

## Writing a Personal Narrative

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### Introduction

I am very passionate about writing. I believe that writing should be a way of expressing one's individuality. Writing one's thoughts on paper and expressing one's self should be an easy task, but for some it is dreadful. The fear of writing is something that I see daily in my classroom. Students are too worried about things like spelling, mechanics, and punctuation. They fear the formality of writing and worry about things like paragraph organization. They often ask me "What should I write about?" or "How long does it have to be?" Students see writing as hard work and usually only write what is required. On the other hand, we teachers often dread to grade any type of formal writing assignment. "Responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time". What if there was a way where we can have students write without worrying about proper use of grammar or mechanical errors? I believe that writing a personal narrative, with the help of the novel *They Cage the Animals at Night*, will not only encourage students to want to write, but will show them that there is no right or wrong way to write. It is important to show students how to edit their sentences, but it is more important to show them how to expand their writing to make it more interesting for the reader.

I am in my third year of teaching English I. For the past two years, I taught at Independence High School. However, this year I am at E.E. Waddell. The demographics are the same, but the classes are smaller. With school enrollment only reaching one thousand, my ninth grade English classes consist of twenty-two students each. My school consists of 55% African-American, 40% Hispanic/Latino, and 5% other. E.E. Waddell is a Title I school, as more than 70% of the student population is on free or reduced lunch.

Writing is important in all subjects, not just English. I want my students to feel comfortable with writing. We as teachers can make this happen. For instance, looking for student strengths in their writing can build their confidence. According to *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, "Tom has seen students of his who appear to have no

real desire or talent for writing blossom into fairly confident, hardworking young writers. It's obvious that writing has become important to them because their teacher found good things in what they write and told them so". Providing positive feedback to students about their writing will boost their confidence and enthusiasm. According to *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, another task we have as teachers is helping students "find their individual voices when they write". As teachers, we know that all of our students differ in several ways. Our mission is to figure out what works for each individual student. We need to make sure we find ways to motivate them and have them feel comfortable, especially when it comes to writing.

### **Objectives**

By the end of this unit, I want my students to be able to write without having the fear of their writing "not being good enough". I want them to be able to write freely on any given topic and be able to make connections to their own personal experiences. I want them to be able to respond to a variety of text and feel comfortable expressing their opinions through their writing. When writing their personal narratives, I want them to be descriptive and to consider their audience. I want my students to be able to demonstrate an understanding of various literary genres, concepts, elements, and terms. In addition to the North Carolina state objectives, I want my students to enjoy writing and express their creativity. The main thing I want them to take away from this unit is that writing should be fun and stress free. It should serve as an escape for jumbled up ideas in their heads. I want students to become familiar with each other, as students have more in common than they think.

### **Strategies**

As beginner writers, we are often lost and are not sure where to start. I want students' personal narratives to be enjoyable and meaningful. "Too often we demand that students write about subjects about which they care little (and sometimes know less), and we forbid them to use their own natural voices. Then, we immediately search out every mistake, large and small, that they make writing within these narrow restrictions". As teachers, it is easy to want to make corrections in students' writing, but the purpose of this unit is to remove such fears from our students, making them want to write. We must provide them with an opportunity to use their voices.

### **Nonfiction Pieces**

Having students look at different examples of nonfiction, specifically autobiographies and memoirs from different cultures, is a strategy I want to implement in my unit. I believe it is important for students to be exposed to pieces of writing from different cultural backgrounds. This strategy will help students create their own style of writing. When students feel comfortable writing, the possibilities are endless.

One of my inspirations for creating this unit is *The Freedom Writers Diary*. A teacher inspires students from different cultural and social backgrounds to pour their hearts out on paper, ultimately uniting them as one. She is not only determined, but also is able to withstand issues like racial discrimination. In her story, she describes the obstacles she had to overcome in order to show her students that they were not only intelligent, but each had his or her own voice. She develops a close relationship with each one of her students and inspires them to become young writers. *The Freedom Writer's Diary* is a collection of poems and journal entries, written by high school students, which share personal stories about everyday issues and struggles. I want to share excerpts from this nonfiction piece with my students to show them that they are no different from other students around the world; they too can be successful writers.

*They Cage the Animals at Night* by Jennings Michael Burch is a wonderful example of writing about personal experiences. In his story, he describes being abandoned by his mother at a young age and bounces in and out of foster care. His story of survival is incredible and my students enjoy this novel every year. This is the first year I will be assigning a personal narrative that is aligned with a novel. I want them to focus on a particular time in their lives, using this autobiography as inspiration.

### Visual Timeline

A visual timeline is composed of illustrations that represent important events in one's life. This strategy will assist students with developing ideas for writing their personal narratives. First, I want students to explore who they are. In my writing seminar, each member created a timeline of his or her life, using magazine cutouts. We were told to cut out words and pictures that made a statement or expressed individuality. We broke up our visual timelines into four parts: our childhood, high school experience, college experience, and adulthood. Although I am older and have a longer timeline, I would like my students to create a similar timeline.

## Daybook

A daybook is simply a notebook where one records all thoughts, ideas, suggestions, and questions. The writers may include quotes, pictures, song lyrics, handouts, newspaper clippings, or lists. I want to encourage students to think and I believe this strategy will help students with writing their personal narratives. “In order to make daybooks work as a thinking tool, teachers need to provide some structure and they must balance that structure with ownership to make students want to use daybooks”. The purpose of keeping a daybook is to write freely about any given topic, using a style in which writers are comfortable using. “Daybooks can be difficult to explain to students --- part of the difficulty is that students want to give teachers ‘what teachers want’”.

## Freewriting

“Freewriting allows writers the freedom to explore ideas without a censoring voice”. The purpose of this exercise is to keep the hand moving, writing down thoughts as they pop into the writer’s head. I want to incorporate free writing with themes. I want students to practice writing freely for at least three minutes on a particular theme or topic relating to the story and to their own lives. “Sometimes, students need a concrete prompt to get them going with personal writing”. Some of the themes discussed in the text include change, survival, love, courage, death, sickness, and abandonment. These are all topics that students can relate to and discuss in their narratives. I want each student to develop his or her own style.

## Visuals

Another technique I would like to use is linking free writing to photographs. I want to have students bring in a photograph that is important to them. This can be a picture of their first home, a vacation, a family member, a pet, etc. After each student brings in a photo, I want to post these photographs around the room, and have them do a gallery walk around the classroom. I want students to write down anything that comes to mind when they look at other students’ photographs. This way, students choose the topic in which they want to write about, but the photographs trigger it. According to *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, if writing in your class is always governed by topics you pick, you will be disappointed in the results.

## Socratic Seminar

The Socratic method of teaching is based on Socrates' theory that it is more important to enable students to think for themselves than to merely fit their heads with "right" answers. Socratic seminars help students develop critical thinking skills. Students also establish verbal, listening, and writing skills in Socratic Seminars. These discussion circles provide a way for students to be creative and ultimately developing a lifelong love of reading. "Through the repeated readings and the thorough analysis of the material, students learn to take their time while reading and explore possible multiple meanings and interpretations". During seminar, students are free to discuss anything related to the text. For instance, students may express opinions on a particular topic or share personal experiences. In addition, Socratic Seminars develop students' social skills. Additionally, students learn team-building skills, conflict resolution, and community-building skills. According to *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School*, in addition to learning how to approach a problem in a collaborative manner, Socratic circles encourage students to be accepting of people, opinions, and idea that are different from their own.

Socratic Seminars will assist students with ideas when they begin to write their personal narratives. Discussing the themes of *They Cage the Animals at Night* encourages students to identify with the characters in the story. In order to facilitate a constructive seminar, a teacher must develop discussion questions that will attract their students. With students sitting in a circle, students can observe others' reactions to certain topics. Students learn a lot from each other just by having a casual conversation about the text, expressing their opinions about themes such as abuse and neglect. As teachers, we must monitor students during Socratic seminar, making sure they remain on topic. In *Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School*, Copeland compares a teacher's role in a Socratic circle to a traffic cop at an intersection where the stoplight has stopped working: "The role of the teacher and the traffic cop alike is to direct the flow of movement. Ultimately, the movement's direction and destination are up to the traveler's themselves". In this strategy, students learn about themselves as well as their peers. Finally, assessment and evaluation will be a writing sample, summarizing and stating main points of the discussion and developing questions for future seminars. When students write on issues they care about, their writing is usually better.

Point of View

Teaching students about perspective is another strategy that is incorporated in my unit. As students think about who they are, I want them to think about how others perceive them. For example, I will ask students to describe themselves, but through the eyes of others. I want them to focus on the differences in descriptions in their writing, depending on how others perceive them.

Stereotypes often play a role when one person describes the other. Depending on a person's cultural background, students automatically have perceptions about their fellow classmates. In Holland's essay about theory of self and identity, she talks about figured worlds and how we live through our own cultural narratives. "Some figured worlds we may never enter because of our social position or rank; some we may deny to others; some we may simply miss by contingency; some we may learn fully". Teaching at a high school where students are from all parts of the world, I observe these cultural differences all the time. I believe that students' identities blend in with their cultural background. Culture is often expressed through writing and I encourage all students to use their culture as a way of discovering their voices.

### Music and Poetry

Music and poetry are other strategies I will incorporate into my personal narrative unit. As teachers, we know that our students all have different learning styles and it is important to incorporate strategies that appeal to each student. Several students are musically inclined and respond well to lyrics and poetry, while others do well with visuals. I want my students to read poems and listen to music that correlate with the text and assist them in writing their personal narratives. In addition, encouraging students to look at music lyrics and poems that keep them engaged. Bringing these strategies into the classroom is a wonderful way for students to relate to others. According to *Literacy and Education: Understanding the New Literacy Studies in the Classroom*, these students begin to engage with literacy, to write poetry and tell their life stories. You have drawn on their out-of-school literacies to engage them in the classroom. Studies have shown that using materials and resources that students can relate to keep them interested and enthused. Reading and writing go hand in hand in every classroom and are life skills that are necessary for each student after graduation. In Pahl and Rowsell's book about understanding new literacy studies in the classroom, it "connects new ideas about the relationship between literacy and identity and how this works in classrooms". Identities shape who we are and incorporating music and poetry in this unit will not only encourage students to write, but will assist them in their journey of self-discovery.

## **Classroom activities**

### Poetry activities

Objectives: Students will be able to read, analyze, and respond to a variety of poems. Students will be able to create a poem.

Modeling good pieces of writing, such as poems, memoirs, and narratives, is important when introducing a personal narrative assignment. I will introduce my unit with a poem titled “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon. In this poem, Lyon describes her past with vivid images that include clothespins and the know-it-alls. Students will need a copy of the poem, their daybooks, a highlighter, and a pen or pencil. Students will read “Where I’m From” and highlight any words or phrases that catch their attention. Then, they will write a response to this poem in their daybooks. Ask students to begin thinking about where they are from and the significance of their past in order to generate classroom discussion.

I will have students read *Crafting Authentic Voice* by Tom Romano. Two poems, one written by a college student and the other by a teacher, begin with “I am what I am” and describe who they both are and where they each come from. Students will compare and contrast both poems, and then write their own version of an “I Am” poem.

In addition, I will also include a poem by Lucile Burt titled *Melissa Quits School*. Students will respond to this poem in their daybooks, writing down their reactions and opinions.

### Visuals

#### *Visual Timeline*

Objective: Students will be able to create a visual representation of important events in their lives.

Using photographs, newspaper, magazines, and illustrations, students will create a visual timeline. Students will also need glue and construction paper. They will focus on pictures and words that represent important moments or milestones in their lives (for example, the first time they learned how to swim or ride a bike, their first day of school, the first time they received an “A” on a project, their first day of high school, vacations,

living in a different city, etc.) Students will cut out pictures or phrases that symbolize these important moments in their lives and create a collage on the construction paper. Students will present their timelines to the classroom, letting their peers know who they are and where they come from.

### *Photograph Activity*

Objective: Students will be able to respond to a variety of illustrations in their daybooks.

Ask students to bring in a photograph that is important to them. It can be a photograph of a family member, a friend, a pet, or a vacation. Make sure to tell students that their photos will be posted around the classroom and must be school appropriate. After students have brought in their photos, post their photographs around the room. Students will need their daybooks. Next, ask students to walk around the room and observe each picture. Students will freewrite for thirty seconds on at least ten of the photos that are posted around the room. This activity should not take more than fifteen minutes. When students are finished, ask them to share their thoughts and comments about the photographs they chose with the class. The purpose of this activity is to make students aware of the things that are important to their classmates and to respond to something besides the text.

### Daybook

Objective: Students will be able to respond creatively to a variety of text in their daybooks.

At the beginning of the school year, distribute composition books to each student. Model one's own daybook to provide students with a visual of what it should look like. According to *Thinking Out Loud on Paper: The Student Daybook as a Tool to Foster Learning*, to help introduce the daybook to our students, we bring our own to school. Students notice its bulk and messiness. We show the students how our daybook is a container, more like a kitchen drawer than a notebook. Students may decorate their daybooks any way they want to, as long as it is school appropriate. Explain to students that the purpose of a daybook is to write down any responses, thoughts, suggestions, questions or comments about any particular topic. They will not be graded based on what they write; they will be graded on making daily entries. Students may also include poems, music lyrics, pictures, or quotes. Students are to use their daybooks all year long. I will

have them glue in all of the poetry we discuss in class and have them respond to it. The daybooks will be the center of this unit.

### Responding to text

Objective: Students will be able to respond and reflect to a variety of text.

In their daybooks, I want my students to respond and reflect to the text and find connections with the characters and events in the story. According to *Thinking Out Loud on Paper: The Student Daybook as a Tool to Foster Learning*, we have all kinds of things in our daybook—writing, mainly, but pictures, and doodles, and photographs as well. I want them to write down questions, thoughts, reactions, and draw pictures of Jennings’ story and tie them to their own personal experiences. I do not want them to worry about spelling or complete sentences, but I do want them to write in it every day. “...the journal provides immature writers with some of the regular practice they need to become comfortable with writing”. The only grade students would receive for their journal is for writing daily. According to *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, the idea of journal writing is to develop fluency and to eradicate fear of writing.

In addition to responding to the text, students will have a series of freewrite exercises that will be completed in their daybooks. Each day when students arrive, there will be a topic relating to a theme from *They Cage the Animals at Night* on the board. Students will turn to a clean page in their daybooks and write for approximately two minutes. The purpose of these freewrite activities is for students to write without worrying about spelling or grammar and for them to keep their hand moving. Students will write what comes to mind based on the topic provided each day. Some of the topics that will be assigned are the following: survival, courage, abandonment, love, friendship, abuse, and hope. This activity will improve students’ writing skills and allow them to feel comfortable with their writing.

### Nonfiction pieces

Objective: Students will be able to compare and contrast a variety of nonfiction pieces.

Before putting students into groups, define and discuss author’s purpose, style, and diction/word choice. Next, put students into groups of four and hand out excerpts of different examples of nonfiction. Have them focus on style and word choice. Ask them to

look for similarities and differences as they are reading each excerpt. Students may read each excerpt either aloud to their group members or to themselves. Students will then write down similarities and differences in their daybooks. This can be done using a T-chart or a Venn diagram. Some of the pieces I will use are *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *My Forbidden Face*, and *The Freedom Writers Diary*. These texts each come from different historical times and are written by people of different ages and cultural backgrounds. It is important for students to recognize the similarities and differences in writing. This will provide students with a glimpse that good writing does not require a specific style or format.

### Socratic seminar

Objective: Students will be able to discuss and debate about specific topics relating to the text.

For this activity, arrange the desks in a circle so that both you and the students are facing each other. Students will need their daybooks and a copy of the novel *They Cage the Animals at Night*. As the teacher, you must begin the seminar with a specific question or topic, especially in the first seminar. Your question will be what triggers your students to begin discussing the text. Students will take turns speaking and listening to each other. Students may ask their own discussion questions or ask the opinion of others within the circle. It is the teacher's job to keep the discussion related to the text. During the seminar, discuss the elements of the story such as characterization, setting, plot, climax, conflict, resolution, and theme. Students may also share personal experiences that tie into the issues in the novel. The purpose of this activity is for students to make connections with the issues and/or topics in the story. This activity will also measure students' speaking and listening skills.

### Point of view

It is important for students to learn about perspective. One person's perception may not be similar to another person's perception based on his or her age or cultural background. Learning different perspectives will provide students with global awareness of the diversity expressed in writing. I want each student to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Ask each student to describe themselves through the eyes of four different people: a friend, a teacher, a parent, and a stranger. When each description is complete, have them compare all four descriptions.

## Writing a personal narrative

After students have completed all of the pre-writing activities, they will begin writing their personal narrative drafts. First, provide students with the writing prompt. Students will focus on a specific moment in their lives that they consider life changing. In their personal narratives, they will write why this moment was important and how it changed their lives. Students will write in first person point of view and the narrative will be approximately one page in length. Students will begin writing their drafts in their writer's notebook. Provide students with dictionaries and thesauruses for them to be able to look up words. This will help them with both spelling and using descriptive words in their writing. Students will be reminded to think about Jennings's story in *They Cage the Animals at Night* and how he drew the reader into his story and how he explained the moment when his life changed.

Encourage students to read each other's drafts. Students can provide feedback, while learning about each other's lives. "Comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; thoughtful comments create the motive for revising. Without comments from their teachers or from their peers, student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way. Without comments from their readers, students assume that their writing has communicated their meaning and perceive no need for revising the substance of their text." This will also provide an opportunity for students to work together.

The final draft of student's personal narratives will be graded for content rather than correct use of grammar and mechanics. It will be written on a separate sheet of paper and, after each paper has been graded, be displayed on the classroom bulletin board.

## Conclusion

Developing relationships with your students at the beginning of the year is extremely important. If you fail to build these relationships, the trust is gone. When students trust their teachers, they tend to do more than just the minimum. The evidence is shown in their work. Luckily, I have good relationships with my students and I hope this unit inspires them to write incredible personal narratives. I believe that my students want to show me what they are capable of, and as teachers, nothing makes us prouder. Implementing the right strategies and meaningful lessons will help students shine through

their writing. I want my students to develop a passion for writing and to think of writing as an escape. I want them to express themselves on paper and not worry about spelling, grammar or mechanics. I want my students to become inspirations for other students who struggle with writing. I want them to evolve into spectacular writers.

Notes