

T&W Blackboard

From the Teachers & Writers listserv

<http://groups.yahoo.com/teachers&writers>

Dear Teachers & Writers,

We wanted to check in and see what sorts of creative writing exercises you might be using or what exercises you might recommend for getting students engaged in and excited about writing early on in the school year.

When I was teaching, on the first day of class, I always asked students to write a list of the names of everyone they had ever known. After several minutes, I would ask students to read the names. We would talk then about the sound qualities of the names and also about the associative leaps made by the students in writing their lists. At the end of the discussion, I asked students to look back one more time over the names. "These are your stories," I would tell them, and say that one thing I didn't want to hear in the coming months was that they had nothing to write about!

Of course, I adapted the above exercise after learning it from another writer and teacher, who had probably learned it from one of his teachers. Please let us know what's worked for you in the past or what you're planning for the weeks ahead, in terms of getting young people started writing.

LOYAL MILES

Teachers & Writers

Director of Development and Marketing

I read the students two passages: one from *The Man In The White Sharkskin Suit* by Lucette Lagnado and another from *The Lost Childhood* by Yehuda Nir. Both passages describe the narrator's mother. I ask the students to listen closely for the details that reveal the mother's character, and how the authors give us a sense of a story beginning just from these descriptions.

Then I ask the students to pick a person they want to describe. I tell them to choose someone they know well,

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someone whose face and actions they've memorized. It could be their mother or father, one of their grandparents, a sibling, a friend, a cousin, or even a teacher.

I tell them to show what the person looks like, sounds like, smells like, using the person's body language to reveal something about his or her character. I ask them to show what their chosen person feels, and their own responses to this person. To help them get started I tell them to think of the person doing something—cooking, shopping, talking on the phone, playing a sport, etc.—showing this person in action at a particular moment in time.

LINDA MOREL

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One of the early writing assignments I do with my tenth grade English students is a "profile" piece on a classmate. To prepare for the interview, I model questions that would receive more than a "yes" or "no" response from an interview subject. I tell them that they should be excavating information and stories.

We spend a class period conducting the interviews, and then the next day we do a series of exercises to shift their writing beyond the "He is nice" or "She is a great person" statements. I show them pictures of Frankenstein's monster and write: "He is so scary." Students have to continue the sentence, adding textures, scents, colors, and sounds. Then I break students up into groups, give them a photograph (usually of a person), and ask them to write a descriptive paragraph. Each group reads their piece aloud to the class, and we, the classmates, respond by telling the writers what we like, what stands out, and what we remember.

Students then jot down key physical characteristics, notes on apparel and style, and mannerisms of their partner. For homework, they are responsible for writing one paragraph that brings their partner to life. The paragraphs they write in response are not the usual bland overarching statements, but pop with verve and sensory details.

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