

FOUR WAYS TO GET STUDENTS WRITING

Encouraging students to write is a resource-consuming task. Here are four writing resources that I have found to be very successful in the classroom and in writing workshops.

1. Writing Prompts

Here are five prompts to get you started. You can find more at <http://www.writingwords.com/writing-starters/>

- a) Brainstorm using the words: flame, table, cover, mask, watch.
- b) Your character loses a backpack containing one thing that his or her future depends upon. What is the valuable thing that is lost? What happens next?
- c) Write an opening sentence in which your character is running. To what or to whom is he/she running? From what or whom is he/she running? What happens next?
- d) Your character finds a wrapped package in the attic. The initials on the label are "MRN" and your character knows of no one with those initials. What's in the package? Who is MRN? What's the story?
- e) Your character finds or receives something small enough to hold in two hands. This object changes your character's life. Think of Bilbo and a ring, Arthur and a sword, Harry Potter and a book, the prince and a glass slipper.

2. Choose 4

Make a list of 100 words formatted to create 4 columns of 25 words each. This list can be handed out in your first writing class and kept in the students' writing folders or binders for the year, or it could be enlarged and posted in your writing corner. When students need inspiration for a story, they can ask a partner to give them 4 numbers between 1 and 25. The students find the words corresponding with those numbers on their list, and their challenge is to incorporate them into a story.

Here's my list: airplane, airport, alien, amulet, apple, armour, attack, bear, book, boots, bracelet, brown, bully, camera, cape, castle, cat, cave, chain, chair, charm, computer, copper, crystal, cup, danger, desk, dog, doll, door, dragon, dream, DVD, fear, field, fire, flame, fortress, game, ghost, glass, gold, green, hat, hero, horse, hut, key, knife, luck, match, medal, minstrel, monster, mountain, nail, needle, paper, park, peanut, pencil, phone, popsicle, power, rain, ring, robe, robin, sail, scroll, ship, shock, shoe, silver, sleep, slide, spell, spider, spring, stone, string, summer, sword, team, tent, thread, throne, thunder, unicorn, wart, watch, water, weapon, window, winter, witch, worm, yarn, yellow

3. The Mysteries of Harris Burdick

The pictures in this book by Carl Van Allsburg and the mystery behind their creation never fail to inspire writers of any age. I have used the illustrations for writing classes in both elementary and high school. A good buy is the portfolio edition of the drawings; the illustrations are enlarged to 11" x 14" and are great for display in the classroom.

Online copies of the illustrations can be found in Google images. Houghton Mifflin has created a website dedicated to the book with lesson plans, notes from the author, tips for writers, and a place for students to submit their stories based on the drawings. Other lesson plans are also available on the Internet for a variety of age groups.

<http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/harrisburdick/introduction.html>

4. Kim's Game

This activity challenges memory skills and generates creative ideas for stories, drama and individual or group presentations. Students enjoy the fun of this old-fashioned memory game and then use their imaginations to create stories, scenes or presentations.

On a tray, assemble twenty to thirty objects, such as small scissors, mirror, spool of thread, comb, toy airplane, toy car, pencil, pen, feather, small jar or bottle, coin, ring, button, watch, spoon, fork, craft stick, yarn, barrette, bead, candy wrapper, candle, or any other small objects you can think of that are unbreakable and found easily. You can also use pictures of objects and display them on a screen or paste them on a display board.

Give students one minute to study the objects. Hide the objects and have the students (alone or with a partner) write lists of as many of the objects as they can recall being on the tray. Give the students three to four minutes for this, then reveal the objects for the students to check against their lists. You can give prizes for the longest lists, or rather than make it a competition, you can ask how many people forgot the barrette or the button, how many remembered the yarn, which item they thought was the easiest to remember and see how many agree, etc.

The creative side of this lesson comes from the old TV program *MacGyver*. For a greater challenge, have the students pick their objects from their lists *before* they know the purpose for them. The activities below are just a few that can be drawn from this game:

a) Writing prompt: Students choose three items from the list and use these items in a story to help their protagonists escape from situations in which they are trapped.

b) Drama prompt: Students, with a partner or in a small group, choose three objects and dramatize a scene in which the three objects are used to help their characters escape from a situation they have invented.

c) Oral Presentation prompt: Students present their plans for manufacturing an escape using their three items. Here they can hone their skills for selecting and ordering information and presenting individually or as a group.

d) Writing prompt: Three of the objects are found in a memory box in an attic. Why did the person save these three objects? Write a letter that is also found in the memory box explaining what those three objects meant to the owner.

e) Writing prompt: The object that is chosen is magic. What special powers could it have? How could it work for a character in a story or dramatic scene?

f) Research and presentation prompt: Have the students research the earliest use of the object they have chosen and present their discovery to the class.