TEACHERS WRITERS

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Loosening Up The Uptight Student

by Julie Landsman

EACH FALL, STUDENTS COME TO ME WORRIED about grammar, spelling, and vocabulary. They are anxious about the five-paragraph essay structure, about the dyslexic way they sometimes form words. They are constantly on guard for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors. For the twenty years I have taught, I have never ceased to be amazed at the power of the teacher over the minds of students. My experience has been varied: from working in special programs for disruptive teenage students to teaching creative writing in a highly selective high school for the arts. I have also taught in regular English classes in Minneapolis high schools and in classes for students who have learning disabilities.

Another thing that amazes me is the similarity of the problems all these different kinds of students have with their writing: they paralyze their own creative impulses by censoring themselves, and the effect on their work is devastating. I have learned that we can counter this uptightness, that we can loosen up and liberate the creative writer in our students—be they members of street gangs, small-town kids in rural North Dakota, or suburban kids whose parents want them to go to Princeton. In all these cases, students have good stories to tell, insights to discover, unusual images, and wild words to put together into poems, stories, and personal essays that are free from restraint and stiffness.

I love the beginning of the school year, the opening up time with a new group of students, young or old. The initial sessions, which concentrate on doing away with the censor, are my favorite ones because of the discovery so many older students make that they are writers, and that things are coming up they never even knew were there. The first months of my year-long literary arts high school program give me a chance to undo some damage, to challenge some assumptions.

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The following is a set of activities I use with all kinds of students in a wide variety of settings, and that are being successfully used by teachers I have worked with over the years. Some of these activities take fifteen minutes, some two hours. Their common goal is to get students to write without restraint, to encourage them to generate material. I do not discount the importance of revision. However, I have met so many students who never get started in the first place, who have very little material to shape or craft or "spell check," who are actually stopped dead in their tracks because they are afraid to put pen to paper. I am writing here about the first step that is crucial to the rest of a student's writing experience. I believe all kinds of people can succeed in writing original work if they learn a process that releases their creative impulses, their imaginations, their memories.

Reading Aloud

A key for building a writing community within each class, which is essential for opening up students' writing, is to have them write and *immediately* read aloud what they have written.* We read around in a circle or small group; there is no comment from anyone after each piece is read. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of each student's hearing his or her own voice, of feeling in his or her body, or breathing, where the words come from. Once in a while I have the group echo phrases from the writing they have just heard. The group simply repeats those words, images, or phrases that stick. From this the writer can tell what parts of the writing are the most powerful or memorable.

Reading aloud without comment frees up my students from worrying about what others will say about their writing. At the same time I do encourage my students to talk to each other after class if something has moved them or if they find a communality in experience that comes out in the writing. One young woman I'll call Sarah, who was in the tenth grade and pregnant with her second child, wrote about her mother sucking on lemons before she went to sing at church choir rehearsal each Wednesday night. After class that day, another young woman in the class, who was different from Sarah in every outwardly discernible way, stopped her after class to tell her about her father, who did the same before he went to sing with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. It was one of those moments that brought two members of the class together, and broke down the barriers to good writing that so often appear in public school classrooms.

Given the importance of building trust in the class, I always write and read along with my students. I take my place in the circle, reading when it comes my turn. I can do this without relinquishing my role as facilitator and guide for my students: so far not one of them has seemed distracted by my participation in these activities.

Getting Started

I always start my classes without any writing at all. We go around the room and state our names and two details about our home. Then I may ask the students to jot down some information about themselves in terms of the five senses and to tell the class this information when it comes their turn: e.g. "I love the smell of lilacs, my favorite food is tortillas, I listen to blues and jazz, I like the feel of cotton t-shirts, and I enjoy looking at Jason's eyes." Because this activity has so few items it is usually manageable for even the shyest student, and we learn a lot about each other. Laughter often accompanies the reading of the five senses introduction, which also helps relax the class. And of course, the writing is vibrant because it is sensuous.

Autobiography Exercises

Next I move to one or two autobiography exercises. I have students write numbers from 1 to 26 down the left-hand side of their papers. Then I ask them to take five minutes to list an item, phrase, or word about themselves beside each number. They are to do this without thinking, without being logical. They can repeat a phrase such as "I love chocolate" if it keeps coming up as they list. They can write a few phrases for one item, breaking the "rules" as long as they keep going steadily down the page without self-censorship. I read them Nazim Hikmet's poem "Autobiography," Langston Hughes' poem "Theme for English B," and Joy Harjo's poem "Autobiography" as examples. After we have finished writing, the students read their lists aloud, with no comment from anyone. A student always has the right not to read. However, I encourage them to read as often as possible. Usually the momentum of each student reading draws in even the most reluctant ones. Students who initially are afraid they will not be able to write complete sentences enjoy this exercise and participate in it immediately because the list format is less threatening to them.

There is another autobiography I sometimes ask students to write in addition to, or instead of, this one: to start the autobiography at the top of the page, knowing they must finish it at the bottom. The students should write quickly and without careful thought or planning. I tell my students that they can summarize their entire lives or they can choose one aspect of their experiences, such as the houses they have lived in, the schools they attended, or a relationship with one of their siblings. Again, we read these aloud without comment. This exercise appeals to students who are concerned they will not have enough to say. The one-page limit is reassuring to them. Once we have done the five senses introduction and one or two autobiographies as a class, I can usually feel the trust building, the community tentatively opening up, an interest in each other's lives developing.

I move from these different kinds of autobiography to an "I remember" activity. As an introduction to this I have the students read four or five pages from Joe Brainard's book *I Remember*. I pass out these pages and we go around the room, each student reading an item on the list. If there are students who cannot read well, I give them plenty of time to look over their items, or I ask another student to help them, or I assign four or five students to read as a chorus. After we have read

* I primarily use Natalie Goldberg's methods of timed writings from her books *Writing Down the Bones* and *Wild Mind*.

Brainard's "I remember Spam," "I remember bouffant hair-dos," "I remember Buster Brown shoes," etc., I ask the students to take ten minutes to make their own "I remember" lists. I again tell them to write automatically. I tell them they can include single words, phrases, and even short paragraphs on their lists. After ten minutes I call time and let them finish up their last item. Then we go around and around the room, reading one item at a time until everyone is done with the last item. The reason students like this exercise especially is that they read only for a moment each time it comes around to their turn in the circle. Also, they can select certain items to read, and certain ones to leave out as the reading goes along. After the all-class reading I have them spend fifteen minutes writing in some depth on one item on their list. I also tell students that they can take items from each other's lists. If someone writes "I remember my first trip to the dentist" and this triggers a memory for another student, he or she can jot that down at the end of his or her list.

Here's an example by Jenny N. Young, a junior at the Arts High School:

A Second Chance

Danny was seven years old when I met him. He was crazy and furious and a fighter. He had chocolate skin, white in places. White and red and purple even, because he was asleep on the couch and his mom was smoking. She was sixteen then. I guess she forgot him when she missed the ashtray and Danny caught fire.

Danny was told to never ever leave the apartment without an adult, because life is murder outside and children should know that. When the couch burst into flames and Danny's family ran screaming, they left him there. He awoke to his body sizzling red. But Danny didn't flee. He remembered the rules and waited.

Waited, as the flames devoured him.

I remember him because he had energy and fury that scared us all. Because he asked me once if I loved him and I just smiled, because that same day he saw Brian giving me a back rub and he hit him. Slapped his huge white face, because Danny was possessive.

Danny never owned. He lived in a place that seems unreal to me now. Imagined, because here is safe and busy and full, and Cabrini Green is a ghetto that some say is worse than hell.

Hell because the dark stairwells are saturated with piss. Hell because there children laugh like other children do, but they are doomed because their lives are soaked in blood.

I helped Danny paint. I showed him how we cover the walls with thick white paint. I watched him beating the walls, splattering his cheeks and the floor with specks of white.

"Be careful, Danny."

Be careful doesn't mean much to a seven-year-old who was shot on his way to school.

Be careful is nothing as the bullet smashes a young face and the dead boy is still holding his mother's hand.

Be careful is nothing as I shove the newspaper articles out of my face because Danny is famous now. Our society was too sick to listen before.

Danny was seven years old when I met him. He was crazy and furious and a fighter. He had chocolate skin white in places, white and red and purple even, because his mom was smoking. She was sixteen then, and I guess she forgot him when Danny caught fire.

Other list poem ideas are "I didn't know I loved" from Nazim Hikmet's poem of that name, "I don't understand," and a list of firsts: first car I drove, first time I saw my mother cry, etc. All these can be done in a similar round-robin fashion, with further exploration of one item on the list after the reading aloud. The idea of listing or chanting is good for triggering ideas without allowing the student to freeze up. These activities are effective at catching uptight students unaware, before they have time to become nervous or self-conscious in the writing or composing of the list.

Letter Writing

I often go from list writing into letter writing in the first two weeks of class. Letter writing is familiar to most students, and thus may not seem as formidable as other assignments. Usually even the most turned-off student has written a note to a friend during class. I read aloud some of Richard Hugo's letter poems from his book *31 Letters and 13 Dreams*. I also read a variety of poems of address. Then I ask them to quickly make a list of people, living or dead, to whom they would like to write letters. I tell them they should think of this as a "letter unsent." They read their lists aloud and choose one person to address. I then give them ten or fifteen minutes to write the letter. Again, we read them aloud.

Postcard Pass-around

Another activity that lightens up my introductory classes is one I call postcard pass-around. I collect old touristic postcards, and when I have enough for one for each member of the class, I put a post-it on the back of each card. Each post-it has a number from 1 to the number of students in the class. I start by giving each student a card. Then I tell them to look at it, and to jot down the number of the card on a page in their notebook. Next to the number they are to write an imaginary message from an imaginary person who is visiting the place pictured on the card. They are to do this quickly because that is the way postcards are often written. After a few minutes I ask them to pass the card to the person on their right and do the same thing again, always remembering to jot down the number on the back of the card next to their message. When everyone has written these instant messages from each card, we read them aloud. We start with #1 and all read the entries for this number, then #2, and so on. Postcard pass-around is always a successful activity, because everyone is curious to hear the different interpretations of each postcard. I hold up the card for the class to see as we read each group of entries. This activity is also successful because, unlike the more in-depth writing exercises, it is another instant assignment, with little to threaten students who are worried about having enough to say.

Poster Poems

In these introductory sessions I also use poster poems. In this activity each student is assigned a large piece of butcher's

paper that has been taped to the wall of the room. Using a magic marker, each student writes an opening line of a poem on his or her sheet, in his or her own color. After starting their poems the students fill in lines on the other sheets posted around the room that have been begun by different classmates. After all the poems are complete—for example, 23 poems of 23 lines each for a class of 23 kids—each student reads aloud the poem that he or she started. This activity adds humor and physical movement to the class. I try to plan it for a day I feel will be a restless one anyway, such as the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.

An example of one group poem, composed by a class I have taught for persons who are HIV positive or who have AIDS, is:

I'm rearranging my home
And the living room has an octopus in it.
Oh so many arms, how can I love them all?
It ate all my food, my pets, my ideas. . . .
But it is beautiful to the octopi, why not I?
It burrows into the giant furnace and reaches its arms
through heat vents
8 is enough wrap-around comfort for an octopus in the
garden—on a mirror that's double trouble
16, 24, 32, oh my god! the ink is all over the couch!
And under the ocean there are others growing angry
They too wish to be in my home, warm and loved with
plenty to eat and lots of stories to share
Interiors by writers
Writers by interior octopi

—Paul, Marty, Dean, Dan, Kent, and Julie
(two lines each)

The Color of Music

I also encourage students to listen to music while coloring with crayons. After ten or fifteen minutes, I gradually lower the volume and tell them to flip over the paper on which they have been coloring and write whatever comes into their minds. We read these aloud to each other. I have noticed that this activity relaxes the class into a dreamy state and brings out memories or images. It may be the smell of the crayons, as one of my poet friends suggests, or the relaxing New Age Kitaro music I use for this, but it is a chance to practice real relaxation with students. This activity is in contrast to the short, quick ones, and is aimed at the student who needs to daydream a little to get going.

Instant Poems

Another short activity for pure enjoyment is what I call instant poems. In this experience I have students think of topics or phrases and a number of lines between one and five. We go around the room, one at a time; each student calls out a topic and number of lines—e.g., "red shoelaces, two lines" or "hurricanes, five lines"—and we write on the topic, using only the number of lines indicated. After we have written on everyone's topic, we read them aloud: all "red shoelace" poems first, next all the "hurricane" poems, etc. This is another chance for students to see a variety of interpretation of the same topic. When we begin, I emphasize that we do not want definitions, but rather images, surreal combinations, the first thoughts that come to mind. It is important to move rapidly, not allowing students a great deal of time to think about each topic, in order to get spontaneous, original poems.

The Important Object

After the first few weeks I ask students to bring an object of importance to class. They show this object to the rest of the class and explain why it is meaningful to them. After we have heard from everyone, I ask each of the students to make a list of objects in their lives, things that they remember or that they can "see" as they write. We read these lists aloud and again, I tell students to add to their own lists from the lists of others. Then I ask each student to choose one from his or her list and to make a second list, which I call an "embedded list." The students may choose a kitchen table, for instance. Then I tell them to make a list of things they associate with the kitchen table: incidents, images, people, memories, and ideas. Sometimes this embedded list becomes a poem itself. By the end of the writing time some students may find themselves writing a short story. I always give students follow-up class time to expand on what they have written and to read it aloud to the class or to a partner.

Collages and Cut-ups

Other brief exercises that allow students to play with words are collage poems and cut-up sentences. In the first, I simply bring stacks of newspapers and magazines, Scotch tape, and butcher's paper. I tell students to comb through the printed material and to find words, phrases, and sentences that appeal to them, cause them to chuckle, or catch their ear. I tell them to cut them out and, once they get a pile of these phrases and words, to put them in some kind of order and tape them to the paper. Often students will follow a story line: "600 gray rhinoceroses/ help out in apartment fire." Or they will string images together: "a new moon/ on a fashionable bridesmaid/ settled over San Francisco yesterday." Finally, students read their poems to the class and then we post them on the walls.

An example of an entire poem that came out of the newspaper exercise is this one entitled "Still Smiling" by Teresa J. Circle, a senior at the Arts High School:

deep pockets, enormous suede death
winning overturned
damage dismissal
unearth rights
easier for war.
"wait and see"
temporary blame for death.
price of the moon
slapped wines,
shot war
effect
red bucks built
steady swindling, pushing
stop, wait run dry
raise dying dies
pressure

trees survive survive
twee-dotty-toilet-music
choose leaders or lose decision,
pride
comfort.
beware devil entry
relish a smile.

In another exercise, I have students write five sentences. They can be about the same thing and can form a paragraph, or they can be five disparate sentences. Then I have them put each word from each sentence on a separate slip of paper. After they have a pile of these slips, they shuffle them up completely and draw one at a time, writing down the words on a clean piece of paper in random order. After they get them down I have them insert punctuation by counting every fifth, then seventh word and inserting a comma or a period randomly. Finally, they read their sentences or paragraph to the class. This exercise always brings laughter and delight in the way words seem to play by themselves. Because this exercise is based not on thinking, but rather on luck, it gets even the most intimidated students writing. Combined with the collage exercise, it can relax an entire group of students who are afraid to put words on paper. (A more detailed description of this second exercise can be found in *Writing Down the Bones.)*

Here is an example of a mixed-up poem from a student who had learning disabilities, and who was in the ninth grade. He only used three short sentences to arrive at this:

Ultimate people's feelings do take us
unbreakable love hurts
so why
time feeling decisions
feeling the understanding.

The Five Senses

I also use exercises that include all five senses. These involve writing from a picture (sight), writing to music (hearing), writing after walking blindfolded while a partner takes you by the arm (touch), writing after sniffing aromas such as mint, cinnamon, coffee, Italian seasoning (smell), and writing after eating chocolate or apples (taste). Of course the kids get a kick out of eating and sniffing and listening to music together. At the same time they take this exercise seriously and often come up with some wonderful pieces as a result of engaging various senses.

A group of students who were disruptive in most of their classes, and were in a special program to help them go on to the next grade level, wanted to put some of the lines they wrote about different tastes together into group poems. Here is what these ninth graders came up with:

Lemon

sour, onion
watermelon, yellow
strange
cousin Joanne
make you shake
on fish
Florida
summer, my Dad's back yard

Chocolate

smooth,
skin, kiss a girl
Grandma's
a hug
in love
Valentine's Day
ice cream summer
hot pop
Willie Wonka

Close to Home

A final exercise that works well for all kinds of students is the telling of neighborhood or family stories. There is often a particular character in my students' lives: an old woman who can cure cats, a ghost under an overpass who comes out at night, a great grandmother who saved lives by swimming out into a river to rescue children. I encourage students to list and to tell aloud neighborhood stories, family myths or legends. After everyone has had a chance, I simply ask them to write down these stories, embellish them if they want, put them in verse form or in the form of short short stories. This oral history technique can lead to other projects such as taping the family elders.

All of these activities help my anxious students to generate material. They end up with notebook pages, collages, and butcher's paper filled with lists, journal entries, stories, lines, and poems. Then we can go on to revision. We can use spell checkers and read aloud for the correct sound, the correct place for a comma or a period. Until students feel comfortable putting pen to paper—ignoring spelling, grammar, and punctuation—writing will seem arduous, dull, meaningless, or at the worst, frightening. These exercises form a selection from which to choose, a list of ideas for reaching turned-off kids. And at the same time, these same suggestions can be effective for the student who loves writing, and who writes constantly, often in spite of someone else's criticism or judgment.

Because reading aloud is an important part of these activities, I stress the necessity for each student to listen to his or her classmates, and for kindness and consideration during the writing time. As I have stated, a classroom dynamics of trust and openness is absolutely inseparable from the content of the lesson material.

All the suggestions and activities, strategies, and methods described above can constitute the important beginning of a student's writing career. I find them indispensable, however, in encouraging a ten-year-old or an octogenarian, a gang member or a prep school junior, to write original, unusual, impulsive, and unexpected words. It takes a lot of effort to free students up from writing anxiety, but judging from their poems and stories and their sheer delight in putting pen to paper, it is important, necessary, and exciting work for all of us.

Two Poems

by André Breton

On the Road That Goes Up and Down

Tell me where the flame will stop
Are there vital statistics for flames
This one barely dog-ears the paper
It hides in flowers and nothing feeds it
But we look in its eyes and don't know what we see in its
eyes any more
Because they are looking at you
A statue is kneeling on the sea but
It isn't the sea any more
Now lighthouses rise up in the city
They bar the way to marvelous blocks of ice and flesh
That were plunging their countless chariots into the arena
The dust puts to sleep women dressed as queens
And the flame keeps on running
It's a lace ruff around the neck of a young lord
It's the imperceptible chiming of a straw clock in the
house of a poet or some other good-for-nothing
It's the whole boreal hemisphere
With its hanging lamps its pendulums coming in for a
landing
It's what climbs the cliff at the appointed hour
Hearts are the light oars of that lost ocean
While roadside stoplights change with a dry click
Like that special crunching made by priests when they
walk
There's no actress on tour any more in the white and gold
wagon
Who with her head just poking out of the door curtain her
great water-thoughts covering the pond
Expects only that the flame will grant her the ultimate
oblivion of her role
The worn labels of green bottles still speak of châteaus
But the châteaus are deserted except for a living head of
hair
Château-Ausone
And that hair which never stays up late to comb itself out
Floats on the air the medusa jellyfish It's the flame
Now it circles around a cross
Beware lest it desecrate your grave
Beneath the earth the medusa jellyfish is still at home
And the flame with dove's wings accompanies only
travelers in danger
It gives the slip to lovers the moment the two of them are
alone
Where is it going I see the mirrors of Venice smashing on
the outskirts of Venice
I see windows that aren't attached to any kind of wall
opening at a construction site
Some naked workers there polish the bronze brighter
These tyrants are too gentle for stones to rise up against
them
They wear rings on their feet made from these stones
Perfumes hover around them star of myrrh field of hay
They know the rainy lands unveiled by pearls
A pearl necklace makes the flame seem grey for a moment
But immediately a crown of flames encompasses the
immortal pearls
A man and at the head of a fern stairway
Several women grouped on the top steps
Who open and close their eyes like dolls
Assist at the birth of a forest that must save
The very essences of plants from destruction
The man I no longer am then horsewhips the last white
beast
Which vanishes in the morning mist
Shall its will be done
In the first cradle of foliage the flame falls like a baby's
rattle
Beneath its eyes they toss the net of roots
A silver place-setting on a spider web
But the flame won't know how to catch its breath again
Woe betide the flame that would catch its breath
I think of a barbaric flame
Like the one that burns the fans in women's fingers as it
passes through this all-night restaurant
Like the one that trails me night and day
And gleams in each falling leaf when the leaves fall
Flame of water guide me to the sea of fire

* * * * *

All the Schoolgirls Together

Sometimes you say marking the earth with your heel the
way in a bush the eglantine grows
Wild as if it's made only of dew
You say The whole sea and the whole sky for a single
Childhood victory in the land of dance or better for a
single
Embrace in the corridor of a train
Going to hell with gunshots on a bridge or better
Still for one savage word
The kind that a bleeding man whose name travels very far
From tree to tree would say as he looked at you
All he does is go in and out in the middle of a hundred
snowbirds
Then where is this really
And when you say it the whole sea and the whole sky
Scatter like a thundercloud of girls in the playground of a
strict boarding school
After a dictation exercise in which *My heart's desire*
Might have been written *My heart's on fire*

Few poets have embraced the idea of loosening up more than ANDRE BRETON (1896–1966) did. These two poems are from *Earthlight*, a collection of Breton's poetry brilliantly translated by Bill Zavatsky and Zack Rogow and recently published in a paperback edition ($12.95) by Sun & Moon.

Beginnings

Five Ways to Get the Words Moving

by David Steingass

EVERY DAY THAT I WRITE I BEGIN WITH VARIAtions on the five exercises below. "You really do this to get ideas?" students ask. "Right out of the air?" Athletes stretch before competing, I tell them, and singers warm up their voices before performing. As Picasso said, "God also invented the alarm clock."

Use these exercises once a day and you'll notice your writing and your students' writing improving very quickly. As the airlines say about donning oxygen masks, however, take care of yourself first, the children second. Those most fluent in the writing process usually make its best teachers.

Exercise 1: Playing Adam and Eve

Using common nouns you like, quickly write a list of five words in which each word (after the first) is suggested by what precedes it. For example:

gum
tree
termite
mountain
tumult

Write your list in a column so that each word stands alone. As in freewriting, don't stop writing; think while you write, rather than between words. Write whatever the word you are writing reminds you of—immediately. Try not to make value judgments. This will be difficult; we love the busy work, the marching in place of orthodox thought. Instead, concentrate on the sounds of your words and what they suggest; move by connotation, so that each word you write "makes sense" though it may seem neither rational nor logical.

After you've come up with several five-word lists, pick your favorite and add words as fast as you can for 90 seconds. Again, concentrate on common nouns. The important thing is to write rapidly. Itemize details inside your head with your eyes closed or details in the room with your eyes open, zip through the alphabet, use your middle or your dog's name—anything to keep words coming. If *toad* suggests *tamale*, for instance, and finally *tambourine*, write them. Try to reject nothing.

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You'll develop a list of words something like this:

gum	baffle	hero
tree	reflex	helix
termite	tumult	heliotrope
mountain	tremor	helicopter
tumult	bat	pomp
pulsar	pyramid	buffer
belfry	sensor	bat
rigmarole	moon	mentor
muffin	camel	mirror
buffoon	comet	crocodile
earthquake	sonar	ocelot
fault	radar	hummingbird
fluke	excelsior	tremor
whale	thunder	queen
depth	pyramid	constellation

The next step is to edit your list. Begin by crossing out repetitions and words you can't read or don't like. You might eliminate half your words. Then underline your ten best words and number the top five. Revision begins with choosing and ordering words—and introduces the writing process as a way of asking questions. The importance of constant choice and evaluation cannot be overemphasized. Here is my edited list:

1 hummingbird
2 ocelot
3 excelsior
4 moon
5 pyramid
queen
bat
thunder
crocodile
hero

Next, go through this whole process twice more, using verbs and colors, instead of proper nouns. Then try the following exercise:

1) On a clean sheet of paper, write your five best nouns, skipping three lines between each word.

2) Write your five best verbs after their correspondingly numbered nouns. Forget whether they "make sense"; in fact, change them if they "go together."

3) Write your five favorite colors before their respectively numbered nouns. You'll have five three-word phrases that should contain startling, exciting, unanticipated phrases:

red hummingbirds whisper
blue ocelots hum
yellow excelsior yodel
brown moons shout
orange pyramids bellow

In this little catalog, do you notice any subtle patterns? It might be anything. For instance, I just noticed that all my verbs describe the act of making sounds.

Next, look again at your list of ten nouns until you notice a pattern. Ask yourself why you used that pattern, and try to find a subject or title to develop. Four of my words are animal names, so I'll use animals I'd like as pets as my subject:

hummingbird
crocodile
bat
ocelot
parrot
monkey
cheetah
boomslang
raccoon
polar bear

You and your students will have come up with fairly complicated lists. Save four of them:

- the 90-second quick-writing list;
- the ten best words;
- the five favorite colors/nouns/verbs catalog;
- the focusing on subject.

Making these lists—the beginnings of revision sheet portfolios—incorporates not only spontaneity, but also choice and decision-making in the writing process.

Exercise 2: Looking at Clouds

As a boy I was a cloud-watcher. These were the rules:

- Be alone, and a little lonely.
- Have an unfocused mind.
- Stare at the clouds until they suggested something recognizable.
- Search out supporting evidence in neighboring clouds.
- Develop the fantasy as far as time allowed.

Later, I began to see parallels between writing poems and watching clouds: both accumulate in jigsaw-puzzle stages of ambiguity. Words, like clouds, lead to ideas and show us where to go.

Here is an exercise you can use to demonstrate this idea.

Divide your class into groups of four or five students. Each group collaborates to write a sentence that includes one word from everyone's list of ten favorite words (capitalized in the poem below). Then write the sentences on the chalkboard without capitalization or punctuation:

THUNDER the BASKETBALL player EATS OREOS

one day NICOLE was riding her BOAT and she found a HEARTshaped SEASHELL filled with seaweed
LAURA and JENNY like Rich and Ted our favorite groups are ALL BOYS POISON and MOTLEY CRÜE
BO JACKSON was driving his CAR when he saw ERIN riding her HORSE and Dawn walking her dog Sheeba
MOOSEY the DEER eats PIZZA with Nathan the DORK
the CAT PLAYS FOOTBALL with BOYS
the JET full of ANIMALs flew overhead while the HORSE kicked the VOLLEYBALLs into the fountain
MATT WATCHes FOOTBALL GAMEs
we like to TALK to BOYS like JEFF and TOM

The sentences may well have little relationship to each other or to the title. If you'd been staring at clouds, you'd ask yourself "What's there?" The authors of these sentences did a similar thing, saying, "They don't make sense." When your students say this, invite them to arrange and punctuate the sentences.

Then ask the students to work individually to find narrative "meaning" within and especially among the lines, and to edit the poem according to a set of guidelines the whole class agrees upon. This class agreed on the following:

1) You can rearrange the order of the sentences, but not the words within each line.

2) Cut one line if you'd like. You can delete any words except each writer's favorite. You can add words, but each line should total no more than nine words.

3) You can change any word's form (from singular to plural, past to present, etc.).

4) You can change punctuation in as many or few sentences as you like, but you can only use one period—at the end of the last line.

Also, any word or phrase can be freely reinterpreted. For example,"We like to talk" might become a book title, a pet's name, or a birthday gift. Working this way, your students start to understand how meaning grows out of, rather than glosses over, language. Punctuation becomes a tool of meaning rather than a rigid harness for words. Developing parallelism (such as uniform verb tense and point of view) makes arbitrary lines begin to hold together. Here's my revision, including the original sentence numbers to indicate my rearrangement:

1) THUNDER THE BASKETBALL PLAYER EATS OREOS

9) He likes talk. To boys like Jeff and Tom
2) Nicole rides her boat, the heart-shaped seashell
4) "Bo Jackson." His car, Erin, rides the horse, Dawn,
5) while Moosey-the-deer eats pizza. With Nathan,
6) his cat plays tackle football with boys
3) Laura and Jenny like. All Boys Poison and Crüe
7) fly in jets full of animals, horses, and volleyballs.

One reason I chose these lines was their difficulty (26 of 42 best words are proper nouns). Punctuation can make the most difficult examples "work." I did break the rule about using only one period, but what the heck.

Have the class continue until each student has discovered an idea that wasn't apparent. Think of the clouds, how one

detail proceeds until the whole sky is cavalry, cookies, or a caravansary.

I've used this exercise with teachers and students, from fourth grade through college level; you too can modify it for your students. Save your last version for Exercise 3.

Exercise 3: Asking the Golden Questions

What I call the Golden Questions are:

- Going where?
- Doing what?
- Then what happens?

They'll get you out of any writing jam, including the infamous Writer's Block. Using them, you and your students celebrate writing as a dialogue, as Yeats put it, of self and soul. It reveals poems as occasions of decision-making—arenas of improvisation and discovery.

Here are two ways you can use the Golden Questions:

1) Pick your favorite line from "Thunder the Basketball Player Eats Oreos" and begin a poem with it, inventing as you go by answering one or more of the Golden Questions. Here, for instance, I asked myself "Doing what?" and "Then what happened?"

> He likes talk. To boys like Jeff and Tom
> He tells the best secrets of his life. First,
> The Christmas he saw Santa plain, then the whole

2) Arrange your students in groups of four or five, as in Exercise 2. Ask each student to begin a clean sheet of paper with a favorite line from their revised version from Exercise 2. Next, have each student pass his or her paper to the next student in round-robin fashion. Each writer invents a new line of approximately the same length, continuing the narrative, and ending the line with an important word from the proceeding line. (To understand each poem's development, students may have to interview each other.) For example:

> He likes talk. To boys like Jeff and Tom
> And girls called Cid and Clarise he will talk
> Whatever comes to his head. Legends like El Cid
> He speaks from the place in his head legends
> Flourish. . . .

After four or five new lines have been added, the poems are returned to their initial authors for last lines and titles.

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If your students are very young—say second graders—try working the Golden Questions into the following format, the so-called Sam Scramble. You'll need these four lists (all words numbered by preference):

- five favorite colors;
- five favorite numbers;
- five favorite verbs;
- ten favorite single-syllable common nouns (e.g., clam, ball, shoe, moon, shell, worm, snake, fish, box, pie), numbered 1–10.

Next, pair opposite-end nouns (1 with 10, 2 with 9, etc.), decide which word should come first, and write each pair on a separate line:

> clam-pie
> box-ball
> shoe-fish
> snake-moon
> shell-worm

Then add the corresponding number, color, and verb (in participial form) to each pair of nouns. My third noun combination used my third color, number, and verb:

> Six-hundred pink shoe-fishes chanting. . . .

I have no idea what a shoe-fish is or what six hundred pink ones chant, but I guarantee that any second grader will be able to explain it.

Another technique is to extend each phrase in your catalog from Exercise 1 by answering a Golden Question, whichever one best fits the context. For example, for each of my five lines I asked, "Doing what?"

> Red hummingbirds whisper the secrets they hear among
> leaves
> Blue ocelots hum along with the rain forest
> Yellow excelsior yodel their parts in the angelic choir
> Brown moons shout in short high notes
> Orange pyramids bellow under the bake-oven sun.

You can also apply the Golden Questions to your revised "subject list" from Exercise 1. This is more challenging because you begin with single words. You'll develop a battery of sentences, such as this one that is based on the word *parrot*:

> A green parrot stands on the left shoulder of a toothless,
> one-eyed pirate with a wooden leg.

It's good to concentrate on sensory detail and develop similes to show readers exactly what compels you:

> A cheetah runs like a slice of dark-spotted light.

Remember, nouns "do" things or "go" places. Even rocks don't just "sit" doing "nothing." They might "break the surface of a pasture Herefords graze," or "hide in winter snow and stare out of summer grass." If you can't get quick answers, skip to other words. The exercise is more a dance among what delights you—writing as a verbal adventure ("Where next?")—than a test of what you know. From this procedure you can develop a catalog poem.

The final step is to pick one of your sentences. Close your eyes and visualize as vividly as possible what you like most about your subject, and, asking the Golden Question "Then what happens?" as often as necessary, develop the sentence into a substantial paragraph. (See my example at the start of Exercise 5).

Exercise 4: Watching the Dark

"How do you get ideas?" is a very difficult question to answer. Certainly you can't write what isn't in—or at least passing

through—your head. How do you know what's there, where to find it, whether it's any good, and how to get it onto paper? Maybe you were lucky enough to grow up in a rural area, with the advantage of much darkness. If so, perhaps you've noticed that you find things in the dark not by looking directly at where you think they are, but with peripheral vision.

There's always something there, just as there is always something in your head. Try to think "nothing," and don't be surprised if Ferris wheels, history lectures, and romantic fantasies want to horn in. You'll soon realize how difficult it is *not* to have ideas.

Now go back to your edited list of common nouns from Exercise 1 and pick any word. Add an arbitrary modifier and color until you get a phrase such as "hard purple thunder." As you write the words, you'll "feel" sensory impressions accumulate. A writer's subject, Annie Dillard says, is his or her idea that has not yet been put into words.

Here are two exercises to ease your students into the process of recording their sensations precisely. The idea is to try to write sentences but not to worry about grammar and syntax. Get words on paper—plenty of time later to agonize.

1) This exercise consists of a four-part meditation, to be done in sequence.

A) Close your eyes. Visualize yourself alone in a natural setting. Opening your eyes as little as possible, describe the scene precisely, as though each detail you capture and each sensation you describe is worth big money. Trust your vision. What colors and shapes do you see? (You may see nothing. If so, write "I see nothing," but recognize "nothing" as a noun rather than an absence, negation, or escape. Describe "nothing," peering into the corners and grain of your vision, much the way in which you examine favorite photos or memories.)

B) Focus much closer. Notice something at your feet interesting enough to pick up and take with you. Describe the object, your interest, and the process of accumulation. Visualize each noun, verb, and sensory detail as a label on an individual door. Those doors you refuse to open bar access to entire categories of sensation and perception. For instance, what emotions correspond to what you see? Have they changed since you began writing? Similes and metaphors help you be precise. Remember, in poetry how and what you feel is more important than what you think you know.

C) As you wander in the imagined landscape, you may reach a physical or mental obstacle. Describe this problem or aversion, but keep writing as rapidly as possible. Begin developing a discipline of focus that has to do more with "relaxing" than with intense concentration—ideally, it's akin to a light trance. When you read your writing, certain passages should surprise you. When you hear youself saying "I wrote that? I didn't even know I thought that," you'll know you're on the right track.

D) Watch an object on the horizon become an animal that helps you overcome the obstacle. Describe this creature's importance, particularly how it helps you. This perception, emotion, or memory—discovery is often a combination of these—is the gem most writers seek.

Don't expect the earth to move. However, realizing you consider a certain word or syllable humorous or repulsive may be a discovery in itself. Coming to understand your reactions to your own writing reveals new insights. "Internal difference," Emily Dickinson wrote, "where the meanings are."

2) This quick catalog exercise is a combination of five themes.

A) *History.* Why did your family come here? Tell an old family story. What's the oldest "history" story you know? What's the best story you know about America? Who would you like to be in history?

B) *Time.* List ten things you like best between 1850 and 1992. Leave enough space to write about why you chose each one. What does each thing mean to you? How was life different then?

C) *Photos.* Choose a photo of people in a book and become a character in it. Why do you choose one person over another? How can you imagine fitting into that life?

D) *Maps.* Draw a map of a place or area you know well. Detail the map with specific information only you know. Imagine you are a mapmaker, and draw a map of your place in 1850, in 1492, in 476. What would change, and in what ways?

E) *Sensations.* What minute details are you receiving right now through each of your senses? For you what's the best example of each of the five types of sensory impressions? What do your senses tell you, beyond the obvious? For example, what do tree shadows *mean* (not indicate, as in time of day or season of year)? Among other things tree shadows mean that sunlight cannot penetrate leaves and wood. The mighty sun whose light travels 93 million miles in eight minutes to be here now cannot overcome a yellow birch leaf whose shadow dances on my arm. This perception could begin a "poetic" train of thought.

Which answers surprise you? Which seem only the tip of the iceberg? Which make you feel like a child, excited and sensing adventure? Work over these passages; make your language portray the scenes you sensed with closed eyes. Cut out and consolidate words; polish your nuggets of perception into similes and metaphors. Erase little; leave tracks in case you want to wander back into this territory.

Exercise 5: Living along Lines

Whatever prose you developed at the end of Exercise 3 or 4 will be useful here. (The piece I'm using, about hummingbirds, is from Exercise 3.)

> Hummingbirds are tiny bursts of color that fly out of nowhere and hang in air. Their eyes are as yellow as beads. Mist around their necks sparkles like a yellow necklace. All around them the birch and willow leaves wave bigger than their bodies. At tiny places among tree branches the hummingbirds' nests sit, each as big as half a walnut shell containing two bluesplotched white eggs the size of garden peas. The hummingbird chicks are folded

up in there like tiny accordians, like glossy marbles or accordion-fish.

The next step is to rework the prose using three basic ways of writing lines of poetry in English:

- Syllabic (or word) count
- Accentual
- Free verse.

End rhyme and accentual-syllabic verse are difficult for younger writers. It's usually best not to push them in K–6 classes—save them for middle and high school. Of course, it's good to acquaint all students with the wonderful variety of lines among different poets, if only by thumbing through poetry anthologies and pointing to lines in, say, e.e. cummings, Walt Whitman, or The Song of Songs.

Syllabic: syllable- and word-count lines

Choose a number between one and ten, and in your paragraph make groups of that many words by adding a slash mark at the end of each group. For example, I chose the number five, so after every five words I break the line, and after every five lines I have a stanza, as in:

Hummingbirds are tiny bursts of
color that fly out of
nowhere and hang in air.
Their eyes are as yellow
as beads. Mist around their. . . .

Arranged by syllable count, the look, flow, and feel of the stanza change substantially:

Hummingbirds are ti-
ny bursts of color
that fly out of no-
where and hang in air.
Their eyes are as yel-
low as beads. Mist a-
round their. . . .

Both word and syllable counts move sentences into lines. Syllabic count achieves interesting emphases, but word-count is easier to handle.

In prose, "cliff-hangers" make us go straight on to the next chapter. The last word of each line in a poem is very important because it can either slow down or accelerate the poem—or simply be boring. Evaluate your last words and cross out weak ones. Three of my word-count lines end in weak words—a generic pronoun and prepositions. *Air* and *yellow* are good but may not stay. You can fill the spaces left by deleted words by inventing new words; by filling their places with words from the next line; and by altering the syntax so another word occupies the position.

Here is my revision:

Hummingbirds, tiny bursts of color,
fly from nowhere to hang
in air, their eyes gold
as beads. Around their necks. . . .

Compare your different versions. What words have you tossed out or changed? Which is the best version? (If this final one wasn't, why not?) This exercise in editing lines helps students learn about syntax, word choice, vivid language, clarity, and compression. They become more conscious of sensory detail and imagery. Most importantly, they begin to develop self-evaluation—perhaps the most difficult writing skill.

Accentual lines

Accentual verse is based on the emphases or stresses we give words as we speak. The difficulty here lies in hearing and counting simultaneously. Listen to people's voices, including your own, both in conversation and when reading poems before an audience. It helps to use a tape recorder. The better listener you become, the quicker you'll master accentual verse. Here is "Hummingbirds" in five-accent lines:

Hummingbirds form tiny bursts
of color, flying from nowhere to hang in air,
their eyes as yellow as beads, the mist around. . . .

Free-verse lines

In free verse, you need constantly to make decisions about line length, word choice, thematic "balance." Because of this freedom, free verse is actually a challenging way to begin making lines. This, of course, doesn't mean you shouldn't try writing free verse. Writing "free" verse doesn't consist of doing anything you want, however, but rather what you can make work within your poem's context. Oddly enough, reading a lot of metrical verse gives one a better sense of the free-verse line.

Because of all the decisions involved, it's easy for free verse to stray. One advantage of free verse for beginning writers is that when a line is weak, it isn't so clunky and obvious as it is in formal verse. You want to "build" lines strong enough to hold position in the stanza. Note the words that begin and end my lines.

Try recasting your lines into a free-verse stanza. Here is mine:

Hummingbirds—
tiny drops the rainbows splash
hang in air—their bead-gold eyes,
their mist-fuzzy necks. . . .

I particularly like the metaphor in the second line, which I might not have discovered without the freedom of free verse.

Which of your versions seems best? How can you tell? How does it stir the imagination? Maxine Kumin urges poets to have a dozen reasons for what they do in a poem. "I never finish a poem," X. J. Kennedy says. "I get too sick of it to mess around anymore." The real work—-and not a little of the joy—of writing poems lies in building, and living, along lines. The aim is to write surprising yet inevitable lines, as in the conclusion of James Wright's "A Blessing":

Suddenly I realize that if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.