

Tricks of the Trade

Tips for Reaching Reluctant Writers in Elementary School

JANE LeCROY

STUDENTS BECOME MORE ENGAGED with their own writing when they have specific activities that force them to look at their work closely and really think about it. Here are some ideas to reach the students who always say, “I don’t know what to write about” or “I’m done” when there are only a few words on the page. Often these reluctant writers don’t have much confidence in their writing and this feeling translates into “I don’t like writing.” Giving students positive writing experiences is one of the most powerful things we can do as teaching artists. Using unusual materials and activities from outside the classroom and offering writing techniques in the guise of games can trick the most stubborn students into having fun while writing and foster situations for them to challenge themselves to use more complex vocabulary, imagination and critical thinking skills that all lead to greater reading comprehension and creativity.

Magic Words

Words *are* magic! In a visually pleasing hat or bag or bowl or box, put single cut-out words printed in 14-

point font, including a wide variety of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Have each child grab a small handful and make a poem using some or all of their words. Always collect the words at the end and this bowl will serve you & your students for years! This works well to expand on previous works as well; when students feel they are finished or stuck, have them grab just a few words and incorporate them into their writing to force them to expand on their ideas.

Postcard Poems

Use postcards of art prints, photographs, famous paintings, landscapes, any interesting image that tells a story to inspire great writing. Give one to each student and ask them to study the picture. Surrealist paintings work especially well. All the elements clearly before them are now materials for them to create poetry. Put these questions on the board: What do you see in the picture? What is happening in the picture? What happened moments before what is captured in this picture? What will happen in the moments after what is captured in this picture? What does this picture make you think of in your own life? What are the things/people/animals/plants thinking in this picture? If you were in this picture what would you do? Have the students use their pictures to create poems just by answering some of the provided questions, which

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The obese pawnbroker quite quickly fights umpteen mats, even though two orifices auctioned off Klingons. One dwarf laughed, although five aardvarks very cleverly bought two

leads to a sure start and wonderful writing.

Picture Worth a Thousand Words

Have students draw a picture of their favorite place with as many details as they can. Encourage them to show their pictures to each other describing the space, even labeling things. After this drawing and conversational activity, have students write a descriptive piece using their picture for ideas of details they can add to their descriptions. You can also use this exercise backwards and have the student draw the person or place that is in their poem and the act of drawing the thing will give them more ideas and details to write about, making the piece stronger and more specific.

Music Moves Pencils

The simple act of playing instrumental music during writing time can have a dramatic effect on student writing. Jazz, classical, new-age, instrumental pieces can all create a mood that inspires students to write, and the music often brings on a more free and playful approach. Music, especially more mellow jazz and classical, can also get a rowdy class to quiet down and focus.

Chotchkes & Knickknacks

Place random household items and knickknacks in a bag, like: a wooden spoon, a mitten, a large bolt, a decorative egg, a carved wooden animal, a pinecone, a seashell, a coin purse, a candle, an earring, a figurine, a pretty scarf, an old foreign coin, a natural sponge, old eyeglasses etc. just a random collection of simple, interesting things. Let students each blindly choose an object from the bag. Once they have their object have them imagine the story of the object. Place these questions on the board: To whom did this belong? Where has this been? Where did this come from? Where is

this headed? Physical clues in the details of objects inspire the imagination to create sense and story out of the unknown.

Sensory Sensations

List the five senses on the board: seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, and hearing. Have students practice engaging all their senses by bringing in a bag of apples or bunch or grapes or chocolates, etc. Have them all close their eyes before you distribute the food and tell them to reach out on their desks and feel it and smell it and then finally open their eyes and eat it. Giving students this common experience will result in a wide variety of writing descriptions that illustrate how we each interpret experiences in our own unique way and how our five senses deliver the information that makes up our perceptions. Encourage students to make sure their writing always includes information brought to them by each of the senses. All our work should include colors, smells, textures, sounds and tastes.

Forms Form

Small, tight, poetic forms—such as the haiku, triolet, sonnet, and villanelle—with very specific directions, provide an outline that works like a game. This activity serves students who have a hard time starting by encouraging them to express their ideas in interesting ways and to be aware of repetition, rhyme, meter and syllable count. *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms* available at www.twc.org is a great resource for poetic forms that can inspire these activities.

Cross-Out Poems

As writers we usually build our writing one word at a time, the way the sculptor will pile clay pieces together to shape a form, but sometimes sculptors carve the form out of a larger block of clay. A Cross-Out poem is a poem carved out from a larger piece of text. All you need is markers and pages of non-poetic text that students can deface—or reface. Newspapers or maga-

zines work well and even better is the more dramatic ripping up of an old textbook (history/art/science books are great for this!) and pass out a page to each student.

Encourage students to be bold and not think too much—just start crossing out the less interesting text and leaving behind the text they want to use. At least $\frac{3}{4}$ of the text should be crossed out. When they rewrite the poem on a new sheet of paper they can fill in words they wish were there to make the poem make sense. Really interesting, imaginative material and sophisticated vocabulary come from this exercise and the rebellious act is fun and inspiring! I recommend checking out Tom Phillips “A Humument,” the treated Victorian novel (www.humument.com), to see examples of what this exercise can look like.

Found Poems

This makes a fun homework assignment that develops the poetic mind. Have students look around their homes for poems that weren’t meant to be poems. For instance, labels and instruction sheets and recipes often have sentences that can be read in a poetic context. When the text on a label, for instance, is written on a page it can take on a new significance. The label on the Wite-Out container is a great example, or the one on Joy dish detergent reads “Please keep Joy out of the reach of children.” These mini found poems are great starting places for new poem ideas and also can just be philosophical little poems on their own.

One silly aardvark gossips partly cleverly, however the mostly irascible elephant tickled one angst-ridden cat, yet irascible subways gossips, even though five bourgeois sheep fights fountains.

Collage Poems

Collage poems provide a good way to develop poetic sensibility and to empower students who have a hard time writing. This exercise is particularly successful when it’s done toward the end of a poetry unit after your students have had experiences with many kinds of poems. Take whole lines of poetry—you can use poems your students have studied and ones they have written in class—cut all the poems up line by line, and mix them together in a box/bag/hat. Next, have each student take a handful and arrange them to create a new poem. Newspaper headlines can also be used for this kind of activity. This exercise is excellent for helping students make connections between ideas in unique ways. 🧐