



A Picture Can Inspire 1,000 Words

Curriculum Unit 14.01.09
by Melissa Rhone

Introduction

A collective group of sighs can be heard from my 4th grade students throughout the classroom. This comes as a direct response to asking them to take out their writing journals. I think if you asked some of the students, they would say they don't mind writing, but a lot of them would say it is their least favorite subject. Why is there such a stigma attached to writing? How do we get students excited to put their thoughts and ideas down on paper? I think before we can answer these questions, we have to figure out what it is that they dislike so much.

All of my students love to talk. They talk during partner work, they talk during group work, they even talk when they are not supposed to. They love to be heard, they want their ideas out there, they want their thoughts shared with whoever will listen. One would assume with all these ideas and thoughts begging to be shared that these students would love to write and get those thoughts and ideas down on paper. I find in many situations, however, this is not the case. My goal through this curriculum unit is to create a way for my students to enjoy the writing process, for them to take the ideas that they want to share so much orally and express themselves in written form.

I believe that one of the problems that many of my students face in their writing is they don't have the stamina to write enough content. They have all these wonderful ideas in their minds, but when they are asked to translate these ideas to the paper, they want to get it over with as fast as possible. They say their hands hurt from writing so much, or they are tired of rewriting the same thing over and over. I want them to feel excited when they write, and I need to find a way to actually get them excited to write and to write a lot when they do.

Background

When I was a first-year teacher, I had many dreams of what my classroom was going to look like. On a list of goals I set out for myself, I included having the students highly engaged in all the work they do. This was a lofty goal for my first year, but it was something that I felt really passionate about. Out of all the subjects that I was going to be taking on as a 4th-grade teacher, I was sure that writing could potentially be the easiest. I assumed all the students knew how to write and that we would just be building on the skills they had learned as early as kindergarten.

My 4th-grade classroom at Brennan-Rogers School of Communication and Media in New Haven, CT, is much different from any classroom I have ever experienced in my time preparing to be a teacher. The students inside my classroom have many more life experiences than I could have even imagined. They come from all walks of life and are at a wide range of different academic levels. I work with some students with abilities as low as kindergarten level, all the way to some advanced students working at the fifth and sixth grade level. I have to find a way to let all of the students have their voices be heard through their writing. They all have a lot to say. I just need to differentiate the way they can express their thoughts and ideas. Writing is a process, one that seems to take a long time at the fourth-grade level. We go through the many steps of this process to get a complete essay in the end. Unfortunately, in a classroom that has a lot of needs and an ever-changing curriculum expectations, writing is a constant struggle. When we run out of minutes in the day, something seems to always get pushed aside. Sometimes that something is writing. With the writing process being such a time consuming thing, it is hard to stay the course and get finished writing products in a timely manner. Since I am an elementary teacher in a classroom where I am in charge of giving instruction on all subjects every day, it is a struggle at times. I need to find as many ways as possible to excite and engage the students in as many lessons as I can. My goal as a teacher has changed dramatically as I finish my fourth year of teaching. My goal for my students now is that they can learn something new, enjoy being at school, and get work done at their level so that they feel as though they have accomplished something every day. With my experience, I have learned that I am lucky that one of these goals is reached for some of my students sometimes. This unit will help to pull all the students in and to connect them to something they know well. By doing that, I hope that they can learn something new, enjoy their work, and get it finished.

Rationale

"Why do writers write?" This is a question that I ask my students at the beginning of every school year. We create an anchor chart that is displayed in the classroom for the year with all of their answers on it. Some ideas they may suggest are to get their thoughts and feelings out, because they are bored, or even because their teacher says they have to. The question that I really should be asking is "why do you want to write?" Some may even answer, "Well, I don't want to write, but I have to."

Reading, writing, and math are the core subjects that help students learn cross curricular lessons every day. Writing is the tool the students absorb to let them explain themselves and become individuals in the classroom and eventually in the real world. As I sit here right now and write this paper, I think back to how I

got to this place. Where and when did I learn to form sentences and know which punctuation is right? How am I able to create an essay that makes sense and to give the details that I am trying to get across to my audience?

We teach writing every day, but many of us do not understand the depth of what tools we are actually giving to our students. Our students need to be able to write, and they need their writing to have a purpose. By teaching them writing every day, we prepare our students for their future education and careers after school. It would seem that not everyone realizes that writing is basic to thinking about and learning knowledge in all fields as well as to communicating that knowledge. ¹ Teaching our students to form complete sentences with the correct punctuation and capitalization are key mini lessons in any writer's workshop, but we need to be giving them more during this time. In Toby Fulwiler's article "Why We Teach Writing in the First Place , " he quotes Donald Graves saying, "Writing is the basic stuff in education. It has been sorely neglected in our schools. We have substituted the passive reception of information for the active expression of facts, ideas, and feelings. We now need to right the balance between sending and receiving. We need to let them write." ²

When we let the students write, they need to be writing about something. They need an idea or an experience to draw from. At times we ask students to make up their own stories and ideas, but before we can expect this from the students, we need to let them write from a place where they are comfortable. What do our students know about? What makes them excited? If they can write about the ideas and topics that make them excited or they have a connection to, teachers can expect much higher quality work from them because they feel a connection to these topics.

It is my belief that if we give the students something to draw these ideas and thoughts from, they will be able to be more connected to their work. Photographs would be a great way for the students to come up with ideas. First teaching them how to create a story from a photo they do not know at all and adding their own details and making up a story will help them to be creative. Then when we go a step further to ask the students to share their own photographs. The connections and ideas from those photos can be written even more in depth because they know and connect to that the picture is. They or something/someone they know will be the subject of the photograph and they will be fully invested in the writing.

Pictures are what hold our memories forever. From the first photograph when a child is born until the memory board of photos at a funeral, pictures tell the stories of our lives and help us relive the memories we might forget. Wendy Ewald, an American photographer and educator, says, "Photography is perhaps the most democratic visual art of our time. For most of us, picture taking is part of our family lives." ³ With the boom in technology in the last decade, it is even easier for everyone to snap a picture of something whenever one needs to. The students will be able to easily collect photographs to connect their writing to. Most people are carrying cameras around with them everyday inside their cell phones. When we look back at the photos that we take, we are brought to a memory of a moment in time. Whether the memory is positive or negative, the person looking at the photo can usually describe the feelings and emotions that go along with it.

Objectives

With the help of this unit:

Students will be able to elaborate on details in their writing.

Students will be able to write a narrative essay about a person, place, or event that is important to them with the help of a photograph.

Students will be able to write an expository essay about a topic by using a photograph to assist them in remembering everything they know about their topic.

Students will be able to examine a photograph and write details about it.

Teaching Strategies

In my unit I am going to help my students use pictures as the subjects of their writing of narrative and expository essays. Both of these essays will be from a personal standpoint, and the students can write about something they know well. They will be able to create a picture in their audience's mind by using an actual picture to help them draw out details that are important.

Through this unit students will become interested and reenergized about their writing for the year. These ideas are going to be the way to help the students elaborate in their writing, which is what I think is stopping many of these students from being great writers. Two of the writing units that we work on during the school year are narrative writing and expository writing. When the students write their narrative pieces, they are asked to pick a person, place, or object that is special to them and write a personal narrative about that subject. When they are doing expository writing, they are to choose a topic on which they are already an expert and write a piece sharing what they know about the topic. In these two units I feel that the students would benefit greatly from having photographs of their subject or topic to help them elaborate in their writing. If they are able to look at their topic and feel a connection from a photograph that they are familiar with, I think their writing would grow immensely.

In writing this unit I address the subject of elaboration as it pertains to photojournalism because I want to find out how using pictures as an aid will help the students better elaborate in their writing. I will encourage the students to dig more deeply and also enjoy the art of writing. They will feel the same excitement they do when they tell a story out loud for all to hear as they do when they write down on paper a story about something that is meaningful to them. Through this they will feel the power of their voices through their words.

Writing Workshop

Judy Davis, who taught in the New York City Public School system for thirty years, and Sharron Hill, a teacher, literacy staff developer, and administrator at the Manhattan New School wrote a book titled *The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing*. They explained, "Effective writing instruction begins with specific goals and thoughtful, detailed plans for the year ahead, as well as clearly-defined structure and organization for the writing day." ⁴ They could not be more correct. While writing workshop at times is not totally structured, it has to be planned in a way that will work for all students. Using the workshop model to plan and teach writing is the best way to make sure the students are getting all the information they need to get their work completed.

A Writing Workshop is usually planned for about a 45-60 minute time block. In the block is a mini lesson, which takes about 10-20 minutes; student working time, which is about 30-45 minutes; and then a share and debrief time, which is about 5-10 minutes at the end.

The purpose of the mini lesson is to provide whole class instruction at the onset of the Writing Workshop. The mini lesson should be brief, to the point: it should use language that students can understand and address one clear objective that the students will then go off and try to accomplish during independent writing time. ⁵ This is the time when the teacher talks. This is when the teacher models for the class something the teacher has noticed the students need to work on or a new idea or topic that they need to learn about. This is where they get the information they are going to need to get their work done independently.

During the independent student work time, the most crucial part of the writing workshop happens. While the students are working independently on the task they are assigned, the teacher is conferring with the students about their writing. This is probably the hardest part of our job as writing teachers. At the heart of every good conference is listening. During conferences, as outlined by Lucy Calkins in *The Art of Teaching Writing*, "we must *research* by asking questions that help the writers uncover their plans for their writing, *decide* what they need to learn, then *teach* the writer accordingly." ⁶ We also need to be making sure the students are able to do the work that is expected of them.

The magic of the Writing Workshop is that students are ultimately able to work at their own pace. Some students may be working on their planning process, while others are working on adding an exciting conclusion, and then some students are typing their final draft. As long as all the students are engaged and the teacher is conferencing after having taught worthwhile mini lessons that the majority of the class need, then a successful writing workshop is happening in the classroom.

Personal Connection

It has become very clear to me that when students have a personal connection to what they are writing, they are more likely to want to write about whatever that topic is. This is why I think having students write about something that they know well in the first two writing units is a great way to start the first two marking periods of the school year.

When we ask students to write personal narratives, we are asking them to share themselves. They are going to write about a person, place, or thing that is important to them. This is the first writing unit of the school year, and it is going to help them share something personal about themselves with the class. We will all get to know the students in the class a little better. We will be able to see a snap shot into their lives that maybe would not come up in normal conversation every day.

The second writing unit is also asking the students to share more information about themselves. They get to decide on their topics. I do not necessarily know anything about their topic: they are the experts. They get to share the information that they know, and it might not be information that anyone else knows. The personal connection that the writers will have to their work will make them feel confident about their writing abilities.

Elaboration

Students can usually get something written down on their paper when they are given a topic to write about. Yet, there are the students who write the bare minimum and throw a hand up in the air and call out that they are finished. These students need to work on their elaboration. Deirdre Prisco, a special education middle school teacher at Edgewood Magnet School in New Haven, CT, has written, "Elaboration is an essential key to writing. The development of elaboration is what makes writing clearer, stronger and more effective. It is a challenge for writers of all ages and levels from Pulitzer Prize winning authors to elementary-school students. Writing curricula and programs are filled with lessons on elaboration. Teachers line the margins of student work with comments such as 'add more details,' 'much too general,' 'show, don't tell,' 'tell more' and 'explain better.'" ⁷ We need to work with our students so they have a better understanding of what all of those comments mean.

By using something such as a photograph to help with their writing, students will be able to have the subject right in front of them. Just as a reader will read a book without pictures and visualize what is going on, a writer can look at a picture and write using details to explain what is going on in a photograph. By using the photographs of a person, place or thing, a student will be able to tell a narrative from a particular moment in time. Students are creating a verbal snapshot in their narrative essay, so using a picture to help them elaborate is a perfect way to make them feel more confident in their writing.

When the students are asked to pick an expert topic for their expository essay, they first have to come up with something they are an expert on. We work on making lists under different topic headings until they come up with the one main thing they feel they know the best. If students were then given a camera to go home and take pictures of their subject, they would bring them in to use as a helper when they getting to their writing. Even though they feel they are experts about these things, it's sometimes a challenge for the students to come up with everything they know.

Kathleen Cali, who is a doctoral student in the Early Childhood, Families, and Literacy program at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Education, wrote, "The key to developing support and elaboration is getting *specific*. Good writers use concrete, specific details, and relevant information to construct mental images for their readers." ⁸ When students have photographs in front of them, I could confer with them and ask probing questions to help them be able to add more detail.

Photojournalism

Reuel Golden, who was the senior editor of the world's largest magazine for professional photographers, the New York-based *Photo District News*, says in the introduction of his book *Photojournalism: 150 Years of Outstanding Photography*, "At its most basic definition, photojournalism is the presentation of stories through photographs--photojournalists are journalists with cameras."⁹ While many students would not consider themselves to be reporters or journalists every day in class, I think this idea is a good description of what I am hoping to have students become through this writing unit. I want the students to present their ideas in writing stories with the assistance and through the photographs they will be working with.

Mark Hancock, an award-winning staff photojournalist for *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Beaumont Enterprise* who writes a blog on photojournalism, goes a step further to help visualize what a photojournalist really is. "A journalist tells stories. A photographer takes pictures of nouns (people, places and things). A photojournalist takes the best of both and locks it into the most powerful medium available -- frozen images."¹⁰ Even though this is a writing workshop and not photography class, I think it is very important for the students to see the power of a photograph. With the photographs that the students are going to be using in their writing they will be able to report out and share details from a time and place that have meaning for them.

Photographers take pictures of nouns (people, places and things). Photojournalists shoot action verbs (kicks, explodes, cries, etc.).¹¹ The students are going to be using their photographs to put those verbs on paper. While a photojournalist is telling a story through photos, the students will be telling their stories with support from a photo, making them more journalists than photojournalists.

In the preface of *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach* Kenneth Kobre says, "Today, more crucial than ever, is the JOURNALISM in photojournalism."¹² By saying that he is reiterating how important it is for students to know how to write. We need to be able to tell the story along with the picture. Growing photojournalists in the classroom will help to get the students excited about their writing and in turn do wonderful work in writing workshop.

Interdisciplinary Use of Photojournalism and Photography

While creating photojournalists in writing workshop seems to make sense on the surface, it is important to recognize that this idea and new role can be used elsewhere in the classroom. While building classroom communities and getting to know each other in the beginning of the school year, students can use photography and storytelling to introduce themselves to each other.

Starting off with the students being photographers in the classroom will help them to become more comfortable with being photojournalists. Teaching basic photography skills can be the pre-lessons to more in-depth conversations and lessons when it comes to writing workshop. Since the students will feel comfortable using the camera through these mini lessons in the beginning of the year, they will dive right into the learning and idea of photojournalism.

Students need to be able to understand the difference between photography and journalism. Though my classroom is not a photography studio, the students are going to be able to understand the ideas and concepts of photography. They need to understand these things so that they can know why their pictures are so important.

Classroom Activities

The lessons highlighted below are just a sampling of some of the lessons that can be taught during the two writing units of Narrative and Expository. Please refer to the New Haven Literacy Curriculum Writing Unit for detailed ideas and plans for each writing unit throughout the school year. These activities are created to supplement the New Haven guidelines. The ideas in this unit pertain to elaboration of the student's writing.

Activity 1:

Learning Target: Students can look at a photograph and write a story about what they observe.

Materials: Photograph (example below), writing journal, pencil.

The link below is to a photograph of baseball players. One is a young boy and the other an older man. The man has his head in his hands and the young boy is looking at him. This photo (or one similar) would work well for this lesson because there are details and emotions that can be talked about after looking at it.

<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/baseball.JPG>

Procedure: Show the students the photograph and have them turn and talk with a partner about what they see. Let some students share out about their first reactions to the photo. Then explain that they will be writing a short story, 2-3 long, paragraphs about what is going on in the photo. Have them go back to their desks and give them 5 minutes planning time and then 20 minutes writing time. Once they are finished with their work, give some students time to share their writing. Debrief with the class about what worked, why this activity was important, and how they can use what they learned in their future writing.

Activity 2:

Learning Target: Students can take basic sentences and add more details by using the 5 senses to elaborate in their writing.

Materials: Worksheet with sentences (example below).

Procedure: Review with the students the 5 senses (taste, touch, hear, see, smell) and talk with them about how we could use these senses to help us make our writing more exciting. Model reworking a simple sentence with one of the 5 senses. Write the sentence on the board: The cat walked by the door. Then pick one of the senses to use to elaborate the sentence. For example, say, "I'm going to use touch to help me to describe the cat better. A cat might have fluffy fur, so I could say: The fluffy cat walked by the door." You could use more senses to add even more details to this sentence. Pass out the worksheet and do a few with the students and then let them do the rest independently.

Example sentences to use for the worksheet:

1. The kids played outside.
2. The boy ate a sandwich.
3. We watched the movie.
4. The car made a noise.
5. The girl went to the store.
6. My mom told me no.
7. I put on my school uniform.
8. The dog was barking.
9. I had a drink.
10. We went to the park.

Activity 3:

Learning Target: Students can use a photograph that belongs to them to write a story with lots of details.

Materials: A personal photograph, writing journal, pencil.

Procedure: The students will take the photograph out that you asked them to bring in. They will use this photo to help them write a story about that moment in time. The first part of the lesson will be for the students to write about just what they see and what is going on. Then once they do those basic sentences, they will take them and use details to elaborate on the work. They will use the same technique of the 5 senses to help them to talk more in detail about what is happening in the photo. This will be the planning and for some the first draft of their writing.

Activity Extensions:

These three activities are just a few ideas about how you can have the students elaborate in their writing. I am sharing these three activities to show how to build upon each activity with the students, starting off with an unfamiliar picture and having the students write from that, then giving the students tools like the five senses to help with elaborating and making better details, then finally having them do those two activities with their own photograph. The students will see the connection and have the needed background knowledge as you build on each activity, making it easier for them to write about their own experiences and photographs with even better elaboration, which is the goal of the unit.

Teacher Resources

Cali, Kathleen. "Support and Elaboration." *The Five Features of Effective Writing* . <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/few/685>. An article about support and elaboration in the writing workshop.

Calkins, Lucy. *The art of teaching writing* . Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986.

A book about teaching writing in the classroom by one of the premier educators in the writing field.

Davis, Judy, and Sharon Hill. *The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing* . Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. A book that helps teachers prepare tools, address management issues, get the work started, and build momentum as students increase their understanding of good writing practice.

Ewald, Wendy, and Alexandra Lightfoot. *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children* . Boston: Center for Documentary Studies in association with Beacon Press, 2001. An accessible and practical guide to getting children involved in photography

Fulwiler, Toby. "Why We Teach Writing in the First Place."

<http://comppile.org/archives/fforum/fforum4%282%29files/fforum4%282%29Fulwiler.pdf> An article written about the topic of writing and why it is such an imperative subject to teach to students at every level.

Golden, Reuel. *Photojournalism: 150 Years of Outstanding Press Photography* . New ed. London: Carlton, 2011.

Graves, Donald. *A Fresh Look at Writing* . Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994. A book with new ideas for veteran teachers and good techniques for new teachers dealing with the writing workshop.

Hancock, Mark . "PhotoJournalism." : What is a Photojournalist?.

<http://markhancock.blogspot.com/1996/01/what-is-photojournalist.html>. A blog explaining what photojournalism is; the whole blog has a lot of information about photojournalism as a whole and would be a great resource to get to understand what the job really entails.

Kobre, Kenneth. *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach* . Somerville, Mass.: Curtin & London, 1980. A book with insightful interviews with professionals, practical experience, current equipment and camera technology, and high-impact photographs to create the definitive book on photojournalism.

¹ Prisco, Deirdre . "09.01.03: Visually Speaking: Using Visual Journaling to Build Elaboration Skills in Writing." Writing, Knowing, Seeing 2009. /curriculum/units/2009/1/09.01.03.x.html#f. A unit written by a Yale Teaching Institute Fellow about visual writing.

Student Resources

Bidner, Jenni. *The Kids' Guide to Digital Photography: How to Shoot, Save, Play With & Print Your Digital Photos* . New York: Lark Books, 2004. A basic book that can help kids learn how to use the camera. It teaches young photographers how to create, edit, and share their digital images in imaginative ways.

Ebert, Michael, and Sandra Abend. *Photography For Kids!: A Fun Guide to Digital Photography*. Santa Barbara, CA: Rocky Nook Inc., 2011. This book introduces children between the ages of 8 and 14 to the world of photography. Technical concepts—like how a digital camera actually works—are explained in a way that is easy for children to understand.

BrainPop <http://www.brainpop.com/english/writing/> This interactive website is full of videos to help introduce different topics and ideas to students. This link will bring students to the area of writing and has many videos that can help in the writing workshop.

Appendix: Implementing Common Core Standards

Implementing Grade Four Writing Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3.D Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely.

Students will be using details to help them elaborate in their writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.8 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

Students will use the photographs they have to help them recall information and experiences from their lives to help with their writing.

Implementing Grade Four Speaking and Listening Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 4 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Students will be having conversations with the teacher and with other students through the writing process to help them in creating their final draft of their essays.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4.4 Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

Students will be retelling a story from their life based on an experience they have had and write about it with details and share their work with an audience.

Notes

1. Toby Fulwiler, "Why We Teach Writing."
2. Ibid.
3. Wendy Ewald & Alexandra Lightfoot, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*.
4. Judy Davis & Shannon Hill, *The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing* .
5. Ibid.
6. Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* .
7. Deirdre Prisco, *Visually Speaking: Using Visual Journaling to Build Elaboration Skills in Writing*.
8. Kathleen Cali, *The Five Features of Effective Writing, Support and Elaboration*.
9. Reuel Golden.
10. Hancock, Mark . "Photojournalism" : What is a Photojournalist?
11. Ibid.
12. Kenneth Kobre, *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach* .

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