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Autobiography and the Creative Impulse in Writing the Short Story

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When I first came to the Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School, I was hired through the Center for Theatre Techniques in Education; a program which, among its many services, hires artists to teach in the public schools. Some of my first classes were instant nightmares. My students did not want to be there. They were hostile and resistant. For all they cared, this was another English class with more of the work a number of them disliked, writing. When I first began to teach I had one concern in mind: not to duplicate what English teachers were doing in their classroom. We shared the same students and I was overly concerned with "turning them off" from writing altogether. While I sought not to duplicate the work of English teachers, I learned much about English classes in my school and others. I spoke to teachers at length, attended workshops, read tirelessly. If I derived any benefit from this pursuit, it was becoming aware of, and learning about the current writing movement which Paul Connolly describes as being "not simply a matter of pushing the teacher's desk to the edge of the classroom and watching what happens. It is a deliberate controlled effort to affect a complete ecological system in such a way that learning, and not just the rapacious testing which often passes for schooling, can nurture everyone."l This gave some of my dearest aspirations as a teacher of writing hope for the future. It helped guide me and others to the center from which all good writing happens in the classroom. At the outset, I strongly believed that the writing process and the process of teaching writing were worlds apart. But that's not true. Teaching writing well is also an art.

With emphasis on self-discovery and the classroom environment, this unit presents a method with which to introduce the writing of the short story to tenth graders. Students will be motivated to write, and to develop an involvement with their writing that is both personal and interpersonal. This is a six-week unit, within the context of a Creative Writing course that extends for one marking period, and should take place at the beginning of class. It does as well, naturally build up to a study of poetry.

Strategies are spread throughout a week-by-week format. Week One details two ways in which to begin building a non-threatening atmosphere, and provides suggestions for Warm-Up Assignments as well as Core Writing. These samples continue through Week Two. An outline for other material is provided under each respective week. Week Three introduces the first short stories and outlines questions for group discussion, providing as well, samples for Follow-Up Writing. Week Four and Five continue this thread while addressing the writing of the short story. Students conclude their stories by Week Six, and begin to evaluate.

In structuring lesson plans, note that: (1) The class should open with a Warm-Up Assignment. (2) This activity should be followed by any combination of a presentation, the reading of a short story, group discussion, Core

Writing, and student conferencing. (3) The class should end with a brief follow-up. Taking the last five or ten minutes of class, for example, for a reflection on the group process. What can each student say about what he is feeling, how he sees things, etc. Every member of the group should contribute something, including teacher, no matter how insignificant. One can also take this opportunity to allow students to read their work; not for feedback in this case, but to share each other's accomplishments. (For ideas on end-of-session follow-ups, consult Connolly's "Writing & Thinking.")

The act of self-discovery and the environment play major roles in the creative impulse. This is the driving force, affected and brought on by the world within us (one that is confident, daring, exploratory, full of experiences), as well as the world outside of us (one that is stimulating, supportive, tolerant, and accommodating). It motivates us to create, to write.

OBJECTIVES

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a. To create a non-threatening atmosphere for creative writing.
b. To build upon, or expand, students' ability and desire to express themselves, by emphasizing discovery, creativity, and personal experience.
c. To allow students' first efforts to be simple enough to provide them with personal satisfaction, so they may continue to develop an interest in writing, and continue to use writing as a form of expression .
d. To stimulate students to write original short stories using autobiography as a resource or point of departure.

Developing a Creative Environment & The Teacher as Participant

If our students charge us with being. a bore, it is a sign. Nothing can be more stifling to creativity than boredom. It isn't a motivating frame of mind. It is the resourceful teacher who will evaluate such input and put it to good use; changing, exploring, refining. Nothing can keep a student's interest more alive than the teacher's own passion for his field. "It is interesting," writes Brenda Ueland in *If You Want to Write, "* how if my interest in any one of them flags, they know it; or if I allow discouragement to creep into any one of them for one minute, they die away. Tender plants." [2] As teachers of writing, we should explore a wide variety of forms, develop our own style and technique in writing, and bring those experiences to the classroom, Teaching and learning should be inseparable. We must be working apprentices to be enthusiastic, motivated, resourceful, and passionate teachers.

Most students have the notion that teachers have it easy. After all, who ends up doing all the assignments? It is self-defeating to encourage autobiography when the student is always in the place of having to make all the confessions, "When adolescents feel that they can trust their teacher and their peers, they often choose to

write about incredibly powerful topics." [3]

One can begin to develop trust, and become an active researcher in the classroom, by taking part in assignments and class projects, by observing and becoming involved with students' writing and thinking processes, by working on individual stumbling blocks through the mini-lesson in student-conferencing , by determining as well, from first-hand experience, whether some assignments have begun to lose their color, or are inadequate for a given class. To further one's role as a researcher, one can log classroom observations, student conferencing progress, the ideas and modifications this research prompts, and turn to them when planning.

If the opportunity to write in class isn't always available, Work on something at home and bring it to class. Hold periodic readings of Warm-Up Assignments and assigned, or directed-topic Free-writing. Contribute to the atmosphere by sharing your own. Students marvel at the realization that teachers too may take the chance of "exposing themselves" in class. Is that not what we ask of them?

One should also keep abreast of developments in the field. *The Writer* is a monthly that offers useful, practical advise and support for beginning as well as flourishing writers. Unlike *The Writer, Teachers & Writers Magazine* resembles a newsletter, and is published quarterly. It is specifically aimed at teachers of writing. The majority of its articles are written by active poetS and writers teaching in the New York City Public Schools. Both are invaluable resources.

In fostering a supportive and non-threatening atmosphere, one can help students understand that in learning to write well, we need a certain "attitude." First, they must learn to feel uninhibited, but must respect others so they too can have the respect they deserve.

Second, they must feel confident that there is something to be gained from all the writing that they do. When they stumble on a writing project that prompts them to believe they failed, they are guaranteed at least one insight from it to make future writing a more productive experience. Third, all ideas are acceptable. They are reminders of our individuality.

Creative Writing enables teachers to embrace a multitude of topics as well as a variety of disciplines. Jerome Bruner reminds us that in order "for the person to search out and find regularities and relationships in his environment, he must be armed with an expectancy and, once aroused by expectancy he must devise ways of searching and finding."4 We can contribute to this by providing assignments that elicit not only autobiography but inquiry. We can challenge students' creativity. We can help them discover for themselves in writing. We can nurture our interest in the individual, and offer as much support and concern for content (the discoveries, the life experiences a student brings to it), as for his developing sense of the written word, grammar and spelling.

A Case for Self-Discovery

In "The Act of Discovery," Jerome Bruner, speaking of self-discovery within the educational setting, points out that it is "a necessary condition for learning the variety of techniques of problem-solving, of transforming information for better use, indeed for learning how to go about the very task of learning." [5] Writing is an act of self-discovery, and problem-solving skills are crucial to the development of written-fluency. Self-discovery is particularly important at the stages of pre-writing, where brainstorming takes place. Here, especially, we must stress exploration and freedom. Furthermore, one must make the opportunity to explore available, rather than leave it up to the individual. The act of discovery enables students to remake connections on their own which

are strong and lasting. One's role is to create an environment that fosters this. Bruner explains that the student " . . . is now in a position to experience success and failure not as reward and punishment, but as information."G It is true that we often need to experience that which we don't want in order to discover that which we do, Imperfect people are continuously, one way or another, faced with this process. There is the short story that gets written through, only to discover that we should have done it altogether differently and must begin again. But has this process failed to teach us something because we did not succeed in achieving our intended goal? No. It is then that one's process of discovery becomes a resource in itself.

Becoming familiar with elements of fiction and learning to analyze a short story alone, will not motivate a student to write. One needs to provide him with a cash-in value, with reading material that will challenge his thinking yet give him something realistic to aspire to, with a plan for learning that "lifts the veil of mystery" from writing, but one that is also enjoyable and satisfying.

With this purpose in mind, the short stories selected for this unit are meant to stimulate thought, help students explore possibilities, provide gratification, trigger writing, help students discover relationships between this writing and their own, and explore some elements of fiction that will be practical in writing that first short story.

WEEK ONE

Day One: One goal as a class is to have everyone, including teacher, discover something new about themselves and about writing by the time the course is over. You will be working together, professionally and personally. (Discussion of the necessary preparation for class and the grading system you will use, should take place tomorrow.)

Activity #1 It is easy to feel tense when we take on new things. That is your first "problem" as a class. Point out that you will hold an experiment with the purpose of loosening up everyone. Ask that students write a paragraph in answer to this question: How do you feel right now ? At this very moment? They are to write whatever is presently in their thoughts. Are they tired? Hungry? Nervous? Where else would they rather be? Why? Stress that paragraphs should be legible, but emphasize content over grammar-and spelling. One's purpose should be to put the class at ease. They will have five minutes to do this. A one-minute warning helps conclude writing smoothly. Assure students that they are not obligated to identify themselves.
Take a seat nearby and begin work on your own paragraph. After the compositions are collected, let students know that the class should know how everyone else feels. Let them know that you won't pressure anyone into reading aloud or revealing themselves. You can choose a paragraph at random and read it yourself. Read with enthusiasm. Whether at the beginning, middle, or end, read your own piece and identify yourself. Make connections between the feelings your paragraph portrays and those of students. Request feedback. This is information you may want to refer back to at the end of the course or unit.

Activity #2 Hand out an interest inventory. Use or modify the sample provided in this unit's packet of supplementary materials. Make certain to include a question with reference to the student's writing background. "What is the earliest recollection you have of a writing experience?" Allot them fifteen minutes to complete the handout. If possible, pair off students who don't know each other well. One student will ask the other questions in whichever order he

likes, and jot down responses on the sheet. When a question requires multiple answers, he is to choose the top two or three. It is important to tell them not to write complete sentences or they won't get too far. Each pair is to switch interviewer after 7 minutes, regardless of whether they've completed the handout.
If you have a large number of students,split up oral presentations into two class sessions, and allow each student three minutes. Let the class assist you in choosing the order in which they will take turns. Arrange chairs in a circle. It is preferable to begin by introducing the student in your pair first or vice-versa.

FOR TOMORROW: Students are asked to bring in a notebook. This notebook is treated as a journal, and should remain in class at all times. All freewriting and autobiographical material will be kept in it.

Day Two: Materials you will need for today: manila folders, notebooks, copies of "Topics I Can Write About."

Proceed with an overview of the course and unit. Specify your goals. Discuss what is expected from the class, as well as what can be expected from *you* as teacher. Explore the relationship between what students will learn about writing in your class, and writing across the curriculum. If you have a writing background, share some of your experiences and difficulties in becoming a better writer. Stress confidentiality. Encourage students to write honestly and openly. Assure them that you will not share information that may compromise them.

Pass out folders. Everyone should be allowed to decorate them, or doodle on them as they please. These should contain a copy of "Topics I Can Write About" (a handout with enumerated blank lines). Encourage students to add to this list today, and to continue doing so throughout. (For the purpose of simplifying the grading of daily writing, a modification of the point system is recommended. [7]) The form on which points are recorded is also attached to the folder. Upon coming to class, each student is responsible for obtaining and reviewing his work from the previous day.

Activity #1 Introduce freewriting. Explain that it is a stream of consciousness, a way of clearing one's mind of thoughts. Freewriting requires the student to write about topics of his choice, for ten or fifteen minutes, without stopping to strike out errors, check grammar or spelling. (The use of pencils and corrasable pens should be discouraged.)
Day One's Activity #1 is freewriting modified. This is particularly useful when, for example, in reading a short story, you want to tap the student's inner thoughts on a particular topic or element of the story. In this unit, this is referred to as "directed-topic" freewriting. Although freewriting does not form the basis of group discussions, it contributes to them by allowing the student to explore, gather and confront his thoughts, leaving him prepared to develop them. It also draws from autobiography, and serves as a warm-up assignment. Have students do a freewriting on a topic of their choice.

Activity #2 Proceed with a presentation on what one can do to grow as a writer. Encourage students to use their imagination and contribute. A list follows: not be afraid to explore; find challenging topics to write about; expand our vocabulary; read to see how other people write and to expand our horizons; learn to observe; question the world around us; keep a journal; be persistent; care about what we do .and write about; listen to or read other students' writing; let other people read our work for feedback; read our work as if someone else wrote it; revise.
In the Days to Follow: Stress observation skills. You'll also want to discuss description, and using the five senses. Explain the importance of these skills in good writing. Conduct activities that center around the student's personal experience, and which make use of observation and description. These should be built into

daily class sessions.

SAMPLE WARM-UP ASSIGNMENTS/WEEK ONE:

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1. *Smelling the Coffee*— Morning is an important part of a student's life. Here is one way to tap autobiography lightly, and address description. Procedure: Using your five senses, write a two-paragraph composition describing in detail the experience of waking from the moment you open your eyes. What do you see, hear, smell? What does the world seem like to you then? Tell about one of your morning rituals. Describe it. Focus on what represents morning for you. Give your composition a title.
2. *A Variation of the "List Poem"*— This is an easy, unintimidating poem to write, requiring no formal knowledge of poetry. The first lead should begin the first half of the poem. Each item should be listed on a separate line. Assist students in making top choices. The second lead should begin the second half. Specify that the class is to use both, not choose one over the other.

    #1 These are some of the things I love . . .

    #2 These are some of the things I ___ . . .

        (like the least, regret, that make me sad, upset, disappoint me)
3. *Choice Topic*— Have students choose, and write a brief composition on one of the topics below:

    In a moment of crisis, the most critical decision you made.

    The greatest proposition you've ever had.

    The strangest visit.

    Your greatest sacrifice.

    Your first time being stopped by a cop.

    Your first plane flight.

        (Samples of Core Writing for Week One appear in Appendix I.)

WEEK TWO

Following are more examples of warmup assignments. These are intended for Week Two. From here on, you can begin to create and use your own; keeping in mind that one can't always please everyone, but being flexible enough to modify them if necessary. Warm-up assignments are fairly easy to create. One can explore student interests outside the classroom. Be imaginative, venturesome. Turn to events in history, general interest articles, or television programs in branches of science, sociology, to current events.

Students should not feel warm-up assignments are busy work. They should welcome them as they would welcome freewriting. With the exception of the latter, as often as humanly possible, try not to repeat warm-up assignments. They lose their lustre and capacity to challenge.

SAMPLE WARM-UP ASSIGNMENTS/WEEK TWO:

1. *Objet D'Art*— Students choose an object in, or outside the classroom, to write a brief composition about (a picture in a calendar or bulletin board, someone's bookbag, a map, the building, street or sidewalk outside the classroom window). They describe the object, consider its use, and imagine its history. This assignment may leave students feeling "blocked." They should not be allowed to substitute it for other writing. It is a challenge to their creativity and imagination. You can encourage them to share their object with you and members of the class. Point out some of its writing possibilities while helping them expand their raw ideas.
2. *An Embarrassing Moment* —Write a brief composition, you can share with the class, about one of the most embarrassing moments you've ever had to face.
3. Alaska—One can point out Alaska on the map, and provide students with a general background. You may, if you wish, present a short video on some aspect of life there. The "National Geographic Explorer" television series airs concise programs which may be useful for this assignment. There is, at least, one re-run per week. PROCEDURE: In Alaska, the sun never sets for a period of five to six months during summer. In winter, it never rises for another five or six months. Consider these questions in writing a brief composition: What would life be like in continuous darkness? Light? How would your life be different? What could you not do there that you are accustomed to doing now? How would you plan your life to adapt to these living conditions? You may focus on one of these questions or, take us through a typical day in winter of summer for you. Imagine that you are there now. Make use of your senses. Allow the reader to "picture" your day in his mind.
4. *Grave Stone*— Think of a very brief and light poem to be carved on the tombstone of your least favorite person. This should be a fun project; perhaps you can show us that by making the poem rhyme, writing it in the form of rap, or showing us a humorous element. You can use the person's name as a title for the piece. However, if it is someone we know, you can replace his/her name with one that is humorous, or with a nickname which you think would characterize this person.

WHAT TO COVER/WEEK TWO:

I. Introduce and review pre-writing techniques. Include listing, clustering, and freewriting as ways of brainstorming, Point out ways in which students can make use of them in the classroom and across the curriculum. (For a description of the clustering and listing techniques, turn to Carol L. Altieri's "Approaches to Writing," in The Process of Writing, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Vol. IV, 1986.)

II. Decide on what kind of writing you will want from your students. Let them know. Point out the qualities of good writing. These should be posted in the room. My list includes writing that is simple, descriptive, insightful, and which involves the reader. Present a sample, perhaps a paragraph from a short story, or a brief poem, which portrays these qualities.

III. Explain and begin to familiarize students with the following: (a) what a draft is; (b) focusing; (c) the power of using one's senses in description; (d) "showing" vs. "telling;" (e) how to avoid stating the obvious; (f) how to avoid clichés and stereotypes. Discuss how these are qualities of poor writing. Look for them in student writing. Point them out during student conferences.

IV. Hold one student conference during which you should: (a) recognize and support students' efforts; (b) point out examples of quality writing in their pieces; (c) point out occurrences of "showing" and "telling;" (d) encourage peer conferences so students can discover topics and approaches used by other members of the class; (e) spend some time exploring with students their sources of ideas so that they can be conscious of them. (No teacher should have to be burdened by holding student conferences all at once. They can be scheduled throughout the week, and prevent the class atmosphere from being disrupted. One can confer with a student when he is having a specific difficulty, and use this opportunity to place the problem within the context of a mini-lesson.)

V. Students should compose the following core writing assignments:

> *A Childhood Reminiscence* —Students write a composition based on a memory from childhood. A presentation on "focusing" can be coordinated to help them narrow down their ideas.
> *Character Sketch* —Introduce the character sketch, Explain how a sketch is similar to a "portrait;" how it allows the writer to reveal the personality of a character. Point out situations where character sketches would be called for. PROCEDURE: Write a two-page character sketch. Create the person as you know him or her. Include an event that shows us what kind of person this is. Can you show where this event takes place? Does the way in which the person speak, and what he or she talks about, say something about him/her? Can you give us an example of this? [8]
> *The Image Poem*— Inspired by Daitzman's *Renaissance,9* these are poems which focus on, freeze, one moment alone. These are comprised of one single verse whose words are broken into a number of lines. It is effective for helping students focus, begin to develop "an ear" for poetry, as well as for helping them begin to develop a sense for the economy of language. PROCEDURE: Students are asked to choose from a list of "stimulus words" and focus on one of the images this word evokes. Called "stimulus words" because they co¥el images, these are later used as title for the poems. (For a sample list and poems, refer to this unit's packet of supplementary materials.)

WEEK THREE

I. Review pre-writing techniques.

II. Students read the first short stories. These form the basis of group discussion. Some elements of fiction will be used to explore the stories, but group discussions will not be limited to them. Discuss plot, point of view, conflict, setting, and dialogue, in as simple a way as possible. There will be opportunities to expand on them as one moves from story to story. Please remember that this unit, beyond making available the opportunity for students to write, allows for students' first efforts to be simple enough to provide them with personal satisfaction so that they can continue to write.

III. The following selection from the book Free and Compulsory For All will be read this week: "Blind," "Custom," "Kept After School," and "Innovative Assignment." These stories average one page, and take place within a day. They tell of difficult, comical, or absurd situations, faced by teachers as well as students, in an imaginative and simple style. They have been selected as introductory reading because they are not elaborate, yet full of meaning, and because students can, relatively simply, begin to identify point of view and conflict. Students tend to feel that these stories could have been elaborated, or made to seem more convincing, as readers they feel a sense of incompletion. That is why they seem to be a good tool with which to help students examine a story critically. They won't be absorbed by sheer entertainment either. Their brevity should allow for two of them to be read, and written about per class session. Synopses, and the order in which they should be read, follow:

"Blind" is a light and humorous story about a student who, although a good basketball player, can't shoot free-throws. He attempts to improve his average by playing a trick. The trick will be effective, but his coach won't be applauding his success,

"Custom" is a sad and baffling story about an ineffective teacher's bizarre attempts to reach his students. (It is written in good taste.)

"Kept After School" is a humorous portrayal of two students attempting to communicate in detention through hand signals without getting caught. They believe they accomplish their purpose but, unknowingly misinterpret each other.

"Innovative Assignment" is a warm and touching story about a teacher who decides not to hold class one day. He will allow students to go wherever they please so long as they are conscious of their feelings throughout the day, and come prepared to discuss them in class. A girl and her boyfriend deliver an incredibly revealing and honest account of their feelings about themselves and each other. The teacher's assignment is a success, only he has exempted himself from it.

IV. In preparation for group discussion, students should prepare written responses to questions on the text. emphasis is placed on their participation and contribution to the group-sharing process. Therefore, their answers should be brief, and take the form of notes.

V. Follow-Up Writing SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR "Blind"

1. What is this story about?

2. Through whose eyes do we see the story evolve?
3. What is the conflict in this story? Is it resolved? How?
4. What in this story makes the characters seem convincing?
5. Is it likely that an event like this could take place in school? Why?
6. How would you account for the main character's improved average after making believe he couldn't see?
7. The coach was angry because he felt tricked. Was he right or wrong about his attitude toward the student? Why?
8. Do you think there's an underlying message in this story?
9. What made this story interesting to read? Why?
10. Does the story have a good beginning? A good ending? Why?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR "Custom"

1. What is your interpretation of this story?

2. What does the title mean? How does it relate to the story?
3. Through whose eyes do we see the story evolve?
4. What is the main conflict here? Can you point to the segment in which the conflict is revealed to you?
5. Is the conflict resolved?
6. What makes these characters seem convincing within a school setting?
7. Could the writer have intended that as a way of showing us something about this teacher's attitude toward his students? What?
8. What does this teacher's behavior "show" us about his personality?
9. Would you rank the main character as a (1) excellent, (2) mediocre, or (3) poor teacher? 10. Is there an underlying message in this story?
11. What made this story interesting to read?
12. Does it have a good beginning? Did the ending satisfy you? How?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR “Kept After School”

1. What is this story about?
2. Through whose eyes do we see it evolve?
3. What is the conflict here? What is so ironic about the way in which it is resolved?
4. What makes the characters convincing?
5. Was there an underlying message in this story?
6. What made it interesting to read? Why?
7. Does it have a good beginning? Was the ending satisfying? Why?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR “Innovative Assignment”

1. What is this story about?
2. What is the point of view?
3. What is the conflict here? Is it resolved?
4. Is the event that takes place in this story convincing? Why? What kind of school could it possibly take place in?
5. Are the characters convincing?
6. What does the dialogue in this story reveal to us about the characters?
7. If at all possible, what kind of group of students would it take for the girl’s confession to seem probable?

8. Could the writer have used the girl’s confession as a way of saying something about this teacher’s assignment? What?
9. What is the underlying message in this piece?
10. What made this story interesting to read? Why?
11. Is the beginning a good one? The ending? Why?

Follow-Up Writing

Students can write a one-page composition about an unusual incident that took place in school involving a teacher, student, or class; or they can choose a directed-topic freewriting from below:

1. Describe an incident where you proved to a teacher that you could do something he or she thought you couldn't do.
2. Describe an odd incident that took place in the class of a teacher whom you thought was unusual.
3. Describe the strangest, or funniest circumstances under which you've had to secretly communicate with a friend.
4. Describe the most innovative assignment a teacher has ever asked you to do.

WEEK FOUR

I. Review elements of fiction from Week Three.

II. Explore topics for a short story. Schedule conferences throughout the week to assist each student in finding a topic he can care about. Urge students to turn to their interest inventories for ideas, to the "Topics I Can Write About" handout, especially, to their notebooks. Help them select an autobiographical event from which they can develop a story. Students should, however, have as much freedom with their topic-choice as possible. One's role should be that of helping them discriminate.

Explain that one should not have to tell everything as it really happened and, during brainstorming, point to specific ways in which students can replace, or modify, part of their autobiographical material for the sake of creating an interesting, well-built, and gratifying story.

What you can do to assist students in finding a topic:

1. Keep a rich variety of periodicals and reading materials in the classroom and, periodically, allow students time for independent reading.
2. Hold periodic group readings and share special assignments, so that students can experience how others write as well as share the source of an idea.
3. Keep an on-going file of current-event clippings handy, and encourage students to turn to it for ideas.
4. Photographs can also be the source of an idea for a story. Keep an on-going file of them as well.

5. Through student conferencing, and through group-sharing time, help students brainstorm their ideas.
6. Help them explore their personal interests.
7. . . . their sources of ideas for writing, so that they can become aware of them.
8. Encourage students to add to their “Topics I Can Write About” list on an on-going basis.
9. . . . to turn to their notebook (journal) for autobiographical topics they have addressed, or begun to address, through free-writing and other assignments.
10. . . . to explore childhood reminiscences.
11. . . . to use the “Can You Become Invisible” exercise as a source of ideas.
12. . . . to use topics addressed by stories read in class.

III. *The Missing Piece, and The Missing Piece Meets the Big O are read this week* . Both are books by Shel Silverstein. They are stories intended for adults as well as children. Provide students with a brief profile of Silverstein. (The back cover of The Giving Tree is a photograph of the author.)

The Missing Piece was published first, in 1976 . It is a simply and touchingly written fable about relationships, which “gently probes the nature of quest and fulfillment.” (From inside cover.) The second book followed in 1981. It speaks of relationships as well, exploring the desire to belong, and probing self-reliance. Because of their nature, they should be read in that order. Each averages a sentence per page, and should take nearly fifteen minutes to read. Group discussion will take longer but can begin the same day. (Remind students that written responses should take the form of notes,)

IV. Group Discussion

V. Follow-Up Writing

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR The Missing Piece

1. What is your interpretation of this book?
2. Through whose eyes do we see the story evolve?
3. What is the main conflict?
4. The book opens with the following: “It was a piece. And it was not happy.” Yet, the main character in this book, while in search of its missing piece, does appear to be happy. What circumstances in the beginning of the book reveal this to us?
5. What, in preparation for the end of the story, do you think Silverstein is trying to point to by presenting this contradiction?
6. What set of events in the story portray the loneliness of the main character?
7. What does the sequence of encounters with different missing pieces reveal to us about the main character?
8. In what way are these encounters similar to encounters between friends or lovers? Can you point to one of the encounters, and tell us of a similar situation among people?

9. How does the story portray the obstacles the main character faces after these encounters? How would you relate these obstacles to real life situations?
10. When the main character meets " . . . another piece that seemed to be just right," they exchange dialogue. What does the main character's dialogue reveal to us about the effect of his past experiences with other "relationships"?
11. How does Silverstein make you feel when, after the main character is "complete", it begins to roll again? What kind of realization does the main character come to?
12. What does the song which follows that scene reveal to us about the main character's state of mind?
13. What could be the reason for the main character to let go of its perfect piece right after finding it? What kind of realization does the main character come to?
14. What kind of things does the ending of this story force you to think about?
15. What was this book's underlying message about relationships?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR The Missing Piece Meets the Big O

1. What is your interpretation of this book?
2. What is this story's point of view?
3. What is the main conflict?
4. At the beginning of the story, in what way are the encounters of the Missing Piece with other characters similar to those between friends or lovers? Relate a real life situation that corresponds with one of the encounters in the story.
5. In the event that follows, how does the writer reveal to us true characteristics of people in search of other people?
6. What message does the writer convey about changing ourselves to attract other people?
7. In what way is the problem that faces the Missing Piece, after finding its perfect companion, similar to that of a relationship?
8. Describe a situation that is similar to the one that takes place between the Missing Piece and The Big O when they first meet.
9. What implication does The Big O's suggestion to the Missing Piece about rolling on its own, have about relationships?
10. In what way does the language used to describe the attempts of the Missing Piece to roll on its own, contribute to that action?
11. What do you suppose the Missing Piece will do after beginning to roll on its own?
12. What is this story's underlying message about relationships?

Follow-Up Writing

Students can write a brief composition about their first boyfriend or girlfriend with focus on a disillusion, however small, that took place between them and which affected the way in which they related to the opposite sex in following relationships; or they can choose a directed-topic freewriting from below: 1. Tell of the funniest, or one of the most silly things you ever pretended to be in order to meet or date someone in whom you had a special interest. Can you rely on descriptive details to show us just how disillusioning it was?

2. Think of a time when you thought you had discovered the girl or guy of your dreams. Describe a particular *incident* that revealed to you were wrong. Can you rely on dialogue to show us just how disillusioning it was?
3. Think of the people you've dated. Can you remember dating someone who was very much the opposite of you? What was the final conflict that prompted the breakup? Can you, through dialogue, show us an argument that reveals this conflict?
4. Choose a scene or situation from one of Silverstein's books. [10] Think of two people between whom you think this situation or scene can take place. Describe it taking place between your own characters, with your own details. Allow the situation to reveal, in some way, your characters to the reader.

WEEK FIVE

NOTE: There should be no core writing this week. I. Explain that stories need to be planned in advance, that there are certain decisions we must make before writing a story through. That the way an author makes an ending satisfying to the reader is that he "prepares for the End from the beginning." [10]

Explain that most writers modify their plans as they write, because a story must also evolve and allow the writer to explore a wide range of possibilities. Stress that in planning, but more importantly, in writing a story through, students allow their impulses to guide them. One can give them the confidence they need to do this by providing step-by-step support and guidance, and by encouraging them individually.

Point out that a story has a beginning, a middle (the body), and an end.

II. Students brainstorm their ideas for a short story. Have them try clustering, listing, or a method of their own. For students who are less motivated, one can bring in a tape recorder and have them brainstorm verbally with the teacher. Freewriting, with the purpose of brainstorming, is not recommended yet. Students tend to "spill out," rather than put in perspective their ideas, and then become discouraged from developing them.

Use brainstorming to help students:

(a) . . . decide how well they know, and what they need to know in order to write convincingly

about their characters. Point out that writers don't write about characters who are completely "made up." Explain that a character may often have half the physical characteristics of one person, half of another's, and a combination of personality traits. Stress that characters "make" a story, that "life for human beings is our universal subject . . . " [11] T.D. Allen recommends that:

It is a good idea for a beginning writer to have an actual picture of his n¥in character before him. If he can draw, fine; or, he may want to use the appearance of a person in a magazine picture. Perhaps he will paste it on a page on which he lists other characteristics that he has fitted together to round out a real character. [12]

(b) . . . decide what kind of action they will use to reveal to the reader the kind of person the main character is. Assist them

(c) . . . decide on a main conflict that will make the reader care about the story and the characters.

(d) . . . decide where the story takes place. Help students explore settings that contribute to the main conflict of their story,

(e) . . . decide, for the body of the story, what kind of attempts their main characters will make to solve the main conflict.

(f) . . . decide how the main conflict will be resolved; which of the main character's attempts to solve the conflict will result in the solution. III. Students can begin to write the beginning and body of their short story after they have finished planning. The entire time allotted for core writing this week will be invested in this project. Make sure students are allowed enough time to develop their ideas, and that individual progress has been accommodated.

Assign a length that is both comfortable and flexible. It may be more useful to have students write their first short story in the third person point of view. They should have the least possible characters. This project will, also, be more manageable if the story takes place within one day.

Students should be able to write a story that:

takes place within one day;
has employed autobiography as a resource and/or point of departure;
is based partly on personal experience, and partly on fiction prompts reader involvement;
expresses conflict;
uses the five senses in descriptions;
reveals to the reader aspects of the main character's personality;
has produced convincing characters in convincing circumstances;
in the process of writing, has inspired the act of discovery;
and, has enabled the teacher to use students' individual stumbling blocks as a tool for learning about problem-solving, as well as the writing process.

IV. To balance this week's load of writing, students can begin to read "Crysalis," Ray Bradbury's science fiction story in *S is for Space.* (Present a brief profile of the writer. Note that Bradbury began writing early in life, and some of his stories were written and published when he was very young.)

"Chrysalis" is an engaging story about a man who is mistaken for being dead. He is actually undergoing a metamorphosis, which Rockwell and Hartley attempt desperately to unravel. It is well and simply written, vividly descriptive. Students enjoy the suspense and intrigue that build to its end. They should be able to read it in two sittings. This is a perfect model for showing how, by preparing the end of a story from the beginning, we can achieve a satisfying, imaginative, and convincing outcome. A considerable part of the group discussion should involve this, particularly, while students make plans for their short story.

WEEK SIX

I. Students finish reading "Chrysalis." Group discussion follows.

II. They complete the body of their stories and wrap up the end.

III. The evaluation process:

a) *Self-Evaluations* These should be administered as soon as the project is completed, and should serve as a way of helping the student reflect on his experience with the short story. On the average, students respond honestly, and often tap the root of writing problems. If one has offered proper step-by-step guidance, this self-awareness may help enable a student to identify his stumbling blocks and go about problem-solving on his own. b) *Peer Group Evaluations* In the proper atmosphere, these can help the student-writer identify areas that call for revision in his manuscript. Moreover, peer group evaluations can enable everyone in class to exercise objective revising skills that can later be manipulated for their own use. There should be a handout to guide students in making supportive and kind evaluations, as well as a list with questions one can ask of a manuscript. Whether the stories are read aloud by their authors, or passed to the class as handouts, what is important is a block of supportive, group-sharing time that enables students to be resourceful, to work together, and helps writers avoid feelings of hopelessness or defensiveness.

A FINAL NOTE: With regard for everyone concerned, extensive revision of these first short stories is not recommended. One should allow students to indulge in the pleasure of having completed a long writing project. Activities immediately following should reflect this understanding.

In proceeding from this unit, a teacher can begin to incorporate revising and editing skills through the mini-lesson. Perhaps thought can be given to moving on to a light study of poetry (while reinforcing and strengthening revising skills), and then return to the short story to: (a) deepen an understanding of the elements of fiction; (b) include a selection of short stories that calls for more complex analysis; (c) allow students to work with two drafts; and (d) help students to manipulate techniques used by writers.

Appendix 1

SAMPLE CORE WRITING/WEEK ONE

1. *Can You Become Invisible?*— This is an ideal assignment for introducing students to dialogue. It also puts them in a position to observe. This is as well an exercise often used by writers.

Part I: Instruct students to, for homework, visit a public place downtown where they can sit. (Upstairs from the downtown New Haven mall is ideal.) They should bring pad and pen along, and eavesdrop on the people from their adjoining table for ten to fifteen minutes. They should jot down as much of what they hear as possible, and switch tables if the conversation grows dull, or someone leaves. Also, they are to attempt a good look at the people talking. Their notes must not be altered or amended (in any way) before coming to class. If a student is unable to do the assignment, he should, while at the place he chose earlier, relate in writing the experience of his inability to write, or do the assignment .

Part II: Their eavesdropping will form the basis of group discussion. Questions to get them started may be: What did you and did you not enjoy about this assignment? What did you have the most trouble with in completing this assignment? What were the circumstances under which you wrote? The place? What do you remember most about the people on whom you were eavesdropping? What are some things you can speculate on, with regard to these people and the subject they were talking about, from the way in which they spoke (their tone, mood, choice of words, accent)? What's the one thing that comes to mind when you think of this conversation?

Part III; calls for familiarizing students with the format in which dialogue is written. They should review, and adapt their notes to this format, and give their characters a name. Are there any places in the dialogue where the conversation dies and picks up again? Are they essential to the story being told? Could they be left out without hurting the flow of the conversation? Could they be replaced with narrative, or substituted with their own statements in a way in which it is consistent with the rest of the dialogue?

After reviewing dialogues, have students write an introduction; a paragraph which will capture their observations, a brief description of the character's physical characteristics, and the setting where the conversation evolved. Encourage students to blend fact with speculation, to assign a title to their composition. Follow-up by having them read their pieces to each other.

2. *What a Photograph Can Tell* —Open this assignment by pointing out that most things in the world cannot speak as we do, yet the tell us something all the same. Clouds warn us of the coming rain, the eye of the storm of its end, a plant tells us when it needs water, our place in the Milky Way tells us we are very small in a galaxy that is so great. Explain what the French poet, Paul Eluard, once said about poets. "The poet speaks for things that have no voice." [14] Read to them and discuss the poem "Stone" from Charles Simic's book Dismantling the Silence. (Copies of this poem can be found in this unit's packet of supplementary materials.) In it, Simic fantasizes about becoming a stone. He looks at it from the outside, then steps in to consider its inside, and gives it a voice.

Bring in one picture for everyone's use rather than one for each member of the class. The photography section of many local bookstores carries numerous hardbound collections from which to choose. Recommended are collections which include pictures from a wide variety of cities and people. Make sure there is at least one person in the photograph. The picture may be

passed around the room, then placed on a bookstand so that students may get up to look at it as need be, and without having to fight over a turn with the book. Ask them to examine the picture carefully, to attempt to look inside of it the way Simic looked inside his stone, to give it a voice.

Don't pressure students into writing a poem. Leave the assignment open. When students question you about what form of writing this assignment should take, ask them to follow their impulse. They may write a poem, a one-page composition, or a short, short story. Instruct them not to refer to the photograph in their writing. They must skip over introductions like "There's a man in this picture and he is . . . " or "The name I imagined for this woman was Rachel because she . . . " Make yourself available for alternative introductions. Remember, the first line is the hardest to write.

Notes

1. Paul Connolly, "Writing & Thinking," *Teachers & Writers Magazine* (New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1988), Vol. 19, No. 4.
2. *Brenda Ueland, If You Want to Write* !St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1987).
3. Lucy McCormick Calkings, The Art of Teaching Writing (New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), Chapter 11, p. 105.
4. *Jerome Bruner, "The Act of Discovery," Harvard Educational Review: Breakthroughs to Better Teaching (Cambridge, 1967)* , p. 131.
5. *Ibid.,* p. 129.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 131.
7. Copies are available in this unit's packet of supplementary materials.
8. A list of imaginative possibilities for character sketches is provided by Robert J. Leonard and Peter H. de Beer in A Survival Kit for Teachers of Composition (New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1982), p. 104-110.
9. Reid J. Daitzman, Renaissance, (New Haven: World University Press, 1983).
10. T.D. Allen, *Writing to Create Ourselves* (University of Oklahoma Press: Nonnan, 1982), p. 109.
11. *Ibid* ., p. 106.
12. *Ibid* . in exploring actions that will contribute to their story.
13. Refer to B.J. Chute's article "Five-Finger Exercises or What To Do Till the Muse Comes Back," or to Sister Carol Anne O'Marie's "Confessions of an Eavesdropper." (Both in The Writer, January, April 1988.)
14. "Notes on Writing Through Photographs," *Teachers & Writers Magazine,* Vol. 4, 1973, p. 61.

Bibliography for Teachers

Allen, T.D. , *Writing to Create Ourselves: New Approaches for Teachers, Students, and Writers.* Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Publishing Division of the University, 1982, "Book One: Teaching English Upside Down," 103-123. Divided into two sections (one dealing with everything from how to write poetry to the structure of the short story; the other, with experiments on teaching writing), this is an innovative and straightforward book, as indispensable for the teacher, as for the student and the beginning writer.

Altieri, Carol L., "Approaches to Writing," *The Process of Writing* , Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, IV, (Spring-Sumner, 1986), 4-12. A curriculum unit that portrays a clear and concise account of the listing and clustering techniques, together with sample lesson plans.

Bruner, Jerome S., "The Act of Discovery," *Harvard Educational Review: Breakthroughs to Better Teaching* , n.v., (1967), 124-135. A challenging hypothesis, dealing with "the effects for children of active participation in the learning process." (Harvard Educational Review.) Must-reading for teachers who share an interest in the educational environment.

Chute, B,J., "Five-Finger Exercises, or What To Do Till the Muse Comes Back," *The Writer* , n.v., (January, 1988), 14-17. This author's last article before her unfortunate death provides a thorough account of one of writers' most indispensable thinking exercises. It is guaranteed to make you want to try it.

Connolly Paul, "Writing & Thinking," *Teachers & Writers Magazine,* XIX: 4, (March-April, 1988). An issue devoted entirely to techniques developed in Bard College's Language & Thinking Workshop (1981) by the Institute for Writing and Thinking. An excellent issue filled with ideas, insight, and challenge.

Daitzman, Reid J., *Renaissance.* New Haven: World University Press, 1983. An innovative book of poems whose presentation is akin to the art of photography, Its author is a practicing clinical psychologist who has written a number of books on creativity, science fiction, behavioral psychology, and has invented strategy board games as well as educational software.

de Beer, Peter H. and Robert J. Leonard, *A Survival Kit for Teachers of Composition* , New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1982, 104-110. A practical guide filled with innovative ideas for teaching writing. Of particular relevance to this unit is the session on character sketches. It abounds with creative reinforcement activities and illustrations of this "mode".

McCormick-Calkins, Lucy, The Art of Teaching Writing. New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1986, XI, 105. A revolutionary, inspiring, and passionate book about everything from haw to "Create Classroom Settings Which Allow Us to Listen" and "How Children Change as Writers," to "High Teacher Input" and "Reading-Writing Connections." It is an indispensable, nuts and bolts resource book for the teacher who partakes in the undying challenge of teaching writing.

O'Marie, Sister Carol Anne, "Confessions of an Eavesdropper," *The Writer,* n.v., (April, 1988), 9-12. With a different twist, this is a portrayal of the same exercise put forth by B.J. Chute in "Five-Finger Exercises."

Padgett, Ron, ed. , *The Teachers & Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms.* New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1987. Many of the forms presented here can be used as warm-up assignments, from the classic to the not-so-well-known (ghazal, calligram, lune, senryu, macaroni verse . . .). Cross-referenced, and organized in alphabetical order by form, each section provides a historical background, together with formula and samples taken from well-known poetry ,

Ueland, Brenda, *If You Want to Write.* Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1987. An insightful, compassionate, and simple book about an inspiring author's experience with writing as well as with the challenges of teaching writing. A smorgasbord of art, philosophy, and religion intertwined with an appreciation of the young-writer's struggle.

Recommended Journals

The Writer, published monthly by The Writer, Inc., 120 Boylston Street, Boston, MA, 022116.

Teachers & Writers Magazine, published bi-monthly by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY, 10003.

Reading List for Students

Bradbury, Ray, " *Chrysalis," S is for Space.* New York: Bantam Books, 1966. A wonderful and engaging fantasy about a man who is mistaken for being dead, but is actually undergoing a metamorphosis, Students enjoy the suspense and intrigue that build to its end. It is a marvelous example of vivid, and sound description. A good tool for exploring setting, conflict, characterization, point of view, and writers' intentions.

Romtvedt, David, "Blind," "Custom," "Innovative Assignment," and "Kept After School," *Free and Compulsory For All.* Washington: Graywolf Press, 1984. These short stories tell of difficult, comical, and absurd situations faced by teachers and students. They are not elaborate, yet are full of meaning and emotion. A good tool for introducing point of view, conflict, and exploring writers' intentions.

Silverstein, Shel, *The Missing Piece* . New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1976. A children's book bound to be enjoyed by the young adult. It is a simply and touchingly written fable about relationships, which "gently probes the nature of quest and fulfillment," (Inside Cover.) Ideal for exploring writers' intentions, internal and external conflict, as well as characterization.

Silverstein, Shel, *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O.* Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1981. Also a children's book. It speaks of relationships as well, exploring the desire to belong and reaching deep within the heart to probe self-reliance. Ideal for exploring writers' intentions, internal and external conflict, as well as characterization,.