't have the opportunity to participate *often*. With 25

to 30 students in the class, it takes quite a while for the story to come around for students to make a *second* word contribution. So, follow up this initial activity by having students break into small groups of five or six students each. Now, each group should try the same exercise, one student in each group volunteering the first word and the others adding on to it. With this structure, students will be participating frequently, contributing every fifth or sixth word to the story. Instruct the groups that, if they should find that their story, for whatever reason, doesn't seem to be working out and building appropriately, they should simply start a new story with a new beginning word.

Step 3. "We're going to try this exercise again as a whole class, but this time we're going to tell a story one *sentence* at a time." Sometimes I will add a suggestion that we should try to tell a science fiction story. So my first sentence might be: "The rocket was set for blast-off." Then, Vincent will contribute the second sentence, and so on up and down the rows until the whole class has had a chance to contribute to the story. I have also had the class build a mystery ("There were three loud knocks at the door, and then silence") and a fairy tale. Do this variation first as a whole class, and then break students into small groups again so they can add on a sentence more frequently.

Step 4. Having practiced building a story cooperatively—first by adding one word, and then one sentence, at a time—students are ready to try making extended contributions to a group effort. They should assemble in small groups consisting of five students each. Instruct each student in the group to begin writing a story *individually*, but add these directions: "Write only a description of the *setting* of this story—where and when does it take place? Set the scene with as vivid and detailed a description as you can." Allow 5 to 6 minutes for the writing. At the end of this time, ask the students to stop and pass their paper to the person sitting on their left. Each student now has another group member's story in front of them. They should read what has been written so far and then add on to it, but with these instructions: "Introduce the main characters. Who are they? What do they do? What do they look like? What else do you know about them? Anything you can tell us about these characters will be helpful."

After 7 to 10 more minutes of writing, have the students stop and pass their paper to the left once more. They should once again read what has been written so far and then add on to the story by describing the *problem* that the characters

must solve. The next time that the papers are passed to the left, students will add on to the new story in front of them by *complicating* the problem: "No matter what the problem is that the characters are facing—no matter how bad the situation *is*—*make it worse*." After students write for several minutes on this aspect of the story, the papers are passed to the left for the last time, and the students are directed to *resolve* the story, to write the ending: "What happens? How does it all work out?" Allow time at the end of this exercise for students to read the various stories that were produced cooperatively in their group.

Step 5. An appropriate follow-up to the above sequence of activities involves students in completing unfinished stories. Look in publishers' catalogues for books of unfinished stories that students might use for this purpose. Or read aloud the beginning of a short story and have students write an appropriate ending. Students are learning about the concept of "coherence," coming to realize that the ending must take into account and flow naturally from what has occurred previously in the story.

A variation of this follow-up activity is to have students write their own beginning for an unfinished story, stopping at a suspenseful point. I point out that suspense is a feeling of wanting to know "What will happen next?" So one can arouse this feeling in the reader by creating problems for the characters to work through but not resolving them immediately. Complicate the situation—make it worse—without writing the ending that ends the reader's suspense about what will happen next.

Writing a Character Sketch

A good character sketch involves *showing*, not telling, what a person or character is like. This is "telling":

Wendy was angry when she came into class this morning. I mean, she was really, really, REALLY angry!!

This is "showing":

Wendy flung open the door to the classroom, stomped to her desk in the back of the room, threw herself into her seat, and slammed her books to the floor.

"What's wrong, Wendy?" her friend asked.

"Shut up!" Wendy snarled.

"Showing" involves a description of what the character says and does that reveals the character's mood and personality. It makes a character sketch come alive and allows

the reader to come to know the person through that person's words and actions. Helping students see the distinction between "showing" and "telling," then, is a good way to prepare them for writing a character sketch.

To allow students to practice this approach of *showing* rather than *telling*, I hand out a sheet listing several emotions and feelings and moods accompanied by the following instructions and suggestions¹:

Here is a list of words that describes the ways that people feel at times:

angry	depressed	disappointed
enthusiastic	fearful	frenzied
grouchy	happy	immature
joyous	miserable	moody
proud	reckless	revengeful
sad	shy	silly
tormented	troubled	vicious
violent	wild	arrogant
defeated	compassionate	thoughtful
excited	lonely	afraid

Directions: Create a scene in which a character displays one of these emotions. Following are questions to consider:

Who will your character be?

What will he or she be doing?

Where is your character? At home? At school? Alone? Or with others?

What has happened to him or her? Why does your character feel this way?

Suggestions:

Make your character believable and realistic.

Describe things in detail so your audience can "see" the action.

Use dialogue to help move the story along.

Some examples:

Impatient

Her math class sixth period seemed to last a thousand years. She stared intently at the clock on the wall, wishing that, somehow, she could push the

hands around the clock simply with her eyes. The seconds ticked by slowly, the second hand moving past the 2, now the 3, crawling toward 4 and 5. Ten minutes more—each minute lasting an hour—and she would be free. She had it all planned with the precision of a space shuttle launch: out the door, turn right, three doors down to the next hallway, turn left, grab the phone (she clutched the quarter in her pocket, rubbing it hard between her fingers). Dial the number of the hospital and—at last! find out the results of her mother's surgery.

Nervous

He sat there stiffly in his seat in the classroom, flipping the pages of his textbook, trying to photograph every formula on every page, going over each explanation. He shot a glance at the clock: two minutes till the bell. Then he'd face it at last—the final exam that would determine whether he passed the course, or failed. He remembered the teacher's words last week: "I don't know, Dave. It doesn't look good. You've missed six assignments and turned in poor tests every time."

"I can do it, Mr. Anders. I really can. I KNOW this stuff."

"Well," Mr. Anders replied, "We'll see. The final's next week. If you receive a satisfactory score, I'll pass you. Fair enough?"

Dave was suddenly startled out of his remembrance by the ringing of the bell. He stared dumbly at Mr. Anders striding into the room, paper in hand. He slowly closed his book and placed it carefully on the floor beside him, taking a copy of the exam from the teacher's extended hand.

He sighed, picked up his pencil, bent down over his desk, and started.

Once students have completed this exercise in "showing, not telling," they are ready to choose a real person as the focus for their character sketch. The success of their sketch will depend on their ability to "show" the person's character through anecdotes and actions. I introduce the assignment by reading aloud James Thurber's essay, "Snapshot of a Dog" (1945). It's a clever, descriptive, poignant story in which Thurber reveals his pet's character by telling a series of anecdotes, each story illustrating a different trait:

Snapshot of a Dog*

I ran across a dim photograph of him the other day, going through some old things. He's been dead twenty-five years. His name was Rex (my

*Copyright ©1935 James Thurber. ©1963 Helen Thurber, Rosemary A. Thurber. From *The Middle-Aged Man on the Flying Trapeze*, published by Harper & Row.

two brothers and I named him when we were in our early teens) and he was a bull terrier. "An American bull terrier," we used to say, proudly; none of your English bulls. He had one brindle eye that sometimes made him look like a clown and sometimes reminded you of a politician with derby hat and cigar. The rest of him was white except for a brindle saddle that always seemed to be slipping off and a brindle stocking on a hind leg. Nevertheless, there was a nobility about him. He was big and muscular and beautifully made. He never lost his dignity even when trying to accomplish the extravagant tasks my brothers and myself used to set for him. One of these was the bringing of a ten-foot wooden rail into the yard through the back gate. We would throw it out into the alley and tell him to go get it. Rex was as powerful as a wrestler, and there were not many things that he couldn't manage somehow to get hold of with his great jaws and lift or drag to wherever he wanted to put them, or wherever we wanted them put. He could catch the rail at the balance and lift it clear of the ground and trot with great confidence toward the gate. Of course, since the gate was only four feet wide or so, he couldn't bring the rail in broadside. He found that out when he got a few terrific jolts, but he wouldn't give up. He finally figured out how to do it, by dragging the rail, holding onto one end, growling. He got a great, wagging satisfaction out of his work. We used to bet kids who had never seen Rex in action that he could catch a baseball thrown as high as they could throw it. He almost never let us down. Rex could hold a baseball with ease in his mouth, in one cheek, as if it were a chew of tobacco.

He was a tremendous fighter, but he never started fights. I don't believe he liked to get into them, despite the fact that he came from a line of fighters. He never went for another dog's throat but for one of its ears (that teaches a dog a lesson), and he would get his grip, close his eyes, and hold on. He could hold on for hours. His longest fight lasted from dusk until almost pitch-dark, one Sunday. It was fought in East Main Street in Columbus with a large, snarly nondescript that belonged to a big colored man. When Rex finally got his ear grip, the brief whirlwind of snarling turned to screeching. It was frightening to listen to and to watch. The Negro boldly picked the dogs up somehow and began swinging them around his head, and finally let them fly like a hammer

in a hammer throw, but although they landed ten feet away with a great plump, Rex still held on.

The two dogs eventually worked their way to the middle of the car tracks, and after a while two or three streetcars were held up by the fight. A motorman tried to pry Rex's jaws open with a switch rod; somebody lighted a fire and made a torch of a stick and held that to Rex's tail, but he paid no attention. In the end, all the residents and storekeepers in the neighborhood were on hand, shouting this, suggesting that. Rex's joy of battle, when battle was joined, was almost tranquil. He had a kind of pleasant expression during fights, not a vicious one, his eyes closed in what would have seemed to be sleep had it not been for the turmoil of the struggle. The Oak Street Fire Department finally had to be sent for—I don't know why nobody thought of it sooner. Five or six pieces of apparatus arrived, followed by a battalion chief. A hose was attached and a powerful stream of water was turned on the dogs. Rex held on for several moments more while the torrent buffeted him about like a log in a freshet. He was a hundred yards away from where the fight started when he finally let go.

The story of that Homeric fight got all around town, and some of our relatives looked upon the incident as a blot on the family name. They insisted that we get rid of Rex, but we were very happy with him, and nobody could have made us give him up. We would have left town with him first, along any road there was to go. It would have been different, perhaps, if he'd ever started fights, or looked for trouble. But he had a gentle disposition. He never bit a person in the ten strenuous years that he lived, nor ever growled at anyone except prowlers. He killed cats, that is true, but quickly and neatly and without especial malice, the way men kill certain animals. It was the only thing he did that we could never cure him of doing. He never killed, or even chased, a squirrel. I don't know why. He had his own philosophy about such things. He never ran barking after wagons or automobiles. He didn't seem to see the idea of pursuing something you couldn't catch, or something you couldn't do anything with, even if you did catch it. A wagon was one of the things he couldn't tug along with his mighty jaws, and he knew it. Wagons, therefore, were not a part of his world.

Swimming was his favorite recreation. The first time he ever saw a body of water (Alum Creek), he trotted nervously along the steep bank for a while, fell to barking wildly, and finally plunged in from a height of eight feet or more. I shall always remember that shining, virgin dive. Then he swam upstream and back just for the pleasure of it, like a man. It was fun to see him battle upstream against a stiff current, struggling and growling every foot of the way. He had as much fun in the water as any person I have known. You didn't have to throw a stick in the water to get him to go in. Of course, he would bring back a stick to you if you did throw one in. He would even have brought back a piano if you had thrown one in.

That reminds me of the night, way after midnight, when he went a-roving in the light of the moon and brought back a small chest of drawers that he found somewhere—how far from the house nobody ever knew; since it was Rex, it could easily have been half a mile. There were no drawers in the chest when he got it home, and it wasn't a good one—he hadn't taken it out of anybody's house; it was just an old cheap piece that somebody had abandoned on a trash heap. Still, it was something he wanted, probably because it presented a nice problem in transportation. It tested his mettle. We first knew about his achievement when, deep in the night, we heard him trying to get the chest up onto the porch. It sounded as if two or three people were trying to tear the house down. We came downstairs and turned on the porch light. Rex was on the top step trying to pull the thing up, but it had caught somehow and he was just holding his own. I suppose he would have held his own till dawn if we hadn't helped him. The next day we carted the chest miles away and threw it out. If we had thrown it out in a nearby alley, he would have brought it home again, as a small token of his integrity in such matters. After all, he had been taught to carry heavy wooden objects about, and he was proud of his prowess.

I am glad Rex never saw a trained police dog jump. He was just an amateur jumper himself, but the most daring and tenacious I have ever seen. He would take on any fence we pointed out to him. Six feet was easy for him, and he could do eight by making a tremendous leap and hauling himself over finally by his paws, grunting and straining; but he lived and died without knowing that twelve- and sixteen-foot walls were too much for him. Frequently, after letting him try to go over one for a while, we would have to carry him home. He would never have given up trying.

There was in his world no such thing as the impossible. Even death couldn't beat him down. He died, it is true, but only, as one of his admirers said, after "straight-arming the death angel" for more than an hour. Late one afternoon he wandered home, too slowly and too uncertainly to be the Rex that had trotted briskly homeward up our avenue for ten years. I think we all knew when he came through the gate that he was dying. He had apparently taken a terrible beating, probably from the owner of some dog that he had got into a fight with. His head and body were scarred. His heavy collar with the teeth marks of many a battle on it was awry; some of the big brass studs in it were sprung loose from the leather. He licked at our hands and, staggering, fell, but got up again. We could see that he was looking for someone. One of his three masters was not home. He did not get home for an hour. During that hour the bull terrier fought against death as he had fought against the cold, strong current of Alum Creek, as he had fought to climb twelve-foot walls. When the person he was waiting for did come through the gate, whistling, ceasing to whistle, Rex walked a few wobbly paces toward him, touched his hand with his muzzle, and fell down again. This time he didn't get up.

After reading Thurber's story, I direct students to draw a giant "T" on a sheet of paper. On the left-hand side of the "T", students list the various traits of Thurber's dog, as revealed in the story: "brave," "determined," etc. On the right-hand side, students describe an anecdote from the story that illustrates and reveals that trait:

Trait	How is it revealed?
1. brave	1. dives into Alum Creek from a height of 10 feet.
2. determined	2. tries to jump 12-foot walls
3. etc.	3. etc.

The next step is for students to create and organize their notes and information for their own character sketch. One way to do this is to create a second giant "T", this time listing the

traits of their chosen character on the left side and a brief summary of the illustrative anecdotes they'll use on the right side. If done conscientiously, these notes and this structure will make the actual writing of the character sketch much easier since all the ideas have been generated ahead of time.

Some of my students write character sketches of their parents or one of their friends or teachers. Others follow Thurber's model and write a sketch of their pet. This is what I did in the following example:

His name was "Muggsy." At least, that's what my niece told us when she brought the month-old puppy to us one summer. "What a dumb name!" I thought. Surely we can do better than THAT. Let's name him Johann Sebastian Bark or Dwight D. Eisenhowl or Paw Newman. How about Christian Diog or Virginia Woof or Edgar Allan Paw or Pierre Cardog? But, by the time I had settled on a really GOOD name, "Barkley," we had had the puppy for a week and he was responding quite happily to—of all the names—"Muggsy." So, "Muggsy" it was; "Muggs" when we were in a hurry to call him; and "Muggers" to our neighbors.

Muggsy was small as a puppy—tiny, in fact. We had no idea how big he would become since we had never really seen an adult cockapoo before. When we first allowed Muggs to come into our bedroom at night, he dashed under the bed and curled up there, ready to sleep. He was so small as a puppy that he barely needed to duck his head as he walked under the bedframe. Every night from then on, Muggsy would sleep under the bed but, while the opening between the floor and the bedframe remained the same size, Muggsy did not. As a fully-grown adult, then, Muggs would approach the bedframe, flatten himself against the floor, extend his back legs fully behind him, and inch and crawl and slide his way under the bed. It was a tight squeeze every time, but Muggs never seemed to mind.

At one time we thought we would send Muggs to obedience school and make him "new and improved." There was even a conveniently scheduled series of classes being offered by the local YMCA. Of course, Muggs' father—that's me—had to go with, and be trained right along with him. Maybe that was the problem: we both flunked the class.

We didn't mean to, of course. It wasn't OUR fault. But look at the problems we faced: one of the exercises each week, for instance, had us all walking in a circle around this huge gymnasium. Fine! But walking just behind me was a

full-grown Doberman Pinscher who constantly strained to move forward and get closer to me. I knew what he was doing, you see. He was eyeing my backside and thinking, "Oh, good! Lunchtime!"

Whenever I walked in that circle, then, Muggsy could not keep up with me. I moved fast, always trying to get more than a jaw's length away from the Doberman. It was "Walk or be eaten" and Muggsy would just have to watch out for himself.

The Doberman wasn't the only problem, either. There was also Gertie, an elderly woman who served as the instructor's assistant. The instructor himself was a pleasant-enough person who stood in the center of our large circle and gave directions and guidance. The enforcement of his directions, however, was left to Gertie, and she did her job well. One time, for example, we were told to have our dog sit, then gently tug on the leash to get the dog back up and walking again. I guess my tugs were TOO gentle: Muggsy remained sitting, barely bothering to look up at me with those eyes that said, "Was there something you wanted, perchance, or is there a breeze in here?"

Unfortunately, at that moment Gertie saw us. Everyone else was by now up and moving, but not Muggs. He was planted on the floor, seriously considering taking a nap as a suitable way to pass the time. Well, Gertie stomped over to us, grabbed the leash from my hands, and yelled, "No, no, here's how to do it!" She yanked on the leash with a force that all but separated Muggsy's furry head from his body. Muggs wasn't only UP, he was now three inches longer than he had been before. He choked, gasped, and struggled for air as Gertie handed me back the leash with a triumphant "See how it works?"

Oh, yes, I saw. And so did Muggs. From that time on in class, all Gertie had to do was glance in Muggsy's direction—no matter how far away she was, even if it was across the whole length of the gymnasium—but establish that eye contact for an instant—and Muggs would simply piddle on the floor in terror. Every time. After the fourth or fifth piddle, I thought "Who needs this?" and withdrew Muggs and his father from the class. We were both relieved.

So Muggsy, the obedience school dropout, was never properly trained, but he was still a delight. He settled into certain routines and became as much a part of our family as our own children. He had to take baths just like our own children though our own kids didn't jump out of the tub and run dripping wet through every room of the house, crouching behind sofas, bouncing off

beds, racing upstairs into the kitchen and hitting the vinyl floor at 35 MPH and skidding across it to slam into a cabinet drawer. No, our kids didn't do all this; but Muggsy did. Our kids didn't need 7 towels to dry themselves, either.

Muggsy had some strange habits. No matter how late at night I walked him around the block so he could piddle goodnight to his favorite bushes, he would always want to go out again—at 3 in the morning—every morning. But there was a problem: Dad was asleep at 3 A.M., and Dad always seemed to be the only one who knew how to open the front door. What to do? Muggsy solved this dilemma by crawling out from under the bed, trotting over to my side, and sticking his nose in my ear. And then he'd snort. You'd wake up pretty quick, too, if some beast shoved his cold, wet nose in your ear and then blew out the contents of his dripping nostrils. And then Muggsy would stand back a few steps and survey his handiwork. Was I awake now? Or did I need another blast from the pest?

We miss Muggsy now. He isn't with us anymore. About 5 years ago, he developed epilepsy, and the first few seizures were frightening. The doctor gave us pills to control the problem, and that worked pretty well ... for awhile. But then the seizures came again, lasting longer and occurring more frequently. We couldn't go on like this.

On the last day, my wife took Muggs to the vet one more time. She had made an appointment in advance for this particular visit. She waited in the front as the vet took the leash and led Muggs gently into the back room. A few minutes later, the vet returned—alone this time—carrying Muggsy's leash and collar. He was gone, and we still miss him.

When the students assemble in small groups to read and evaluate their rough drafts of this assignment, they should focus on the anecdotes they use in their sketches to illustrate their characters' various traits. Are the anecdotes appropriate and relevant? Are they indeed illustrative of the particular feature that the author wants to show? Some problems for students to watch out for include a tendency to get sidetracked and write a "Personal Experience" paper in which an incident is narrated, but the point of the narrative is lost. The author doesn't make clear what this incident reveals about the character being described and profiled. Another problem arises when students work under the mistaken notion that "more is better" and try to write up every anecdote they can remember about their subject. Three or

four pertinent, vivid examples, each illustrating a different facet of the subject's personality, should result in a well-written, interesting composition.

"The Mysteries of Harris Burdick"

One day in my writing class, thirty seconds before the bell was to ring to signal the start of the period, a student rushed to my desk with a book in her hand and said excitedly, "Here! Look at this!" She shoved the book at me and told me to read it right now.

"But the class is about to start," I protested.

"It won't take long. Just look at it!" she begged.

I opened the book, Chris Van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* (1984) and began turning the pages. She was right: it didn't take me long at all to read it since each page featured only a drawing accompanied by a single line from a story. But, what lines! One page showed a drawing of two circles of light, like fireflies, hovering over a sleeping boy, and the accompanying story line: "A tiny voice asked, 'Is he the one?'" Another single story line stated, "It all began when someone left the window open." Each page and each line was exciting, leading readers to wonder what was happening and inviting them to fill in the rest of the missing story with information and fantasies from their own imagination.

Ever since my first introduction to it, I have shown this book to each of my writing classes, and the response is always the same: students ask if they can write a story using one of the "Harris Burdick" lines as a stimulus. Sometimes the line is used at the beginning of the students' stories; other times it is embedded in the middle or near the end. But as story starters, the "Harris Burdick" lines are exciting, leading students to work enthusiastically on narrative writing.

Something else that students have done with the "Harris Burdick" lines is to create single lines of their own. I tried it myself and enjoyed the word-play and the struggle to create something suspenseful and exciting and intriguing. The examples below are some of the best ones that my students and I produced:

The Time Machine

In the front window, he saw the future; in the back window, he saw the past. But he couldn't believe what he saw in the side window.

—Corinthia

The Choice

In front of him was a big board with three flashing buttons, red, yellow, and blue. Which one was the right one?

—Melissa

The Visit

It left as suddenly as it had come, and the people stood in wonder at what it had left behind.

—Robin

After Midnight

She felt its presence again even before she turned around. —Laurie

She adjusted the microscope and gasped at what she saw.

—Jessica

A look of horror washed across his face as he peered into the enormous yellow eyes.

—Zan

She stared at the building across the street. Two hours before, the lot had been empty.

—Alison

He watched in horror as his image slowly disappeared from the mirror.

—Andy

You might have your students write their own "Harris Burdick" lines and then type up the best ones, hand them out to the class, and invite students to use one of them as a stimulus for story writing. Some of the best stories my students have written have been produced this way.

Punctuating Dialogue

For many of the preceding activities, students will be using dialogue between characters as a way to reveal personality and move the action along. This is an appropriate time, then, to teach students how to punctuate dialogue correctly. Type up a passage from a story that contains a fair amount of dialogue, *but omit all the punctuation*. I have used a simple children's story from the book *Frog and Toad All*

Year by Arnold Lobel (1976). This following passage is from "Down the Hill," one of the stories in the book. First the original:

Frog knocked at Toad's door. "Toad, wake up!" he cried.
 "Come out and see how wonderful the winter is."
 "I will not," said Toad. "I am in my warm bed."
 "Winter is beautiful," said Frog. "Come out and have fun."
 "Blah!" said Toad. "I do not have any winter clothes."
 Frog came into the house. "I have brought you some things to wear," he said. Frog pushed a coat down over the top of Toad. Frog pulled snowpants up over the bottom of Toad. He put a hat and scarf on Toad's head.
 "Help!" cried Toad. "My best friend is trying to kill me."
 "I am only getting you ready for winter," said Frog. Frog and Toad went outside. They tramped through the snow. "We will ride down this big hill on my sled," said Frog.
 "Not me," said Toad.
 "Do not be afraid," said Frog. "I will be with you on the sled. It will be a fine fast ride. Toad, you sit in front. I will sit right behind you."... (4-8)

And now the same passage, again, but with all the punctuation removed:

Frog knocked at Toads door Toad wake up he cried come out and see how wonderful the winter is I will not said Toad I am in my warm bed winter is beautiful said Frog come out and have fun blah said Toad I do not have any winter clothes Frog came into the house I have brought you some things to wear he said Frog pushed a coat down over the top of Toad Frog pulled snowpants up over the bottom of Toad he put a hat and scarf on Toads head help cried Toad my best friend is trying to kill me I am only getting you ready for winter said Frog Frog and Toad went outside they tramped through the snow we will ride down this big hill on my sled said Frog not me said Toad do not be afraid said Frog I will be with you on the sled it will be a fine fast ride Toad you sit in front I will sit right behind you....

This editing activity might be presented to the students at any time during the narrative writing unit, but it is especially pertinent and helpful if the students engage in this exercise just prior to their drafting of a paper which requires the use of dialogue.

"Draw an Island"

Creative dramatics and art projects can also serve as appropriate and valuable prewriting activities for narrative writing. In this next series of experiences, student-made drawings are utilized for motivation:

Step 1: Have plenty of sheets of construction paper and colored felt pens on hand for this exercise. Announce the following directions to the class:

- a. "Draw an island using the materials provided. The island may be of any size or shape."
- b. "Give your island a name: 'Basketball Island,' 'Skull Island,' etc., reflecting its shape or characteristics." [One of my students traced her hand on the paper and called the result "Five-Finger Island."]
- c. "Identify and draw landmarks on your island: mountains, rivers, caves, valleys, waterfalls, forests, etc."

Place the finished products on the walls of the classroom for all to see.

Step 2: "Imagine that you are stranded on your island. You might have been there for only a few days, or perhaps you have been there for several years. Write a five-day diary of your adventures. You may choose to write about any five days of your confinement on the island (the day you arrived, the day you discovered the Valley of the Dinosaurs, etc.), but write only one entry each day during the next five days of class."

If you wish, you might add more specific directions for each day's entry, such as:

- a. "Today, try to work into your entry a description of how you arrived on the island." (skills: flashback, exposition)
- b. "A natural disaster occurs on your island (a tidal wave, an earthquake, a fire, etc.). Describe the events as they proceed, and tell how you survived the disaster." (skill: building suspense)
- c. "Tell about the day you met another person or group of persons on your island. What did you talk about?" (skill: using dialogue)

The list of variations is endless and is limited only by your own and your students' imagination.

"Land of the Giants"

This is a variation on the preceding activity. Before having the students draw their maps of their island, you might have them engage in the following exercise, which will give an interesting twist to their subsequent writing.

Assemble students in small groups of four or five. Set up the situation by announcing,

"Your group is in the 'Land of the Giants.' This is a place in which everything around you is of gigantic proportions. A pencil is as big as a telephone pole, for instance. Prepare a scene to act out in which you perform a simple activity in this 'Land of the Giants.' You might make a sandwich, dial a telephone, brush your teeth, type a letter—the choice of activity is yours. But decide how you will perform your actions; rehearse your skit; and present it all in pantomime. No talking should occur during the action."

Allow 20 to 30 minutes for students to practice and prepare, and then have each group perform their skit in turn. If the groups have prepared well, then the rest of the class should be able to guess through the performance what the activity is without the group having to announce in advance that "We are going to be trying to drive a car," for instance.

After this introductory exercise, proceed with the map-drawing activity as above, but tell the students that "The island you are going to draw is this 'Land of the Giants.'" The creative dramatics exercise involving the pantomiming of a simple action will have served to give students a vivid idea of what this island environment is like.

Note

1. For an excellent resource to further develop the skill of "showing, not telling," see Caplan (1984).

Works Cited

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