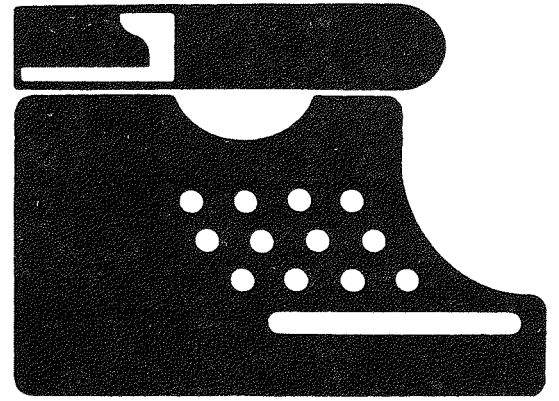


Teachers & Writers



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KEEP THE DOORS OPEN ONE WRITER'S LOOK AT PROCESS WRITING

by Liza Ketchum Murrow

IT'S A CRISP FALL DAY, AND I'M CIRCULATING through a fifth-grade classroom. In my second visit as writer-in-residence, we've been discussing how to develop characters for stories, and after a good brainstorming session, the class is settling down to write; there's a comfortable buzz in the room. I talk with one or two students and then go to Nicole, a girl who caught my attention the first day when she said, "I like to write but I never have any good ideas." During our discussion, she had listened intently from the edge of the circle. Now she's rolling her pencil back and forth over a blank piece of paper.

"Having trouble?" I ask.

Her whisper is barely audible and her dark eyes dart to her lap. "I don't know what to write about."

"Do you have an idea for a main character?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," she says softly.

"Well, let's see. Is it a boy — a girl — an imaginary creature — an animal —"

"It's a boy," she says suddenly and decisively.

I give an inward sigh of relief. "Tell me about him."

She looks at me for the first time. "He's really shy," she says. "He has trouble in school. The other

kids tease him. They call him names but he's too scared to do anything about it."

"That sounds like a tough situation — and good material for a story," I say. "What happens to him?"

Nicole's eyes are bright, and I'm pretty sure she's describing herself, using a male disguise for safety.

"First he cries a lot and it gets worse. Then he decides to find some way to stop the teasing."

"How does he do that?"

"Maybe —" She pauses a moment, looks around the room, and allows her eyes to settle on the most popular girl in the class. "Maybe he finds someone to help him." She's got the pencil in her hand now, and her whole body says: A story is coming alive. It's time to leave Nicole alone.

I work with other students for a while, then return. To my dismay, Nicole is slumped over her desk, her

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pencil's on the floor, and there are only a few jottings on her paper. When I ask what's wrong, she shoves the paper at me. "Ms. D." — her teacher — "told me I had to brainstorm. She said I have to write down everything I know about the character and plan the story *before* I can write it."

I look down at the paper where Nicole has written, "Shy boy. Gets teased. Picked on." She gives me a helpless look. "I don't think it's such a good idea anymore."

I want to wring Ms. D.'s neck. Nicole needed to write this story about a problem close to her heart. Who knows what solutions she might have dreamed up for herself as she wrestled with the imaginary boy's dilemma? But the damage is done. No amount of encouragement on my part will help; the story has died.

Two weeks before, when I started this residency, Ms. D.'s colleagues told me I'd enjoy working with her. "She's so skilled in using the Writing Process," they said. I can see it's a classroom devoted to writing and language; books written by the children are on display everywhere; stories in different stages litter one table, and most of the students are writing eagerly. But Nicole is not the only child having trouble. What's gone wrong?

In the last few years, I have taught fiction writing alongside teachers who are comfortable with what is known as "Process Writing" or "The Writing Process." This method, based on the work of Donald Graves and others, has gained enthusiastic supporters in many schools. Classroom teachers help students brainstorm ideas and encourage them to write about important personal issues. Students think of themselves as authors as they confer with one another, revise their stories, and publish their finished pieces. When I arrive for a residency in one of these schools, the young writers are eager to share their work and we enjoy comparing our efforts. They like knowing that my first drafts are as sprawling and messy as their own, and that I too must wrestle with several revisions before I come up with a finished product that satisfies both my editor and me.

In many such schools, a creative energy has been released and the children are producing vibrant, moving stories. Unfortunately, my experience with Nicole and others like her has allowed me to see a darker side of the picture. In some classrooms, an insidious development is taking place: Process Writing has become an inflexible system, one that does not make room for individual learning styles or modes of expression. In the wrong hands, crucial facets of the Writing Process — brainstorming and planning, writing about personal topics, and revision — have turned against children, boxing in their creative energies as badly as stale assignments did in the past.

Take brainstorming and planning, which is where so many teachers begin. Ms. D. required brainstorming

for every story and poem, an approach I've seen in other schools as well. Making a "web" of ideas on paper does help some students to find a topic. But other students are more comfortable developing their ideas through conversations with a friend or teacher. Talking is brainstorming, and it's silly to repeat that process on paper, when the story is ready to tumble out. For other students, talking or brainstorming only gets in their way. These children are like me — *they don't know what their story's about until they're actually writing it.*

Many of us write this way. On the wall over my computer is this quotation from Joan Didion's essay "Why I Write": "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

Children understand this. When I asked Ms. D.'s students, "How many of you plan your whole story out before you write it?" only about half the class raised their hands — and a good number glanced at Ms. D. first, knowing she expected them to say yes. "How many don't know what will happen until the moment you're writing it down?" Grins, followed by another show of hands. "Both ways can make a fine story," I said, describing how my friend Katherine plans a book down to the last detail before she writes a single word. And then I told them what happened when I was in the middle of writing my most recent novel and Jenny, the main character, did something unexpected.

"Jenny's grandmother was getting remarried, and Jenny didn't like it at all," I said. "She tried to mess up the wedding. I knew she was full of mischief, but I never guessed that she'd stow away in the back seat of her grandparents' car when they left for their honeymoon."

The kids laughed. "What happened?"

I threw up my hands. "I had to wait two weeks before Jenny told me how she'd get out of that mess."

A few students shared nervous looks: obviously I was nuts. Others nodded their understanding, even as Ms. D. cast disapproving looks in my direction. I wasn't surprised; in northern Vermont, a few weeks earlier, another teacher was appalled when I admitted that I let the characters in my books run away with the story. "Do you mean you'd actually write a 250-page novel without knowing what would happen at the end?" he demanded.

I explained that for me writing is a journey. Sometimes I know my destination, and I might have a sketchy outline — but it's always a map with many detours and alternate routes, allowing for the possibility of surprise. Children know how headstrong a story can be, and they're much less likely to rein it in — unless we force that on them.

Another tenet of the Writing Process is that children need to write from personal experience. I agree. But some teachers don't trust children to do that through fiction. Last spring, I worked with three wonderful middle school teachers. I was going to have

their students write historical fiction, and we were all a little uneasy: would this be confining? We shouldn't have worried. Students still wrote about the issues that were important; their young characters were in trouble with parents and teachers, tried to combat racial prejudice, dealt with love, rumors, and the misunderstandings of friendship, ran away from abusive parents, fought with siblings — but they were disguised as gladiators, or runaway slaves, or young peasant girls seeking their fortune. Fiction provides a safe haven for children, an outlet for discussing the very problems and issues teachers hope they will confront. Again, as Joan Didion said, fiction allows us to find out what matters — and sometimes we don't know what that is until we dive into the deep, cold water of a story and find it waiting for us on the bottom.

Last, we come to revision. Most stories have to be rewritten. It took me twenty tries to write a good first chapter for my second novel. But occasionally the burden of revision hangs over students until some decide they'd rather write nothing at all. Worse, a strict adherence to rewriting doesn't give space to those rare gems: the story or poem that comes out nearly perfect the first time. When a piece emerges glistening and whole, any attempt to tamper with it inevitably destroys its spontaneity.

Perhaps some teachers have forgotten — or never experienced — the joy of losing yourself on paper, of being shaken by someone who grabs your shoulder, shouting, "Listen to me, dammit! I'm a character in this book you're going to write, and here's my story." Obedient, your pen rushing, your arm aching from your fingers all the way up into your shoulder blades, you scramble to keep up with the flow of words, praying no one will interrupt. And in fact, no one can; you're so lost in the process you don't hear anyone but the voice in your ear. When you're done, you weep, or shout, or do something completely embarrassing and you ask yourself: where did *that* come from?

These wonderful moments happen all too seldom. My friend Nancy Olson, a writer and teacher, describes them as "the moments when you're standing in the stream but you don't feel the water because you *are* the water." If I'm lucky, I might have that experience once or twice while I'm writing a book. But children, with their fresh, open ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling, are capable of living in these moments — if we give them permission.

Finally, requiring students to rewrite every single piece also ignores the occasions when the act of writing is a release, and the finished product seems irrelevant. When one of my students read aloud what she wrote about her grandfather's death, she cried, but didn't want to touch the story afterwards. Luckily, her teacher knew she was capable of fine revisions and didn't press her to go further with this piece.

Like all of us, children need space, support, and flexibility. In one classroom where the teacher offered

these qualities in abundance, I met Thomas, a shy student going through tough times at home. He didn't write a word the first class. On my second visit, when we were writing portraits, Thomas perked up and decided to describe his father. No one forced him to brainstorm. He sat quietly, lost in thought, through most of that class. When I came back a week later, he showed me a draft that his teacher said he had worked on every day, each sentence pulled directly from his heart. As he read it to me, I learned that his father had just moved away and he didn't know when he'd see him again. In spite of his poignant sense of loss, Thomas was very excited about his story; his whole face beamed when he read it to friends.

My Dad. My Dad Is the Best.

My Dad is kind of tall. He has a nice tattoo of a black panther and it has smoke going all around it and there are three roses. One is butterscotch. And the other two are red. His kids are me, Tom, my brother Ronny, and my sister Brandy. I don't know Brandy because she lives in Kansas and I've never seen her. He likes to ride a motorcycle. He's just like me, and he's my real dad not my little bit step father. I love him very much. This is my real father. He's had two Harley Davidsons and one Suzuki. He has a nice car, I don't know what kind it is. He is my best friend in the whole world.

If Thomas had been forced to plan this piece, to brainstorm everything he wanted to say about his father, I don't think he could have written it. It was hard for him to articulate his feelings; it was only in the process of writing that he found the voice with which to talk about the half sister he's never met, or his "little bit stepfather." Thomas needed to think things through slowly and privately, and he was lucky to have a teacher who supported him through this process. He sent a copy of this piece to his father in Florida, and began to write more copious stories, about his fort in the woods, his friends down the road. The portrait gave him permission to open up about other things in his life. Unlike Nicole, he emerged from his writing experience feeling like an author, not a failure.

For the most part, I see hundreds of children who are avid, eager writers, as deeply engaged in the process as those of us who make our own slim living writing books. But we must also remember students like Nicole, who have taught me that there are as many ways of creating a story as there are authors. If these students can't find a voice for the things they need to say, if their stories stay locked inside them, then we need to be more flexible in our teaching. Only then will the doors swing open, allowing the writers' voices to speak out clearly to the world around them.

WILD CURRENTS

PROMPTS FOR CREATIVE WRITERS

by Teresa Buczinsky

ALL WRITING BEGINS WITH SOME KIND OF prompt — an idea, image, or experience that provokes the writer to pick up a pencil and take on a scuffle with language. Sometimes the prompt can come unexpectedly from a phrase whispered by a friend or from an image on TV, but writers do not have to wait passively for ideas to find and inspire them. Writers find prompts wherever a pattern can be detected or a structure defined, wherever words and stories flourish. Still, even experienced writers can find themselves staring mutely at the blank page, unable to start. To help both myself and my students overcome such moments, I developed the following prompts while teaching creative writing at a high school in suburban Chicago. Although the prompts can be adapted to suit whatever purpose the instructor intends, here is how I use them.

To help prevent the stultifying effects of self-censorship, I never grade “prompt-writing” for quality, and I discourage my students from laboring over the lines and ideas they develop while completing the prompts. Instead, I ask them to write quickly, without giving their words too much thought, and I congratulate them heartily when they demonstrate an ability to produce pages and pages of material that might be destined only for the wastebasket. I collect the prompt-writing sporadically to see that it has been done and to encourage students whose ideas show promise, but inspired writing never receives higher marks than the garbage-bound variety. After my students have completed four or five prompts, they choose one that they would like to develop into a finished work. The material they do not choose to work with goes back into their notebooks, possibly to be mined or developed at a later time.

While working on the prompts in class, the students often brainstorm together, sharing one another’s ideas and images. I encourage them to “steal” lines and phrases from each other, a practice that initially makes them uncomfortable, but ultimately turns them into voracious listeners. Rather than attending to one another’s work out of courtesy, they

begin to listen like prospectors, snatching up bits of material here and there and incorporating these pieces into their own work. I find that this habit begins to affect their reading as well. Not long into the semester, they begin reading as writers, actively on the lookout for ideas, images, and lines that they can make their own. All this “borrowing” is, of course, not the same as plagiarism.

Sometimes, especially when a prompt involves a series of steps, a student will get an idea early on and want to depart from the constraints of the prompt. I encourage departure from constraints of all kinds; but before the students depart, I like them to generate as much material as they can from the constraints they plan to disregard. Practically speaking, this means that I expect them to work through all the steps in a prompt, attending carefully to the restrictions that the structure imposes. Then, after they’ve demonstrated an ability to work within the prompt’s structure, I encourage them to break the very rules that provided them with their material in the first place. When it comes to revision, no rule is sacred except the elusive one that develops in the writer’s mind along with his or her writing — the one-of-a-kind rule that enables a writer to sense that in this particular poem or story, one word is better than another, or that the end should come at this place rather than that one.

If my students’ audience consisted solely of myself, the prompts might easily deteriorate into a series of tedious exercises to be endured for the sake of an English credit. Fortunately, I am not my students’ only audience, or even their most important one. They write to be published, and they use me as a coach to help and advise them as they prepare the material they will send to small press magazines and newspapers.

The first time I encouraged a group of students to submit their work for publication, I assured them that no one in the class would actually be published, but that we ought to go through the motions, nonetheless. I was wrong. Every year, a number of my students find publishers for their work, in magazines dedicated to high school writing, in local literary magazines or newspapers, and even in small press magazines featuring writers from around the nation.

Along with an occasional acceptance notice, we collect rejection notices by the handful. I post my students’ rejections beside my own on a poster board dedicated to this purpose. We acknowledge each new rejection with a round of applause, congratulating the

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writer for the courage to make himself or herself vulnerable to a wider audience. More than any other factor, the desire to make their writing public causes my students to treat writing prompts not as tedious exercises, but as opportunities to generate material that matters to them and that will continue to matter to them after the course has come to an end.

ACCIDENTS

This prompt is based on two general rules about creative writing:

1. It's usually better to show readers what is happening than simply to tell them what is happening. For example, the sentence "John became angry" is not nearly as vivid or memorable as the sentence "John shattered the window with his fist."

2. Specific details usually result in vivid description.

Begin by brainstorming for ideas. Think of as many situations as you can in which a traffic accident might make a good story. Use the list below to help you come up with ideas.

1. Make this an accident that both parties are happy about.

2. Involve something strange or unexpected in the accident, like maybe the driver was a seven-year-old girl, or maybe the car drove through the wall of an ice cream parlor and the owners decided to keep it as a "fixture."

3. Make this accident occur in the past or future, or on another world.

4. Show how this accident affected all of history in some way.

5. Make this accident so funny that the people in the neighborhood where it occurred still laugh whenever they think about it.

6. Imagine the same accident occurring three different times, each time involving different people, and show how differently the accident turns out as a result of the three different personalities.

As soon as you have a general idea about what you would like to write about, fill out accident report forms (see pp. 6-7). This will force you to formulate the details of your story.

After you have filled out the accident report forms, begin to tell your story. After you write each sentence, ask yourself if you are showing or merely telling about the action. Each time you catch yourself *telling*, rewrite the sentence so that it *shows* instead.

LIFTED LINES

Poets, playwrights, and fiction writers have been stealing ideas, phrases, and lines from one another for hundreds of years. Sometimes the stealing amounts to plagiarism, which conscientious writers are careful to

avoid. More often than not, however, the "stealing" amounts to the perfectly legitimate practice of taking a phrase, an image, a line, or an idea from another writer, and using it *in a unique way*. This is not plagiarism; it's making use of available resources.

Listed below are some lines, phrases, and ideas from my own collection of "lifted lines." Sometimes, especially if the stolen item is an entire sentence, I keep track of where I found it in case I need to give credit to the writer, or in case I want to refer to my original source in some way.

"irrecoverable colors" — Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 6

"Obviously, no one expects to discover anything." — Borges, *Labyrinths*, p. 55

Possible titles: "Sacred Pieces" "Ways Out"

arch penetration

When did God's body stop being a problem?

"I'm sorry for that, too; it was brash and rash and blunt. I spoke too soon." — Clement Greenburg, *Arts*, Dec. 89

clown torture videotapes — *Arts*, Nov. 89, referring to work by Bruce Nauman

"A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled, voices hoarse and shrill..." — Dante's *Inferno*

Write a poem like Summer Brenner's "Natural Selection" in which a single topic holds bits of writing together.

"The desire of presence is born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation from the representation of representation, etc." — Jacques Derrida, "That Dangerous Supplement"

Often, my lifted lines are transformed when they work their way into my stories or poems. For example, I once wrote down part of a sentence from an article in *Arts* magazine in which a particular work of art was being described. In my notebook I wrote "Pearls, glass, a makeup compact: the presence of a departed person is formally suggested." In a prose poem I was working on at the time, I used this line to emphasize the suggestive power of any image, or even a "piece" of an image: "Every piece has a title, a story behind it: pearls, glass, a makeup compact, the presence of one missing woman suggested."

Begin your own collection of "Lifted Lines." After you have collected at least two or three pages of ideas, try the following prompt:

1. Write down ten of your favorite lifted lines from the collection. Leave a space after each line.

2. In the space after each of your lifted lines, write your own follow-up line. Use one or two words that work as slant rhymes with words in the original, lifted line. (For more about slant rhymes, refer to the

“Sounds and Rhythms” prompt below.)

3. After you have 20 lines, try to organize them into a poem. Put them into an order that makes a kind of sense, leave out lines that don't seem to fit, and reword your original lifted lines so that they conform to the sound, rhythm, and theme that your poem needs.

4. Don't worry about your poem's making sense until you get to the last step, but remember that the poem isn't finished until it makes some sort of sense, even if it is a strange and chaotic one.

SOUNDS AND RHYTHMS

In Richard Hugo's book *The Triggering Town*, he tells about an exercise that Theodore Roethke used to give his creative writing students. Roethke wanted his students to think less about *what* they wanted to say, and more about the *sound* of what they were saying. The following prompt is based on the exercise Roethke used.

Begin by finding a poem or part of a poem that sounds especially beautiful. Look for a poem that uses slant rhymes and distinct rhythms. The following lines from Roethke's poem "The Exorcism" are an example of poetry by a writer who was especially attentive to sound.

In a dark wood I saw —
I saw my several selves
Come running from the leaves,
Lewd, tiny, careless lives
That scuttled under stones,
Or broke, but would not go.
I turned upon my spine,
I turned and turned again,
A cold God-furious man
Writhing until the last
Forms of his secret life
Lay with the dross of death.

Notice the similar sounds between words like "several," "selves," "leaves," and "lives." These carefully chosen slant rhymes help to account for the beautiful sound of the poem.

Next, make a list of nine or ten nouns, adjectives and verbs from the poem you have chosen. The following lists are made from words in Roethke's poem. Feel free to use them.

<u>Nouns</u>	<u>Adjectives</u>	<u>Verbs</u>
wood	dark	saw
selves	several	come
leaves	lewd	run
lives	tiny	scuttle
stones	careless	broke
spine	cold	go
man	furious	turned
form	last	writhe
dross	secret	lay

Next, use five nouns, five verbs, and five adjectives from your lists and write a poem according to the following rules:

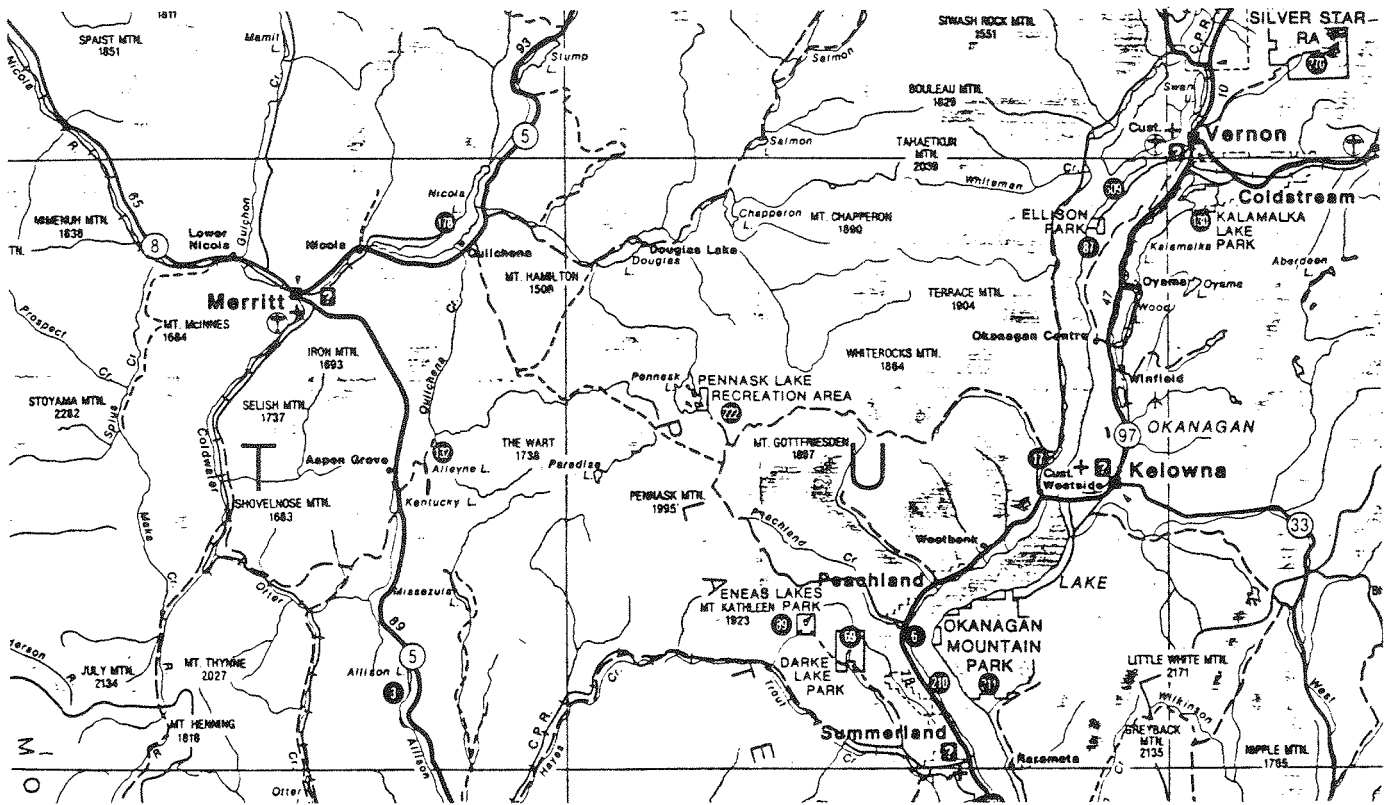
1. Limit your poem to ten lines.
2. Make sure that each line has only eight syllables. (This will be easier if your original list has mostly one- and two-syllable words.)
3. Include ten slant rhymes, and make sure that the words involved in each slant are within one line of each other.
4. No commas, periods, semicolons, or dashes can occur at the ends of your lines (except, of course, at the end of the poem). All pauses must occur internally.
5. Each line must sound like an English sentence, although you are free to experiment with unusual word combinations and you may use verbs as nouns or adjectives, adjectives as nouns or verbs, etc.
6. Don't force your poem to make sense.

After you have completed this exercise, you will probably find that you like some of your lines, but that the poem as a whole is unfinished. Pull out the lines that you like and let these suggest other lines. Feel free to break the rules that you so carefully followed here if that's what you have to do to create a good poem.

WRITING WITH A MAP

For this prompt, you need a map showing an area that you do not know well, so that you can depend on your imagination to answer the questions listed below. If you cannot find your own map, you can use the map segment printed here. Begin by finding one town or city on the map that looks particularly interesting to you, either because of its name or location.

1. If the people here go out for a walk or a drive, what kind of landscape do they see?
2. How has the landscape affected the personalities of the people who live in this town?
3. What are the names of surrounding lakes, mountains, deserts, etc.? What do these names mean or refer to? (You can make this up, of course.)
4. What secret does this town have that only the people who live here know?
5. Who were the first settlers here, and why did they choose this place?
6. What terrible crime was committed here once?
7. What grows better here than it does anywhere else in the world? What effect does this have on the people?
8. What is dangerous about living in this place?
9. What is easy about living in this place?
10. Describe the most horrible kind of weather that comes to this place, and tell what the people have to do when this happens.
11. What do people see and hear if they are walking along the street here during the evening?



12. What sort of animal or insect pest is plentiful here, and how do the people deal with this?
13. Has anyone who came from here ever become famous? Who was this? What did he or she become?
14. What kind of entertainment comes to town?
15. There is one day that the people in this town will never forget. What happened on that day?
16. There is one thing that the people in this town fear (or hate) more than anything else. What is it?
17. What happens to a lot of the young people who grow up here?
18. Where, if anywhere, do the people who live here long to go?
19. Where is the town cemetery, and what is written on the tombstones?
20. Is there a church in this town? If so, what is the pastor's favorite sermon, and what do the people like to sing?

After you have answered these questions, organize your information into story or poem form. Use the poem "Crater Lake" as a model if you need one.

Crater Lake

Crater Lake is a place unlike any other place —
 People silent, waters calm, and winds steady.
 A small shack rests on Wizard Island.
 Its origin is unknown.
 Townspeople maimed in the diamond rush of 1967 sit
 quietly.
 A light flickers on Wizard Island.
 An old cemetery rests at the bottom of Castle Crest Trail
 bearing the names of those who lost.

6,176 feet deep.
 Lives have been sucked up by the depth.
 So they say.
 Greed lurks in everyone's mind.
 Jed Hamilton was never found.
 The townspeople live lies to satisfy the press.
 The undertow.
 The wolves.
 Ha!
 To all the visitors of Crater Lake:
 Don't let the undertow get you.

— Dave Lemberger, high school student

SURREALIST WRITING

Surrealist writing began early in the twentieth century, not long after Sigmund Freud's early discoveries in psychoanalysis. Like Freud, Surrealist artists were interested in the mind's hidden processes. They made art out of strange and incongruous combinations of the images one experiences in dreams and fantasies. Surrealist technique usually has two effects. It creates in the reader a mood or feeling of the unreal or fantastic, and it suggests to the reader not one but many hidden meanings. The following poem by André Breton exemplifies the Surrealist technique.

A Branch of Nettle Enters through the Window

The woman with the crêpe paper body
 The red fish in the fireplace
 Whose memory is pieced together from a multitude of
 small watering places for distant ships

Who laughs like an ember fit to be set in snow
 And sees the night expand and contract like an accordion
 The armor of the grass
 Hilt of the dagger gate
 Falling in flakes from the wings of the sphinx
 Rolling the floor of the Danube
 For which time and space destroy themselves
 On the evening when the watchman of the inner eye
 trembles like an elf
 Isn't this the stake of the battle to which my dreams
 surrender
 Brittle bird
 Rocked by the telegraph wires of trance
 Shattering in the great lake created by the numbers
 of its song
 This is the double heart of the lost wall
 Gripped by the grasshoppers of the blood
 That drag like likeness through the mirror
 My broken hands
 My caterpillar eyes
 My long whalebone hairs
 Whalebone sealed under brilliant black wax

— *André Breton, translated by David Antin*

The following prompt is designed to help you write a surrealist poem or prose piece. Begin by reading through the list of both ordinary and unusual images listed below. These are the sorts of images that Surrealists use in their writing.

After you've read through this list, make your own list of 25 similar images.

a sink full of Brussels sprouts
 a dripping faucet
 a young girl singing a song in the attic
 the sound of someone swallowing
 a wall made out of something walls are never made of
 the smell of wet dog hair
 a bell ringing once every _____
 a boy dressed in a red shirt
 a knife covered with sugar
 the sound of a refrigerator humming
 cobwebs breaking across a face
 a scorpion inside a head of lettuce
 a doctor with a head that looks like a cabbage
 a voice shouting, "One more time for our dead friends!"
 a voice whispering, "Let me have it."
 someone screaming, "Now! Now!"
 a boy watching static on the television screen
 a teacher repeating, "What do you do?"
 a hose which is always behind you
 a mother and child sharing a cigarette
 a white horse sleeping
 the sound of people clapping
 a voice saying, "Everyone knows you're not real."
 framed words like "no" and "nail"
 a throbbing heart
 a hairless dog
 the sound of typing coming from downstairs
 a ball rolling down the hallway
 a girl trying to speak who has no tongue
 five men lined up beside a boxcar

a black lake
 a fish with a face
 food that talks

Now that you have both the above list as well as a list of your own, you are ready to begin constructing a piece of surrealist writing. Choose at least ten images. If you're interested in writing a poem, put these images together in stanza form, something like this:

Five men lined up beside my dresser —
 In the mirror, a girl tries to speak
 (she has no tongue, but I know what
 she wants to say--"Now! Now!")
 I am a fish with a face, I say
 I am your dinner, and I talk.
 No wonder I scare you.

If you prefer to write prose or a prose poem, put the images together almost as though you are telling a dream. For example, you might write something like "I wake to the sound of someone swallowing. A boy in a red shirt asks what I can do; I say I will do it when I can, but to please stop asking. I hear the freezer humming behind me and turn to look — too late." And so on.

Surrealist writing can be very strange, but the line between the bizarre and the incoherent is a thin one. You do not want to cross it entirely. Your poem or prose needs at least to *suggest* coherence. Sometimes the repetition of a single line or image, or the use of a stable situation, can provide a surrealist poem or prose piece with just this sense of coherence. Notice how repetition and the use of the sermon framework provide unity in the following poem:

Untitled

A flash of red
 A flash of green
 And the preacher said —
 you sinners that have sinned shouldn't sin
 And the man said —
 can you dig it?
 The stars dropped water balloons
 And the preacher said —
 penguins can't read and the book isn't for them anyways
 And the man said —
 can you dig it?
 A tree walked by and said "hi"
 And the preacher said —
 celibates must lead boring lives
 And the man said —
 can you dig it?
 A smoked sausage tried to squirt mustard on my white
 shirt
 And the preacher said —
 abula shatwo norkone
 And I said —
 my god, what was that stuff?

— *Scott Glass, 12th grade*

USING TV AND THE MOVIES

Contemporary myths often come from movies. Consider the way that *Star Wars* and *The Wizard of Oz* have become a part of every American's vocabulary. A couple of hundred years from now, students of twentieth-century America will probably study productions like *Miami Vice*, *Star Trek*, and *Back to the Future* in order to learn what we were like, what we cared about, and what we believed in. When you write about a movie or a show that moved you, you are really writing about yourself, what you care about, what bothers you. So movies and TV, even commercials, can be a rich source for your writing.

Begin by watching one or two of your favorite movies or television shows. As you watch, write down lines that you especially like, or that evoke a strong response from you. Stop only after you've collected at least one full page of lines or phrases. Then write a poem based on a few of these lines, as Tom Clark does in his poem "Final Farewell."

Final Farewell

Great moment in *Blade Runner* where Roy
Batty is expiring, and talks about how everything
he's seen will die with him —
ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion
sea-beams glittering before the Tannhauser gates.

Memory is like molten gold
burning its way through the skin
It stops there.

There is no transfer
Nothing I have seen
will be remembered
beyond me
That merciful cleaning
of the windows of creation
will be an excellent thing
my interests notwithstanding.

But then again I've never been
near Orion, or the Tannhauser
gates,

I've only been here.

The fourth and fifth lines of Clark's poem are taken word for word from the movie *Blade Runner*. The rest of his poem gives his personal response to these lines.

Like Tom Clark, choose a few favorite lines from a movie or television show that you especially like, and build a poem around these lines. You may want to say why these lines moved you, or explain how your own life measures up against the idea expressed in these lines.

A second way to use television and the movies in your writing is to recall not lines, but specific scenes or

plots that affected you deeply. For this kind of writing, start by brainstorming. Make a list of ten movies, TV episodes, or moments from movies or TV episodes that meant a lot to you, or that you have never been able to forget. Write down everything you can remember: names of characters, what happened, what was said, etc.

After you've made notes about a number of different shows, choose one that you'd like to use in your own story or poem. See, for example, how Jack Skelley uses a television episode as the topic for his poem:

TV Blooperspotter

In this very special, final *Mod Squad* episode, Marty, the brother of Pete's girlfriend, and Pete's best friend, is sent to Vietnam and accidentally killed while handling explosives. It turns out that the company owned by Marty's father produced these bombs — hence the father feels guilty, suicidal, and in the final scene tried to blow up his factory to atone his guilt but at the last possible moment before he blows everything apart, Pete pretends he is the dead son, and the delirious man is willing to believe. Pete guides the father down into the center of a maze of pipes and wires, and listens with compassion until the father collapses in Pete's arms. Pete feels suddenly powerful, in control; and the world is blazing all around him. He takes the old man's detonation device. He has a big plan.

Make a habit of keeping notes on your favorite movies and television shows. Even if you do not write an entire poem or story around a moment from the movies, you may use your notes for filling in the details in other writing projects.

Note: Tom Clark and Jack Skelley's poems are from *Up Late: American Poetry Since 1970* (Four Walls, Eight Windows), edited by Andrei Codrescu.

SOUND, RHYTHM, MUSIC

by William Bryant Logan

I LIKE TO USE MODELS WHEN I'M TRYING TO let my elementary school students see the terrific textures that are possible in language. Using models is important not only because it adds energy to their own writing, but also because when they write more energetic lines, they find them easier to remember and to read out loud with gusto.

Two models have been particularly useful, both involving magic and incantation. The first is by the Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen (followed by my translation):

Sensemaya

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!

La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio;
la culebra viene y se enreda en un palo;

con sus ojos de vidrio, en un palo
con sus ojos de vidrio.

La culebra camina sin patas;
la culebra se esconde en la yerba;
caminando se esconde en la yerba;
caminando sin patas.

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!

Tu le das con el hacha, y se muere:
dále ya!
No le des con el pie, que te muerde,
no le des con el pie, que se va!

Sensemaya, la culebra,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, con sus ojos,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, con su lengua,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, con su boca,
sensemaya...

Writer-in-Residence at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, WILLIAM BRYANT LOGAN is working on a book about dirt.

La culebra muerta no puede comer;
la culebra muerta no puede silbar;
no puede caminar;
no puede correr.

La culebra muerta no puede mirar;
la culebra muerta no puede beber;
no puede respirar,
no puede morder!

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Sensemaya, la culebra...
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Sensemaya, no se mueve...
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Sensemaya la culebra...
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Sensemaya, se murio!

Sensemaya (Song to Kill a Snake)

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!

The snake has eyes of glass;
the snake comes and wraps around a stick;
with its eyes of glass, on a stick,
with its eyes of glass.
The snake walks without feet;
the snake hides in the grass;
walking, it hides in the grass,
walking without feet.

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!

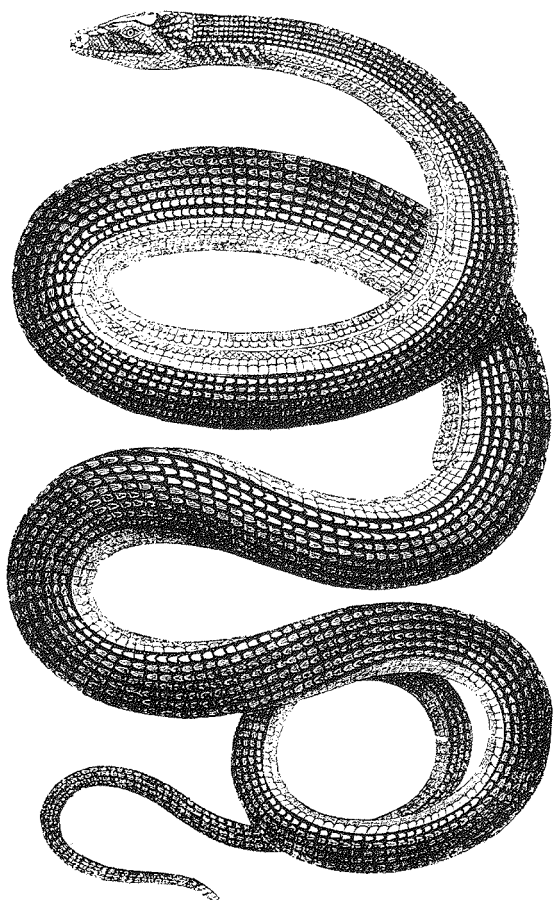
You hit it with an ax and it dies:
Hit it now!
Don't hit it with your foot, or it'll bite you,
don't hit it with your foot, or it'll run!

Sensemaya, the snake, the snake,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with its eyes,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with its tongue,
sensemaya.
Sensemaya, with its mouth,
sensemaya...

The dead snake can't eat;
 the dead snake can't hiss;
 it cannot walk,
 it cannot run.
 The dead snake can't see;
 the dead snake can't drink;
 it cannot breathe,
 it cannot bite!

Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
 Sensemayá, the snake, the snake...
 Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
 Sensemayá doesn't move...
 Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
 Sensemayá, the snake, the snake...
 Mayombé - bombe - mayombé!
 Sensemayá is dead!

I then talk about poems as magic and ask the students to imagine writing a poem that would compel an animal to act in a certain way. The students and I think of examples of the repetition of words, phrases, and names that exercise a power over the hearer. Finally, I suggest that the students include a refrain of pure sound — musical, guttural, whatever — as a sort of *coup de grâce* to make the spell effective.



With this idea, I've gotten songs to Elevate an Elephant, to Sauté a Sloth, to Tame a Horse, to Put a Hippo to Sleep, to Make a Fish Swim to the Center of the Sea. Using the repetition of names and syntax and a refrain of pure sounds, the poems are always energetic. But there was one unexpected result, as well: the kids who have more trouble writing exact, concrete imagery seem to be freed by this writing idea. I don't know why, but the environment of nonsense words seems to help some of them see more clearly what they describe.

Salmon, red, salmon, orange.
 Red and orange.
 Salmon, red and orange.
 Its name is Fish of the Sea.

Shobop beebop shobop beebop
 shobop beebop shobop beebop
 shooooooooooooooooobop

He flows into the center of the sea.
 He flows there to catch his prey.
 In the center of the sea,
 to catch his prey.

The fish of the sea is red and orange.
 Shobop beebop shooooooooobop
 To catch his prey in the center of the sea.

The Fish of the Sea swims fast and steadily.
 The Fish of the Sea goes
 to the center of the sea,
 to the center of the sea,
 to catch his prey.

— April Lowenthal, 5th grade

Kids whose native language is not English also have special fun with this technique. Maybe the pure sounds somehow connect them with their native languages. Marwan is Iranian:

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 bom bom bom bom

The horse is black.
 His neck is blue.
 He jumps like a train.
 He jumps like a rabbit.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
 bom bom bom bom

— Marwan Younis, 5th grade

The second model poem I use is the flipside of the first. Guillen invades sense with sound and rhythm. Michael McClure, in his *Ghost Tantras*, tends to invest pure sound with sense. At first, I used this idea only with pull-out groups, fearing the wildness that all the sound might invoke. Lately, I've found that it works well in full classes, too.

BRAHHNG! KROOOR BRATOOOOOOTH-MAR
GRRRRRRRRRAHH! GROOOOOOOR!

Swow mownarr grah roooooooh muhr
zneeeeeeeeeeeeeesweeeeee bwooooo

BWEEE NOOOOOOOOOO!

GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

sweeepie joooo nahg gar drrrrr twi
chengreeoooo grrrrrrrrrrrr gowld snarr
mroooooooooooo-wub

WUB

WUB

WUB

WUB

WUB

WUB

WUB

bweeeeeeeccc.

15

THE TREES ARE ELEPHANTS' HEADS.

The brown whorls of hair at the top of your head.

The trees are gray-green groooooor greyeccc.

AMM SOOOTEETEE AIEE! GAROOOOOOOOOH.

Gragg. Hrahrrr mok now-toony. Bwooooooh.

Groooooor. MARRRR! GROOOOH! Grooooooor.

GARHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!

GAHRHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!

MOMM.

Hraghrrr.

GROOOOOOOOH!

Mowk-towr-nnowth-own-eii!

FACE,

TUSK,

WHAHHH!

GAHRHOOOOOOOOH!!

LUKK!

When we write poems based on these, I ask the kids first to imagine that they are ghosts, spirits, or some sort of immaterial creature. The language this imaginary being speaks shows how it feels directly, without any need for a dictionary. Every once in a while, however, it appears in the world of people, and then, for a line or two, it speaks in English. The first of these I ever received was by a shy sixth grader. It blew me away.

Grough. Grough! Eeeeeoo. Eeeeeod. Whidyaaa.
Sschwiraaya. Greeayaa. Oooceod o o o o.
The pussywillows are knots on a rope to the sky.
Uhgaraaa. Eeeeeoo. Teawaaa. Sweeooooo.
Grough. Grough! Whidayaaa. Eeeeeoo. Whiyaaaaa.
The lightbulb is a piece of the sky caught in a trap.

Mrowaoo.

— Krista Bray, 6th grade

Krista was so startled by what she'd done that she refused to read it. When she finally did, however, her pleasure, and the class's, were palpable.

I have also found the ghost tantras to be a good way to put life into ideas that might otherwise evoke hoots and yawns. For a May parade at New York's P.S. 84, I tried to find ways that the kids could write about spring. The tantras freed us very quickly from the inevitable tulips, or rather, they put energy into the usual imagery:

Flooooooooooooo

bweeeeee flaaaaaaoo

Shnnuuuuuuuu meeeeeeeeee

mroooooooooooo mub

BUB

LUB

BUB

LUB

See the life come

off the trees Bweeeeee

See the treeeeeeza

Fly Flyaaaaaaaay

The flowerzzzza fieflyfleefly

BoooooooooooOoooooooOooooOa

Seeeeo flaflo

See the trees!

— Raquel James-Segarra, 4th grade

Everyone in Raquel's class did his or her own spring sound-poem. In the end, we held an informal reading. They never read with more expression.

Bibliography

Nicolas Guillen, *Sóngoro cosongo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1952)

Michael McClure, *Ghost Tantras* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1969)

Recently we heard an unconfirmed rumor that poet and teacher Gary Moore had conducted an in-service workshop for teachers entitled "Tough Guys Don't Conference." Mr. Moore is out of the country and unavailable for comment.