

Reflection Writing

Helping Student Writers Access Their Inner Lives to Enrich Their Writing

JEFFREY PFLAUM

THE INNER LIVES OF CHILDREN are as rich and varied and complex as those of adults, and can provide a fertile source of inspiration for their writing, yet children often have difficulty accessing this inner life. As a sixth-grade writing teacher in New York City in the 1990s, I developed a technique I call “reflection writing” to help kids re-connect with and write about important events and memories in their lives. I’d found that the writing lessons I taught often brought up memories for the students that were troubling or complicated, and I wanted to help them better understand what they were feeling, and be able to use this understanding to produce writing that was honest and powerful.

From Contemplation to Reflection

Reflection writing grew out of an earlier writing activity I’d developed called contemplation writing (*Teachers & Writers Magazine*, May/June 1992), where

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I taught students a technique for accessing their inner experience. To start off, I had them count backwards from 50 to 1, silently and slowly, with eyes closed, and then describe the little side-trips that distracted them from focusing on the counting. This introductory process, consisting of four lessons, was designed to help them become aware of the myriad interrupting thoughts, feelings, and images that crossed their minds in any given moment. Once the students became comfortable focusing on their thought process in this way, we moved into contemplation writing. Three times a week throughout the rest of the school year, I would bring in music and ask them to listen silently, allowing their minds to wander freely. Then I asked them to write about whatever they were thinking. Afterwards, they would share what they’d written with their classmates and discuss it.

The writing they did in response to this technique showed me that children can become more receptive to their emotional lives, and that learning to use the mind’s eye, like a giant spotlight, to illuminate their mental images, feelings, memories, dreams, fantasies, daydreams, thoughts, and ideas can deepen and enrich their writing.

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Getting Ready for Reflection Writing

These contemplation lessons opened the way for the reflection writing we did next. The idea behind reflection writing was to give the kids a chance to explore a particular memory in more depth, using the techniques they had learned. Some of the things they'd written and discussed were quite powerful, and I thought they—and their writing—would benefit from further exploration.

I introduced this new writing lesson by drawing an image of a person looking into a mirror on the blackboard. "Using your inner eye to observe yourself is like looking at yourself in a mirror," I told the students, and asked them to keep this image in mind as they wrote.

For a practice lesson, I asked them to take five minutes to recall a time when they felt bored. "Use the inner eye to find, examine, and contemplate images from that time. What mind-pictures do you see?" I asked them.

Next, I asked them to reflect on the feelings and thoughts triggered by the images. "What were you thinking? What feelings did you experience besides boredom? What were you doing or not doing? Did you try to change your feelings? If so, what did you do?"

To help maintain an atmosphere conducive to reflection and contemplation, I asked them not to talk or make eye contact with others during the process, and said they should put their heads down on their desks and close their eyes, if that was comfortable for them. Then I drew down the shades and turned out the lights to set a meditative tone.

Finally, I asked them to describe in detail as much of the experience as they remembered. Although for this practice lesson I was asking them to talk about, rather than write down, their reflections, I reminded them that their reflection writing should describe

both outside and inside worlds. The students talked about their experiences, and I probed their responses with impromptu questions. As we went along,

these discussions following the reflections became crucial to their success.

Directions for Reflection Writing

For each reflection writing lesson I would give the students a topic question, a few guide questions to help clarify the topic, and the following instructions:

Step 1: Read and Understand: Read topic question and guide questions and make sure you understand them.

Step 2: Recall: Using your inner eye, find an experience to answer one topic question.

Step 3: Contemplate: Study the experience and mind-pictures carefully with your inner eye.

Step 4: Reflect: Replay your thoughts and feelings from that time.

Step 5: Organize: Think about what you're going to write. Make sense out of the experience.

Step 6: Write: Take 20 to 30 minutes to write your reflections.

Step 7: Discuss: Read your reflection to the class, and discuss. (Or the teacher can read all reflections anonymously.)

Here is a reflection from a sixth-grade student in a New York City classroom, and some of the questions we used to discuss it in class:

Topic question: *Recall a time when you had a conversation with a friend that made you feel really good.*

Guide questions: *Describe what happened between you and your friend. What did you see and hear in your mind? How did you feel? What were you thinking? What did you and your friend talk about? What happened at the end of your conversation?*

LIZZETTE O.

I thought about the day I talked to my only best friend—my mother. She is my best friend. She helps me and I help her. When we need to, I give her advice and she gives me advice. That's the way we communicate. I remember the day my mother had a big fight over going to court. I asked her if that was what she really wanted to do and she didn't know. I asked if she wanted to talk about it and she said okay. Over and over again she said she felt scared and I was the only one she could believe in and who had confidence in her. I told my mom I loved her and would be by her side if anything happened. At the end of our conversation I asked again if she wanted to go to court and she said her mind was made up. She was going. "Are you sure?" I said, and she said, "Yes!" My mom thanked me and said it made her feel better. I felt good, too.

For Class Discussion: *Summarize the reflection. What feelings did you get from the mother-daughter talks? How do they communicate? What mind-pictures can you visualize? What feelings, communicated in the reflection, are an important part of any relationship?*

After a few lessons, I made one major change in my approach: Instead of providing just one reflection topic with guide questions, I provided six reflection topics without guide questions. I wanted to give the students choices rather than force kids to respond to a reflection they had difficulty recalling. If students needed more structure to answer reflection topics, I would talk them through the guide questions. In the next class, I wrote the following on the board:

Recall a time when you:

- 1) Felt abandoned by everyone.
- 2) Acted like someone else.
- 3) Felt powerful.
- 4) Looked at the world through angry eyes.
- 5) Were criticized by someone.

6) Took a long journey in your mind.

Before writing, we discussed difficult words, for example, "abandoned" and the meaning of "looking at the world through angry eyes," to check the class's understanding of the topics.

Here is a reflection from a sixth-grader in a New York City classroom:

Topic question: *Recall a time when you felt abandoned by everyone.*

ELIO R.

I recalled an experience when I felt like a killjoy. In second grade I got blamed for everything. Free time's over, everyone looks at me. When a party was kicking, and then it ended, I got the blame. In fourth grade I was picked on a lot. (But I found a way to get back!) I was always a jerk. (People called me a jerk.) Even my cousin called me a geek. Whatever I said, people answered, "That's stupid!" Everybody bothered me. I didn't like it at all. It's painful to say, "They didn't care." I was the statue and they were the hammers. The End

P.S. Who cares about them!

And here are a few excerpts from other students in the class:

JESSICA C.

I remembered when I acted like someone else. I thought that I had to be exactly like my friend and it wasn't right to have your own opinions. If my friends didn't like something, I acted as if I didn't like it either . . .

ELAYNE R.

I felt powerful when my sister was younger and I had control. I would pick on her every hour of the day. She couldn't defend herself so I bothered her and she was afraid to tell on me . . .

GINA R.

In first grade I did my homework kind of sloppy. When the teacher came by to check my homework she said, “Your homework is very sloppy,” and ripped it out of my notebook and threw it in the garbage . . .

Not every reflection I received showed the strengths of the previous samples. Sometimes I got reflections that were hard to understand, did not answer the topic question, or needed more information and effort. In each case, we would use our class discussions to help clarify the problems and offer suggestions for making the writing better. “What happened in this reflection?” I would ask. “What mistakes were made? How could the writer correct them? What could be added to help us understand this reflection better?” Sometimes I might also work one-on-one with students, asking them to read their reflections to me, and as problems came up, we would revise the writing together.

Revision

To build revision into the reflection writing process, I created twenty-minute revision sessions, where the class edited anonymous reflections I had written on the board, looking at the pieces line-by-line, using strategic revision questions:

Does the line sound right? (*Grammar/Structure*)

Does the line make sense? (*Communication*)

Was there enough information? (*Content*)

How would you improve the line? (*Revision*)

After we critiqued the reflections on the board, I returned each student’s uncorrected reflections and gave out red pens for them to use to make revisions on their own pieces—and they enjoyed becoming the “student-turned-teacher-critic.”

Extending Reflection Writing

Once students are comfortable with reflection writing, the same techniques can be used to help create

Reflection Writing Topics

Recall a time when you:

- hurt someone else’s feelings.
- felt you weren’t being treated fairly.
- were forced to do something by your parents.
- felt love and sadness at the same time.
- felt sure of yourself and confident.
- wanted to be alone.
- understood someone else’s pain.
- felt no one understood you.
- wanted something badly and couldn’t get it.
- felt embarrassed.
- thought you should drop out of school.
- felt peaceful.
- felt like running away from home.
- thought your friend was your enemy.
- thought you couldn’t do something even though you never tried it.

fictional reflections or portraits. The students in my class were able to take the same reflection topic they’d used to write about themselves and create stories—making the change easily and very successfully, using the self-knowledge they had gained from contemplation and reflection writing and applying it to a fictional character’s experiences.

When kids learn to contemplate, reflect on, and express their experiences, they are given the tools to penetrate the inner landscapes of the mind, imagination, heart, and spirit, and can use these skills to make the journey out to other people’s realities as well. 🧠