



Memoirs and Special Education

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
9-12th grade students with Autism and other Developmental Disabilities

Keywords: Memoir, Adapted Novels, Picture Symbols

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: Writing your autobiography would be a huge task for anyone to handle, but what if you could write about significant or meaningful events in your life. You chose those events and describe those events from your point of view. This unit is designed to teach students with disabilities about memoirs. Students will be exposed to several types of memoirs. Students will compose their own memoirs. Students will use photographs, picture symbols, and written words during this unit.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 35 students in Language Arts Class for students in 9th-12th grades.

I give permission for Charlotte Teachers Institute to publish my curriculum unit in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.

Memoirs and Special Education

Staci Vredevel

Introduction

This curriculum unit is designed for high school students with autism and developmental disabilities. Students will be introduced to memoirs. Students will write their own memoir about a personal event.

Rationale

“Memoir is a portion of a life. Unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it.”¹ Memoirs allow us to focus on a specific time in our lives that hold meaning for us. “The writer of a memoir takes us back to a corner of his or her life that was unusually vivid or intense—childhood, for instance—or that was framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, the writer achieves a focus that isn’t possible in an autobiography; memoir is a window into a life.”²

I chose to do a memoir genre study with my students because I think it is important for my students to reflect on past experiences. I have done a lot of reflection during my seminar “*Exploring Memoir-From Picture Book to Digital Story*.” We have been challenged to keep a journal, create a personal timeline, and explore several memoirs. I chose this particular seminar because I enjoy reading true accounts of events. Memoirs allow us to read the authors’ perspective of the event. Another member of the family may have a completely different account of the event. Reading memoirs from a variety of authors and formats showed me that sharing life events could take on many forms. Many of my students are visual learners, so using pictures and picture symbols would be a great tool for assisting the creation of their memoirs.

Since attending the CTI seminar, “*Exploring Memoir-From Picture Book to Digital Story*,” I have read more memoirs from a variety of authors. I better understand how memoirs share life experiences from the author’s perspective. The information I have gained during this seminar will help me to prepare lessons for my students, so I will be able to teach them about memoirs. My students will have the opportunity to learn more information about their life experiences from parents and caregivers.

¹ Zinsser, William, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 1987

²Zinsser, William, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 1987

I will be using two adapted memoirs during this unit. The first memoir is We Beat the Street, by Drs. Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, and Rameck Hunt, with Sharon M. Draper. The second memoir is Night by Elie Wiesel. We will read excerpts from the stories, so students will have a better understanding of memoirs. We will also learn the components of a memoir and how to begin writing a memoir.

Demographics

I have been a special education teacher for nineteen years. I have been a teacher at Hough High School for three years. I teach Language Arts for all of our self-contained students. I have taught high school aged students with disabilities for fifteen years. I have also worked with middle school and elementary aged students. High school is my favorite age group because I am able to prepare my students for life after high school.

I teach High School students with Autism and other Developmental and Intellectual disabilities. I currently teach at William Amos Hough High School in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System (CMS). Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools is the second largest school district in North Carolina and the nineteenth largest school district in the nation.

William Amos Hough High School has approximately 2,400 students. Hough High School is located in Cornelius, North Carolina. The student population at Hough High School consists of 78.5% white students, 11% African-American, and 6% Hispanic students. Fifty percent of the students are female. Eighteen percent of the students receive free or reduced lunches. Hough High School is in the top twenty percent of North Carolina high schools in overall test performance.

My students are in a self-contained class. Students in a self-contained class follow Extensions of the Common Core. Students in self-contained classes Individualized Education Plan (IEPs). Hough High School has four self-contained classrooms for students with Autism and other Developmental and Intellectual disabilities. We have 35 students in the self-contained program. Students in the self-contained classes do not earn traditional diplomas when they graduate from high school. Students in self-contained classes are able to remain in high school until they are 22 years old. Students in self-contained classes are not eligible to attend college.

Hough High School currently has 207 students with Individualized Education Plans. Students not in the self-contained program may be following the Future Ready Course of Study or the Occupational Course of Study. Students following the Future Ready Course of Study complete traditional graduation requirements. Students following the Future Ready Course of Study have Individualized Education Plans. Those students will receive

a diploma when they graduate from high school. Students following the Future Ready Course of Study are eligible to apply to a four year college or community college.

The Occupational Course of Study is a specialized academic curriculum for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities and high functioning autism. The Occupational Course of Study focuses on transition from school to adulthood, with a focus on community based instruction. Students earn academic credits for Math, English, Science, and Social Studies. Students also have employment requirements to meet in order to earn a diploma. Students following the Occupational Course of Study earn a diploma at the end of high school.

I currently teach in a class for students with autism. Autism is a neurological disorder that impacts communication and socialization. Students with autism have difficulty with receptive and expressive communication. Students with autism like to have schedules and routines, and typically do not like changes to schedules and routines. Students with autism are visual learners. Most lessons have visuals, such as photographs and picture symbols, to help students understand content of the lessons. Many of my students have difficulty answering higher level inferential questions, such as why and how. My students are able to answer questions such as what, when, and where. Several students use picture choice boards to answer questions.

The other students in the program have developmental disabilities that impact their learning. Some of the students have physical disabilities that impacts their ability to read, write, and complete fine motor tasks. Many of our students have communication difficulties. These students also use visuals and modified materials during lessons.

Unit Goals

My goals for this curriculum unit are to teach students about memoirs. Students will be introduced to memoirs in a variety of formats, such as, graphic memoirs, children's books, and young adult memoirs. Students will learn the difference between fiction and nonfiction.

Students will learn the components of a memoir. Students will write a short personal memoir based on a personal theme. This unit will continue for one week.

At the conclusion of the unit, students will share memoirs with peers in class.

My personal goal for this unit is to expose my students to a new genre of reading that most of them were not familiar with before the unit. Students will have the opportunity to share their work with peers in class.

Content Research

During my seminar, “*Exploring Memoir-From Picture Book to Digital Story*,” I have learned about memoirs. We have completed an in-depth study of memoirs. We have read several types of memoirs, such as graphic memoirs, poems, and young adult

Memoirs are defined as a slice of ordinary life—a certain time period, a special relationship, a particular theme or angle on a life³. Memoirs are written in first person by the author. The author is telling their own story. Memoirs focus on a particular event or time period. Autobiographies are different because the focus is on the entire life of the author.

My curriculum unit will focus on a genre study of memoirs. A genre study is studying how people use language to make their way in the world⁴. By exploring their own uses of language and texts, students can see those uses in social interactions⁵.

During my research for my curriculum unit, I found information about teaching literacy to students with severe developmental disabilities. No Child Left Behind⁶ legislation and the Reading First initiative placed strong emphasis on providing students with scientifically based reading interventions⁷. No Child Left Behind set the expectation that all students would show adequate yearly progress in reading and language arts starting in the third grade⁸.

When I began teaching in 1997, I did not teach specific literacy lessons. I provided literacy instruction on an individual basis to students; that instruction focused on functional words, such as stop, exit, and don’t walk. Historically, students with severe developmental disabilities have had little focus on literacy⁹. Individualized Education

³ Gillespie, J., *The Life of a Seventh Grader: Writing a Memoir*, 1991

⁴Dean, Deborah, *Teaching Genre Concepts*, 2008

⁵ Dean, Deborah, *Teaching Genre Concepts*, 2008

⁶ *No Child Left Behind Legislation*, 2002

⁷Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Mraz, and Flowers, *Literacy for Students With Severe Developmental Disabilities*, 2009

⁸Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell,, Courtade, Mraz, and Flowers *Literacy for Students With Severe Developmental Disabilities*, , 2009

⁹Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Mraz, and Flowers *Literacy for Students with Severe Developmental Disabilities*, 2009

Plans focused on functional reading. Functional reading is a term that has been used to refer to being able to identify text found in everyday life (e.g. menu items, restroom signs, and job tasks)¹⁰.

Students with severe developmental disabilities were not introduced to reading for pleasure or research. Many times students with severe developmental disabilities were not introduced to books until they could read. New research shows that exposure to literature is the central and largest component of teaching literacy to students with severe developmental disabilities¹¹. Neuman and Dickinson (2002) recommend reading to students daily and providing opportunities for students to discuss text. Some students may require concrete objects, photographs, or picture symbols to represent key concepts from the text.

I teach high school students with autism. I use novels from appropriate grade level literacy materials. I modify grade level literacy materials with picture symbols to represent concepts within the story. I also modify the text to meet reading levels of students. Using the adapted novels allows students with severe developmental disabilities to access grade and age appropriate literacy materials.

Instructional Implementation

For my curriculum unit, I will be completing a memoir genre study for high school students with autism and other intellectual disabilities. I will use adapted novels, Alternate Achievement Literacy, and picture symbols.

Teaching Strategies

Adapted Novels

Adapted novels are used to help students read grade level age appropriate novels and stories. The adapted novels are shorter versions of the original books. Photographs and picture symbols are added to important vocabulary words in the story. A teacher may use a photograph of a character in the story. The photograph will help students to visualize the characters in the story. Many adapted novels use repeated story lines within the story.

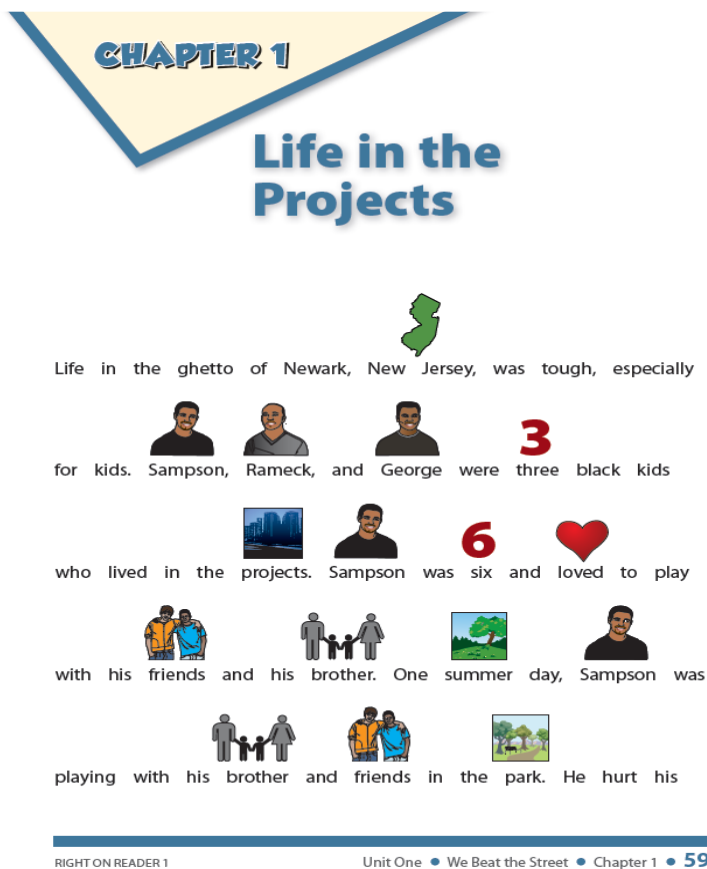
¹⁰ Browder, Gibbs, Ahlgrim-Dezell, Courtade, Mraz, and Flowers, *Literacy for Students with Severe Developmental Disabilities*, 2009

¹¹ Neuman and Dickinson, *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, 2002

Teachers can find several completed adapted novels and stories on the internet. **Sherlock Adapted Books and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte** websites have a wide selection of adapted novels and stories.

When I am teaching a novel, I have the full version of the book with me. This allows me to read excerpts from the text to clarify the adapted novels and stories.

Figure 1. This figure shows a page from an adapted novel. This is a page from We Beat the Street.



Picture Symbols

To adapt novels for my students I use picture symbols to represent characters and concepts for my students. For my curriculum unit, I am using picture symbols for vocabulary words that will be taught in lesson one. See Appendix two.

Most of my picture symbols come from Boardmaker. This is a common computer program utilized by teachers for students with autism and other developmental disabilities.

I also use picture symbols from Symbolstyx. This program is part of News-2-You. News-2-You is an online news paper for students with autism and developmental disabilities.

Students can also use picture symbols to create their memoirs if they are not able to write. Teacher can make symbols after students have chosen a topic for their memoir.

Alternate Achievement Literacy

Alternate achievement literacy is the ability to access and comprehend text that is chronologically age appropriate by using adaptations, modifications, and technology¹². I use this method to provide instruction to my students.

Students are given answer choice boards, usually with 12 answer options. Students answer who, what, when, where, how, and why questions using the choice boards and text. Alternate achievement literacy focuses on the understanding of text¹³.

Alternate achievement literacy uses the least prompts for passage comprehension. This is a prompting system that teaches students to locate information in the text to answer comprehension questions. Prompting levels change if the student does not give the correct response. The first prompt is to reread the section of text where the answer is located. The second prompt is to read only the sentence containing the correct answer. The third prompt is to model, the teacher will read the sentence and point to the correct answer. The teacher will identify the correct answer on the choice board for the final prompt. Teacher will also ask the student to point to the correct answer.

¹² Browder, Trela, Jimenez, *Alternate Achievement Literacy Manual*, 2007

¹³Browder, Trela, Jimenez, *Alternate Achievement Literacy Manual*, 2007

Journal

Students will use a journal in class to record important information. Students will use journals during lessons to record vocabulary words and definitions. Students will keep pictures representing vocabulary words in their journals. Students will use their journals to store assignments and notes throughout the unit. Students will also be able to draw pictures in their journals.

During my CTI seminar, I have started to use a journal each day. I use a journal to make lists of things to do and keep notes about important things I need to remember. A journal has become a great tool for me.

Classroom Lessons/Activities

These lessons are designed for high school students with Autism and other developmental disabilities. The purpose of the lessons is to teach students about memoirs, create personal memoirs, and increase understanding of text. Students will learn the components of a memoir and how to write a memoir. Students will share their memoirs with students and teachers.

Lesson 1-Introduction

What's a Memoir?

The first lesson will begin with an introduction of new vocabulary words. Those words include: memoir, nonfiction, autobiography, timeline, poem, graphic memoir. Students will be asked to share how they would define each word, before the teacher provides the definitions. Picture symbols are included in Appendix 2. Teacher will list student responses on Smart Board.

A memoir is a record of events written by a person having intimate knowledge of them based on personal observation. Memoirs are written by the person telling the story about an event from their life.

A timeline is a graphic representation of the passage of time as a line.

An autobiography is an account of a person's life written by that person.

A poem is a piece of writing that usually has figurative language that is written in separate lines that may rhyme.

Nonfiction is writing that is based on facts, real events, and real people.

Teacher will then share the definitions of each new vocabulary word. Students will copy definitions into their journals for future reference. Students will be given a copy of picture symbols. Teacher will instruct students to cut out picture symbols and glue them into their journal next to the correct definition. Some students may require the teacher to cut out picture symbols prior to beginning the lesson. After students have completed the task, review the vocabulary words and definitions.

Lesson 2

Elements of a Memoir

This lesson will begin with a review of previously learned vocabulary words. Teacher will ask students to open journal to vocabulary activity completed during previous lesson. Students will review words and definitions. Teacher will ask individual students to read words and definitions from their journals.

Next teacher will begin lesson two. Lesson two will focus on the five components of a memoir. Memoirs tell a compelling story using truth, theme, first person narration, voice, memory, and musing¹⁴.

Teacher will begin topic of memoir components by describing each component of a memoir. Students will put information in their journals.

Memoir Components

Truth: the author needs to be honest when writing a memoir; tell the truth, you may not remember all of the details, but be as specific and accurate as possible.

Theme: choosing the theme of you memoir can be difficult; begin by listing important events from your life, for example family vacations, holidays, or family events. Teacher will give specific examples to students.

Teacher will distribute 3 column chart for students, see Appendix 3. Ask students to complete chart. Teacher will ask students to glue chart into their journals. Students will use the chart to help determine the theme for their personal memoir.

Voice: Teacher will explain that students should write their memoir using their own particular linguistic quirks, sentence rhythms, and recurring images¹⁵. Write your memoir, so people will get a feel for what is happening in the story.

¹⁴ Lee-Miller, E., Ash, L., and Barrington, J., *Getting Started on Your Memoir*, 2009

¹⁵ Lee-Miller, E., Ash, L., and Barrington, J., *Getting Started on Your Memoir*, 2009

First Person Narrative: Teacher will tell students, they are telling the story from their point of view. Students should use person first language, for example, use the pronoun “I” when telling your story.

Share the following examples with students:

- I went to the store.
- I saw the lion at the zoo.

Ask students to write two sentences in their journal using person first language. Ask several students to share their sentences with the class, to check for understanding.

Memory and Musing: Why is this event important? How did you feel at this event? Ask yourself these questions about potential themes for your memoir.

Teacher will ask students to choose two events from their chart and answer the questions about that particular event.

Lesson 3

Begin Writing Your Memoir

Teacher will begin lesson with a review of the elements of a memoir. Ask students to identify five elements of a memoir. Students can use journal to locate answer. Students will work with a partner for ten minutes to review five elements of a memoir.

Next, teacher will tell students, they are going to begin writing their own memoir.

Memoirs generally have a focus on a specific aspect of your life, a moment that changed you and your reflections, people, places, or things that have had a distinct impact on your life.¹⁶

Ask students: what do you think people write memoirs about?

Student answers will vary. Ask students to write their answers in journals. Students will share answers with a partner.

Following the discussion about memoir topics. Teacher will begin to discuss writing a memoir.

We will use six steps to write our memoirs. The steps come from *How to Write a Memoir- Your story in six steps*.¹⁷

¹⁶ Paris, C., *How to Write a Memoir-Your Story in Six Steps*, 2014

Teacher will ask students to write the six steps for writing a memoir in their journals.

Step 1- Find Your Focus

Take notes about your life. Use topics from three column chart to choose a topic. Ask students to write three sentences about one of the topics from the three column chart.

Step 2- Discuss Your Topic with Others

After students write three sentences about a topic, students will share their writing with a partner.

Step 3- Know Where to Start and Where to Finish

Make sure that memoirs have a beginning, middle, and end.

Step 4- Fact Check

Check out references before you begin writing, you want to be sure that facts are as accurate as possible.

Step 5- Start Writing

Teacher will ask students to write for 15 minutes. After 15 minutes, students will work with a partner to review what they had written.

Step 6- Revise

After completing memoir, students will revise their writing before sharing their final versions with class. Revision will take place throughout the next lesson.

Lesson 4

Write and Revise Your Memoir

Teacher will begin the lesson with a review of the elements of a memoir (truth, theme, voice, first person narrative, memory and musing). Students will reference their journals for definitions.

¹⁷ Paris, C., *How to Write a Memoir-Your Story in Six Steps*, 2014

Next, teacher will review the six steps to writing a memoir (find your focus, discuss topic with others, know where to start and finish, fact check, start writing, and revise). Students will reference their journals for definitions.

Students will be given 15 minutes to write independently. Teacher and assistants will monitor student progress. Assistants will help students who are using picture symbols to create their memoir. See picture symbols in Appendix 4.

After independent writing, students will work with a partner to revise their writing. Teacher and assistants will continue to monitor student progress during this time.

Teacher will inform students that memoirs should be completed for the next class. Students will share their memoirs with entire class.

Lesson 5

Celebration and Sharing

Teacher will begin class with vocabulary assessment, use Appendix 5. Students will be asked to identify vocabulary words and definitions. Level 1- Teacher will show a picture symbol to students and ask student to provide definition. Level 2- Teacher will provide definition and ask student to identify vocabulary word from a group of three choices. Level 3- Teacher will ask student to identify vocabulary word given a choice of three pictures. Level 4- Student will match picture symbols of vocabulary words.

After vocabulary assessment is complete, students will share their final memoir with class. Teacher will assist students with sharing, if necessary.

Assessments

Students will be given informal assessments throughout the lessons, in order to assess understanding of the vocabulary words related to memoirs.

For final assessment, students will be asked to identify vocabulary words learned throughout the unit. Teacher can use the assessment rubric, in Appendix 5. Level 1- Teacher will show a picture symbol to students and ask student to provide definition. Level 2- Teacher will provide definition and ask student to identify vocabulary word from a group of three choices. Level 3- Teacher will ask student to identify vocabulary word given a choice of three pictures. Level 4- Student will match picture symbols of vocabulary words.

Students will also share their memoirs with the entire class.

Appendix 1: Implementing Teaching Standards

Content Objectives/Common Core Standards/ Extended Common Core Standards

This unit will address standards of the Common Core and the Extended Common Core Standards in Literacy and Language Arts. The students in my class are following the Extended Common Core Standards. This unit could also be used with students following the regular Common Core State Standards. All of the standards addressed are listed below.

The following Common Core Standards will be addressed:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as influences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.3

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events; including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7

Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g. a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in the account.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2

Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3

Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3

Write narrative to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3d

Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

The following Extended Common Core Standards will be addressed:

ECCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.3

Determine how characters change or develop over the course of the text.

ECCSS.ELS-Literacy.W.9-10.3

Write narratives about personal or imagined experiences or events.

ECCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3.c

Write about multiple events and use temporal words to signal event order

ECCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.2

Determine the theme or central idea of a text and select details that show how it is conveyed in the text; recount the text

ECCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3

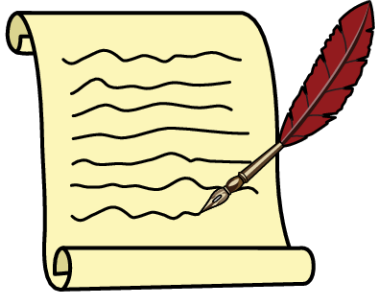
Analyze specific individuals, ideas, or events and determine how they interact over the course of the text.

ECCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3

Write narratives about personal or imagined experiences or events

Appendix 2

Lesson 1-Vocabulary



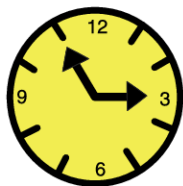
Poem



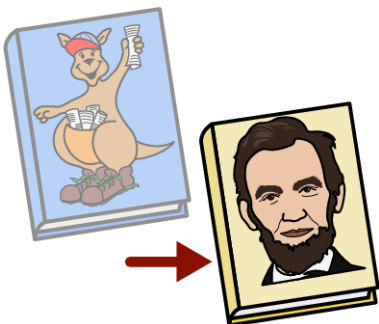
Autobiography



Memoir



Timeline

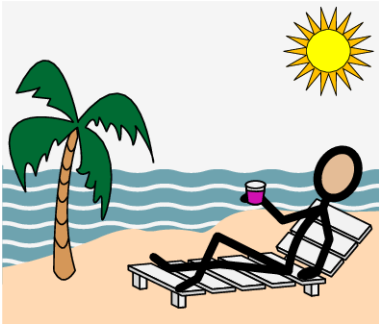


Nonfiction

Appendix 3

| Family Vacations | Holidays | Family Events |
|------------------|----------|---------------|
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| | | |
| | | |

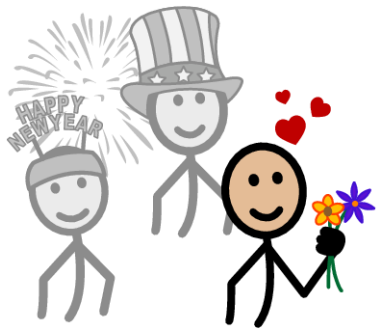
Appendix 4



Vacation



Trip



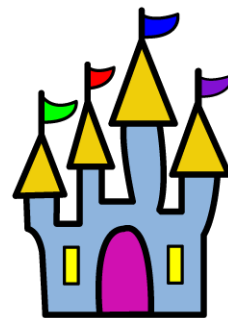
Holiday



Birthday



Family



Disney World

Appendix 5

Assessment Rubric

| | | | | |
|------------------|------|--|--|--|
| Vocabulary Words | Date | | | |
| Poem | | | | |
| Autobiography | | | | |
| Memoir | | | | |
| Timeline | | | | |
| Nonfiction | | | | |

Prompting levels: I-independent, G-gesture prompt, V-verbal prompt, and P-physical prompt

Student Resources

- Journal
- Copy of adapted version of *We Beat the Street*
- Copy of *Night* by Elie Wiesel
- Three column chart from Appendix 3
- Picture symbols from Appendix 2
- Picture symbols from Appendix 5, if needed

Teacher Resources

- Journal for each student
- Picture symbol vocabulary words for lesson one
- Copy of adapted version of *We Beat the Street* for each student
- Copy of *Night* by Elie Wiesel for each student
- Three column chart from Appendix 3
- Picture symbols from Appendix 5, for students completing a memoir with picture symbols

Classroom Resources

- Smartboard
- Picture symbols for vocabulary words
- Books for students
- Journal for each student

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Neuman, Susan B., and David K. Dickinson. *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*. New York: Guilford Press, 2003.

This article explains the importance of exposing students with disabilities to literacy at an early age.