

FIVE TIPS FOR TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING

Heather Wright

1. Many Beginnings, Few Stories

To get the best work from your students have them begin several stories and then choose the one that they want to finish. Each story beginning can have a different lessons attached to it so that something is learned with each story beginning that will build skills used throughout the story. Aside from the characteristics of an effective story opening, some areas of focus could be active voice, using the senses, characterization, writing and punctuating dialogue, etc.

Check <http://magicalwords.net/lucienne-diver/beginnings/> for advice from Lucienne Diver about story beginnings.

Check <http://www.timwynne-jones.com/pages/elevthings.html> for advice from Tim Wynne-Jones about writing effective dialogue (and other things.)

2. Real Audiences Make Real Writers

If you can, try linking your students to those in a younger grade in your school. Have your students meet and interview the younger ones and fashion stories around their favourite things using their names as the main characters in the story.

Create a class anthology based on a specific set of writing prompts that will be used every year by your class. Each year, once your students have finished their stories based on those prompts, they get to read what the class created the year before from the same prompts. You may have to check your school's policy about whether students' names can be on their work, or whether their stories need to be "published" anonymously.

When students know that someone, other than the teacher, is going to read their work, it often raises the level of commitment and the quality of the editing.

A great source of prompts to use for any age is a book by Chris Van Allsburg *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. The link to the publisher and some lesson plans are here: <http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/thepolarexpress/tg/mysteriesofharris.shtml>

You can Google the book's title for a glimpse of the contents.

Another source of writing prompts could be derived from taking a "field trip" to the school library. Give your students several small slips of paper each and send them into the fiction section. On the papers, ask them to write titles of books. When they are finished, the slips of paper go into a bag from which the students draw one or two slips of paper that are their writing prompt for their stories. Keep the slips that they choose and they are your resources for your anthology next year. You can give them the option to use the words as their stories' titles or incorporate the words into their story somewhere. Of

course, you don't have to do this just for an anthology, but anytime the students need a "get-up-and-move" break and a more active beginning to a writing class. This works well, too, if like in many schools, there is a computer lab in or near the library.

3. For Those Who Like Facts Only

Sometimes it is a challenge for students who are completely absorbed by non-fiction to get on the imagination bandwagon. They need assignments with roots in real people, things, and events. If their interest is cars, then encourage them to put a car at the heart of the story: the driver must win a race; the mechanic is injured and his child must repair a car in time for a special event; someone goes joyriding and has to explain a big scratch on the car to the owner; or someone uses a car to rescue someone; or ... you get the idea.

Another source of "real" people is old postcards that you can find very cheaply at flea markets and antique stores. The messages on the back are great story starters. Here's an article that gives some examples of how this can work: <http://wrightwriter.wordpress.com/2010/08/26/can't-think-of-anything-to-write-read-someone-elses-mail/>

4. Resources, Resources, Resources

Always have more than you need and in different formats. Students like things that they can touch, so it's also important to make some of your writing prompts hand-sized. Here are some suggestions:

- A box with writing prompts on small recipe cards that they can choose from—see below for some sites that have these in abundance.
- A photo album with photos of people and places cut from magazines and newspapers.
- A box or album with newspaper headlines or short news stories that could spark a story.
- A box with possible story titles on cards.
- A box with cards that have one or two lines of dialogue on them.
- Word lists – See this [article from *Canadian Teacher Magazine*](#) for a list of words to start with and how to make this idea work. In this article, there are also three more writing ideas, including more information about *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*.

Resources for writing prompts:

You can access nearly 100 writing prompts by clicking the "Writing Prompts" tab at the top of this page. Also, check the "Links to Writing Resources" tab at the top of the page for a list of links to other sources of writing prompts and tips. Warning: The Brainstormer and Writer Igniter are addictive. Students will want to visit those sites a lot.

5. The Writing Room

The room can be anywhere—a computer lab, the classroom, the front porch of the school, but for students to fully participate the room needs something more than just a place to sit and hold paper. It needs an atmosphere of trust. Sharing writing is not in everyone's comfort zone and many are reluctant to share their stories with anyone other than the teacher; however, writers can benefit from feedback from fellow writers. So, how to achieve this?

Start with the volunteers. In the class, there will always be a few who can't wait to stand up and read their stories to the class. That group can be expanded by offering to read the work yourself. Once students see how things work and that they will be safe, more will volunteer. Students can also be afraid that their read-aloud skills will embarrass them, so they don't share their stories. In that case, I'm happy to read their work. Unless the story is very short, I also ask the students which part they want to read or want me to read. Limiting the length of the piece, limits the amount that is at risk, and means that you can deal with more students' work as well. Another way to help get everyone's work in front of the class is to have all the students hand their work in and you read the sections they have chosen without telling anyone who the writer is.

Comments on student work need to be guided by you. Here is a link that contains a list of suggested rules: [Five Basic Critique Group Rules](#). It's important that, whatever the students say, they be reminded that they must say something positive before they offer help. It might be very worthwhile to have the students compile a list of words they would never want to be used to describe their writing, such as, boring, dumb, stupid ... I'm sure they can come up with more. These become the words they don't use in class.

Depending upon the age and ability of the class, opening the work up for criticism is risky. Some young boys may say they hate something just because it has fairies in it. Some girls may say the same because a story is about wrestlers. It's fair to remind the class regularly that all readers are different and they all like different styles of writing and subject matter; otherwise, there would only be one kind of book in the library. No one will like everything. If it's not your cup of tea, then this is the time to stay silent. (Echoes of Thumper's mother here: "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.")

Older students can concentrate on the aspect of writing that is on the table for the class. If the focus is on writing effective dialogue, then the entire class knows which principles are being applied to the work and can talk about its successes and missteps against a known standard, and because they have had the lesson, they have the vocabulary to talk about it. Rather than saying that the dialogue is bad, they need to look at what needs to be changed to make it better. Perhaps the writer needs to delete some adverbs and add more active verbs. Maybe, the readers want to know more about what is going on in the character's mind, or perhaps the point of view switches too often in the scene. One way to phrase suggestions is, "What I think would help make this better" "Better" is the next step up from "good" after all.

I hope some of these tips and resources have been useful. If you have any other issues that you have concerns or questions about, please drop me a line at hwrightwriter@gmail.com or in the comment box

on my website: <http://wrightingwords.com>. If I don't have the answer you need, someone else may.
Enjoy the best job ever!