



Recognizing Voice and Finding Your Own Voice in Writing About the City

Curriculum Unit 92.03.07

by Laura Spierri

The exercises presented in this unit are aimed at enabling students to recognize voice in the materials that they read and to find and choose appropriate voices for their writing. Most of the lessons are suggested for use with students from grade 5 through high school. The teacher should decide which of the suggested reading materials are appropriate at each level.

Voice lets the reader immediately identify what he or she will need to do to get anything out of what is to be read. We as teachers know by the title or by that first sentence whether we can sit back in an easy chair or whether we will have to pore over a piece of writing with a note pad and pen. Our children don't have that skill. The ability to recognize voice will enable students to know what they have to do in reading various materials and to understand the radically different approaches required.

If children are able to choose a voice when they write they will be better able to write about themselves and their world in a meaningful and expressive way. As will be explained, voice includes the style of writing and the audience with whom the writer means to communicate.

While even the poorest students know when they are about to be told a story by the tone and voice of the piece (they all perk up at "Once upon a time," and if it's not overdone, "My children at home . . .") they too quickly give up when they believe that the writing isn't going to be fun (personal, anecdotal, or a story). They feel frustrated or stupid because they haven't been taught that different types of materials do require different approaches and different amounts of effort to understand.

The student that knows what different written works will require of him or her will be able to experience less frustration because he/she will be able to 1) allot the needed time, 2) select the correct working environment and 3) have the correct supplies such as pencils, paper, highlighters, dictionary, and possibly a textbook or other book for cross references. We taught ourselves these tricks probably as late as in college. But the task can be usefully learned from an early age.

No matter how active reading is, creating original responses or pieces is more so. And since we learn best from what we do or are active participants in, each of the lessons below will have an active component of discussing issues, writing things from lists to essays, and acting.

The topics will all be inspired by and based on the single theme of "the city". With each assignment

students will be required to use an assigned voice that is appropriate to the specific issue or theme that is to be written about. The theme is the city because our students live in New Haven and are fascinated by and fearful of it. It is one of those few subjects that keep them interested and talking. It is in many ways the center of their lives. The vehicle to get through the readings and the writing assignments is to focus on the voice so that students can better understand the intentions of writers and choose what they themselves want to say in their own writings.

Three Components of Voice: Person, Tone and Audience

In this paper voice will be defined as a function of three things: the person in which the piece is written, the tone, and the audience the piece is meant for. In first person writing, either the writer's impressions or the writer him/herself is the subject of the writing. Essays in the second (you) person tend to be didactic, that is they teach people or show them "how to," or imperative or hortatory, that is they exhort the audience or command them to do something. Works written in the third person ("one", "he", "she" or I include here the third person plural, "they") are about a subject other than either the writer or the writer's point of view. The first person plural (technically the fourth person) is used most in speech writing and works to express community or union with the reader or audience. With this as an introductory definition of "person", students can be taught to recognize types of writing and how to choose the appropriate voice when they themselves write. Lessons that illustrate this point will be the focus of this paper.

Voice also entails what some who write about language and writing call "tone". The author's tone is a reflection of the author's personality, mood, attitude toward his/her subject, the author's intention or point of writing (whether to amuse, inform, persuade, etc.) and of the author's intended audience, among other things. Tone is conveyed mainly through 1) the writer's vocabulary (from colloquial to technical) and through 2) sentence length. For each piece of literature read or written in class, tone should be discussed and, in writing, should be appropriate to the writer's intention and his/her intended audience, or those addressed by the writing.

The First Person Singular Versus the Other Persons

The personal voice, the personal I or the first person singular is usually used in autobiographies, informal descriptive essays, editorials and in rhetorical writing such as speeches, introductions to books and in less formal writing of a didactic nature. In other words, it is used a lot. The first person is such an engaging voice that it is also used in a good percentage of fictional writing as the fictional narrator relates his or her own experiences so that the tale can be told. The directness of the personal I makes it attractive to readers. Students are usually eager to read someone's story told in this person because 1) there is a good chance that the subject will be real and "human" and therefore 2) easier to understand than technical material with its technical vocabulary and 3) readers enjoy "meeting" the writer when his/her personality or fictional narrator's personality comes through the voice of this person. The personal I is anecdotal and enables students to readily relate to the speaker or writer.

The second person usually has a limited audience because it is used to teach, show the way or lead through

directions or a new skill. People who want to be taught something, who in some cases, want to experience the didactic wisdom of a secular or religious leader (sermons), or want to learn a new skill (how-to) will readily accept the “you” voice and its accompanying tone.

It is with the third person singular or plural that most students (in class and of life) have the most difficulty. This person is impersonal. It is usually used to teach concepts or material rather than to share experiences and opinions, as the first person does, or to teach a skill or a moral position, as the second person does. It is therefore by definition going to be harder to understand and will therefore require more effort (=work!).

For the student, or anyone, to use this voice, he will have to be ready to some degree set him/herself up as someone worth listening to or reading and as someone with worthwhile information. For these reasons students, and possibly all types of writers, are either unable or unwilling to write in the third person (thus, the reason this piece tends to change from third to second to first and back again).

The first person plural is the we voice. This is the voice of the writer or speaker who is with one word uniting him/herself with the audience. Politicians, ministers, union leaders, teachers and those in the same club or group tend to use this voice to dramatic and expressive effect. (by way of contrast, the doctor who greets his patient with “And how are we today?” can count on being resented because the “we” is clearly misplaced in this situation). Rodney King’s speech after the Los Angeles revolt of early May, 1992 will be discussed below as an example of use of this voice at its best.

The Audience

In many cases, knowing who the writer is writing for or to helps in the writing process. Is this a story for children or a report for an employer? The students’ knowledge of their readers will in such cases determine the best voice, or how the words are said, just as the audience will determine what is said. If the students can keep their audience, or readers, in mind they will be able to “speak” their words with greater intensity.

Understanding Voice: Reading Pieces on Harlem

The following exercise should be the first in this curriculum unit because it clarifies what is meant by voice and how the use of different voices determines not only how things are written but what is written as well. I am borrowing an idea from a page of Russell Baker’s book, “Poor Russell’s Almanac.” The nursery rhyme, “Little Miss Muffet” in which he describes the rhyme through the ersatz voices of a sociologist, a militarist, a book reviewer, and others and finally a child. (The piece itself is worth sharing with your students if you do no other part of this curriculum unit. See the bibliography for the complete reference). In this vein, descriptions of Harlem by essayists, Harlem Renaissance writers, historians, a sociologist, a poet and an historian of city design follow. You can put a piece of paper over the authors’ names and descriptions before you make copies for the students so that you can discuss these questions: 1) Who wrote each of the descriptions? 2) Who is the intended audience? 3) What’s the author’s purpose?

Afro-American author, Claude McKay, in his 1928 story, “Harlem Shadows”:The noise of Harlem, the sugared laughter. The honey-talk on its streets, and all night long, ragtime and blues playing somewhere, . . . singing

somewhere, dancing somewhere! Oh! the contagious fever of Harlem.

Afro-American historian, Joseph McLaren: Regarding Afro-American literature, the spirit of the 1920s favored artistic expression by Afro-Americans; the Harlem Renaissance was proof of the craving for such expression. A number of scholars have attributed this growing interest in Afro-American literature to the hedonistic spirit of the 1920s and a resurgence of “primitivistic” ideas. Although these conditions were certainly present—with the speakeasy, bootleg gin, and organized crime as a backdrop—the growth of urbanization and the fact that many Afro-Americans had access to higher education allowed room for artistic talent and the creation of forums for its expression. In short, Harlem was the mecca of black entertainment in the 1920s and there is a connection between its cultural milieu and the emergence of literary artists such as Langston Hughes.

A white Southerner, Dan Lacy, documenting white racism: The black ghetto of the Northern cities provided for the first time an environment in which black leadership could rise and be sustained without depending on white acceptance. A Chicago Defender or New York Amsterdam News could assert black rights vigorously and attack white authority without risking its existence. A black lawyer could be outspoken without destroying his little role before the courts. Sustained only by his own congregation, a black minister could afford to be militant. The accumulation in one place of so many Negroes with more than ordinary drive and curiosity and with more education than was possible in the South made possible a genuine literary flourishing in Harlem. Black writers and musicians became organs of black self-awareness.

The Afro-American Harlem Renaissance author, Rudolph Fisher: The truth about Fifth Avenue has only half been told, that it harbors an aristocracy of residence already yielding to an aristocracy of commerce. Has any New Yorker confessed to the rest—that when aristocratic Fifth Avenue crosses One Hundred Tenth street, leaving Central Park behind, it leaves its aristocracy behind as well? Here are bargain-stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech. Fallen from splendor and doubtless ashamed, the Avenue burrows into the ground—plunges beneath a park which hides it from One Hundred Sixteenth to One Hundred Twenty-fifth Street. Here it emerges moving uncertainly northward a few more blocks; and now—irony of ironies—finds itself in Negro Harlem.

You can see the Avenue change expression—blankness, horror, conviction., You can almost see it wag its head in self-commiseration. Not just because this is Harlem—these are proud streets in Harlem: Seventh Avenue of a Sunday afternoon, Strivers’ Row, and The Hill. Fifth Avenue’s shame lies in having missed these so-called dicky (as defined by the author, “swell”) sections, in having poked its head out into the dark kingdom’s backwoods. A city jungle this, if ever there was one, peopled largely by untamed creatures that live and die for the moment only. Accordingly, here strides melodrama, naked and unashamed.

Afro-American poet, Claude McKay, 1922

Harlem Shadows

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire’s call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street! . . .
Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,

Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

Afro-American author and essayist, James Baldwin: Harlem, physically at least, has changed very little in my parents' lifetime or in mine. Now as then the buildings are old and in desperate need of repair, the streets are crowded and dirty, there are too many human beings per square block. Rents are 10 to 58 percent higher than anywhere else in the city; food, expensive everywhere, is more expensive here and of inferior quality; and now that the war is over and money is dwindling, clothes are carefully shopped for and seldom bought. Negroes, traditionally the last to be hired and the first to be fired, are finding jobs harder to get, and, while prices are rising implacably, wages are going down. All over Harlem now there is felt the same bitter expectancy with which, in my childhood, we awaited winter: it is coming and it will be hard; there is nothing anyone can do about it. . .

An architectural (city design) historian, William Whyte: Harlem might one day be an example (of an area that can be "rehabilitated" and "house most of the people who were on the site earlier"). It has already suffered disinvestment and displacement. It is, in fact underpopulated, having lost almost a third of its population since 1970. Much of the tenement housing is burnt out. But Harlem has great advantages. It is well served with mass transit; it has broad, tree-lined avenues and excellent access to parks. There are many cleared sites for new housing; there is a fine stock of brownstones, some blocks of which, such as Striver's Row, have been kept in excellent shape.

Hopefully these Harlem descriptions help clarify voice as applied to a city theme, but if you prefer, use the Russell Baker piece on Little Miss Muffet.

Anything Written Is a Great Beginning

I want to emphasize that anything written is a great beginning. In fact, this “anything written” might be, in some cases or for some students, a great ending as well. A simple list of words expresses the writer’s personality, and when read carefully, the writer’s voice can be heard.

Because writing is difficult for or completely new to many students, it is a good idea to follow the developmental writing model of starting with single words, then moving to phrases, sentences, paragraphs, essays, and papers. Some students will never get beyond one level, while a few will insist on skipping levels and writing long papers. The way to encourage writing is to accept anything the student can create. A list of isolated but related words is a creation since the student chooses the words. With a little bit of guidance and some exposure to poetry those students who can write, or speak as you record, little more than words and phrases may be able to create their own tone poems.

Finding Materials in the Desired Voice and About the City

As I began to look for specific source materials for this curriculum unit, I realized that the possibilities are too limitless for me to do much more than suggest a few of my favorite materials for each of the following assignments. So I concluded that it would be more helpful to remind my fellow teachers of some excellent sources for short written pieces on the city (or on any topic).

1) Books that illustrate good writing and critical thinking skills are a great source for short pieces. In every book of this type that I looked at there were essays ranging in length from a few paragraphs to several pages in all of the voices and dealing with city issues and topics. Since so many writers are city people and writers tend to deal with what they know or like best, innumerable pieces of all kinds will be useful for you to illustrate the points about voice and city writing. The following books are a few that will enable me to illustrate this point:

Gerald Levin’s “Short Essays: Model for Composition” includes over fifty essays and excerpts and an excellent “Thematic Table of Contents” including “roots,” “growing up,” “people”, “sports,” “values” and “issues and controversies.” Among these topics are several city related themes including Jim Brown’s “Growing Up On Long Island,” and Lewis Yablonsky’s “The Violent Gang” and over ten more works that could help you illustrate the suggested curriculum ideas below.

Similarly useful collections by Berke, Gere, Mayfield, and McCuen are included in the bibliography of this unit.

2) Newspapers, most importantly, and magazines are invaluable sources because they have pieces in each of the three basic voices on a daily basis and the most common theme is the city.

Each section of the newspaper offers rich stores of all kinds of materials. The city or local news sections of both the “New York Times,” “Advocate,” “New Times” and the “New Haven Register” have both current crises and city developments. All of these papers have interviews with local dogooders and heroes nearly on a daily basis. These employ the third person and most often in the quoted lines, the first person. The foods, cooking and living sections have innumerable second person pieces in those how-to types of articles. Speeches of famous people

are regularly printed in their entirety in the “Times,” the best source of the we or first person plural voice.

3) Anthologies of works by types of writers including all the ethnic groups, women and other “minorities” are excellent sources. Several such examples will be referred to below and are included in the bibliography.

4) Books by writers that you know to be city people are loaded with appropriate examples of all kinds of city writing and in different voices. For example James Baldwin, writes about numerous cities and cities within cities in all his works, as does Chaim Potok, Naipaul, Toni Morrison, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, to name a few (and by way of contrast, how about anti-city writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson).

Now, to some more concrete lesson ideas . . .

Writing a Letter Of Complaint (translation: A Letter Seeking Redress)

What voice would be most effective in writing a complaint to the mayor, or another city official, a teacher, a principal, or a manufacturer? The students’ first reaction might be that the personal voice should be used. Have the class suggest some “beefs” against any of the above, or for younger children, against parents. Topics of the following type can be suggested:

To Mayor Daniels: We need more parks/police/protection/schools

To the school superintendent: We need more realistic curricula/ AfroAmerican male teachers/community involvement in schools

A topic the students suggest as a “joke,” such as “unload the cardboard pizza for school lunches,” “give us more vacations, parties, dances,” “pay us for doing homework,” etc. would supply great bases for your efforts to make them form rational and convincing arguments rather than tirades.

Have the class compose a letter in the first person and you might find that it reads as a personal attack or a list of gripes. Go with this for a while, but lead the children into a discussion about how they would react if they were to receive this letter. Once they come to the realization that they have written fighting words they will be ready to rework it together to change the tone of the letter. To do this they should probably once again begin the letter with the personal voice to relate their personal experiences with the issue, but to move to the third person, the more objective voice, to enumerate the difficulties of the status quo. Finally, but probably most important, they should be led to make suggestions for the implementation of these ideas. By writing this

group letter the class will come to understand, with your help and explanation, that words in the third person can be more convincing because they are removed from accusatory “I’s” and “you’s” as the issues themselves receive the class’ attention.

A Journal Of City Themes

Exposure to different moods as expressed in essays should enable students to learn how to express their own moods or experiences in writing. An excellent vehicle for this type of personal writing is a journal. But since so many students have been writing journals as class assignments, the new theme of “My City Journal” might enable students to see themselves in a broader context and to move toward new forms of writing such as description writing, instruction, story-telling as they relate friends’ experiences, and preparations for developing debates, to name a few. This journal of the city should be an on-going writing assignment. The students should be encouraged to do their journals as nightly homework. For those students who prefer to write in their journal in lists only, or phrases only, you should happily accept this.

The journal entries for the week should be encouraged to stick to the week’s chosen (assigned or agreed upon) theme. I suggest some themes here but your students will be able to provide more timely and specific ones:

- life on my street
- the places where I hang out things I do with my friends
- places I go with my friends, family, alone
- I wish I had more to do in my free time
- the places I avoid
- the important people in my community, church, school, block, building
- when there’s nothing to eat
- dealing with the bureaucracy

Each of these topics as dealt with in a journal would get the students writing about things that concern them, and at the same time, they would be writing about community issues that they will see concern their classmates as well.

By developing lists of themes that use the present subjunctive “I would . . .” the students could learn about how their classmates experience the situations that are similar to or in some cases quite different from theirs.

And this would be an excellent first step toward all types of writing that can make the students organize their ideas, develop their skills in more objective writing and feel empowered by writing for a purpose beyond venting or recording.

By using any of the themes as the center of an evening's journal entry (or you might choose to have the students write journal entries in class) students will be better able to incorporate their own experiences and feelings into what in another class would be a torturous essay. The goal is to get the students writing about ideas and experiences as a whole so that they can better express both their personal experiences and feelings, but possibly more importantly, to realize that a lot of what they feel and do is determined by where they live and what opportunities are open to them.

When I assigned a nightly journal in seventh and eighth grade language classes I met with two basic complaints: 1) the students did not want to share things that they felt were too personal or 2) the students felt that their lives were boring. The use of city themes that affect the students can solve both problems since the students can be directed to places, people and events outside themselves. Students should be helped to realize that many of the moves and decisions that they make are related to complicated community situations and pressures. Go through concrete examples with them: Rolaina watches tv every afternoon. Why? Her mom won't let her go out. Why? The streets are too dangerous. So in the journal the student is to discuss his feelings about the limitations that are put on him by his guardian because of the facts of city life.

There are many books that are written in a journal-like format. In some books, such as James Baldwin's "No Name In the Street" and James Comer's first chapter of "Beyond Black and White," the authors tell about incidents that they personally experienced but which they understood to be part of the racism of the cities in which they were living in England and in the United States, respectively. Alfred Kazin's "A Walker in the City" contains long descriptive chapters that he understands to be both autobiographical essays and sociological studies of Jewish life in early twentieth century Brooklyn.

A wonderful autobiography that tells of slum survival is by Carolina Maria De Jesus who wrote her life while struggling to raise her three children in a Brazilian slum. She describes the incidents of her life in a clear, factual narrative that is interspersed with her natural philosophical impressions, for example, "May 10 1958 . . . Brazil needs to be led by a person who has known hunger. Hunger is also a teacher. . . Who has gone hungry knows how to think of the future and of the children. . ." This is the diary of poverty and parts can be read by children as young as fifth grade and up. It is a must for all readers of the city and for all writers of journals.

Excerpts from either "The Diary of Anne Frank," or from the autobiographical fiction by Maya Angelou, "I know why the caged bird sings," would also provide high interest materials for students who we are encouraging to write. The one that we all know, and for good reason, is Anne Frank's diary. This is a great inspirational book for students who are as young as eleven. If you choose carefully, there are numerous passages that are worth reading to a class of students who may themselves have poor reading skills. The readings themselves will provide superb material for discussions or all kinds of city issues.

Freewriting As Legitimate End Piece

Students tend to see written language as completely separate from speech. They see writing as an impossible task. In order to break down this way of thinking they should be encouraged to freewrite, or to write the first things that come into their heads. Assure students that just doing the assignment or mere quantity is everything and that spelling, grammar and usage will in no way be considered in the evaluation of their written pieces. Don't even look at their works; merely glance at the page to make sure it is the appropriate assignment. The ideal scenario is to have the students read the freewritten essays to a group of their peers, peers they choose, so that they feel free to express themselves openly and honestly.

When the verdict of not guilty came down for the four Los Angeles police officers who had beaten the Afro-American motorist, Rodney King, riots or revolts broke out all over downtown Los Angeles, April 30, 1992. The statement made by Rodney King at the end of the first week of the revolt is one of the most powerful ones I have ever heard. It was clearly not a prepared speech and is therefore an excellent example of freewriting. Its power lies in the direct and heart felt truth of the plea. Because King was talking to the people that he felt connected to, he spoke in the first person plural to make his plea:

People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along? Can we stop making it, making it horrible for the older people and the kids? And I mean, we've got enough smog here in Los Angeles, let alone to deal with the setting these fires and things. It's just not right. It's not right. It's not, it's not going to change anything. We'll, we'll get our justice. They won the battle, but they haven't won the war. We'll have our day in court, and that's all we want. And just, I love, I'm neutral, I love every, I love people of color. I'm not like they're picking me out to be. We've got to quit. We've got to quit. You know, after all, I mean, I can understand the first upset for the two hours after the verdict, but to go on like this, to see the security guard shot on the ground, it's not right. It's just not right. Because those people can never go home to their families again. Please, we can get along here. We all can get along. I mean, we're all stuck here for a while. Let's try to work it out. Let's try to beat it. Let's try and work it out.

Although this speech was not written down beforehand, it is a beautiful expression of how natural speech can retain its life in written form. What might be an effective writing method for many students is to have them record their spoken words. Have them talk into a recorder or record their discussions or what they say in class. These are forms of freewriting. The goal is to have them create, that is, to get their thoughts going and to communicate. If they can be aided by speaking their thoughts and by writing all their ideas and feelings they will be well on their way to writing more often and with greater ease.

The Arts as Stimuli for Writing and for More Art

As part of their spring performance of June 3, 1992, the dance students of New Haven's ECA (Educational Center for the Arts) danced down Audubon Street to music and to a student's reciting Rodney King's words. There were tears in the eyes of the audience. Speeches such as this one are excellent for oratorical exercises. Students who do little else might shine as they study and or memorize a speech or a poem that they love either in front of an audience or on tape.

When works of literature are so powerful, they lend themselves to other creative endeavors. Students should be led to find or write music to these words, choreograph dances to them, or illustrate them in drawing,

painting or photography. The stimulus in this case is the speech. You can also have the students read newspaper and magazine articles about what happened in Los Angeles this year. Have them read materials about other city uprisings (Watts; Democratic Convention in Chicago; Miami, 1990; Sharpesville, South Africa; etc.). Speak to your resident historian for ideas) and have them compare the causes and discuss the ramifications. The articles are written in the third person. Have them try this person and also try exercises with the first person. Let them decide which they find most effective. Some more suggestions follow:

Show the tape of the Rodney King beating, or to footage of the Los Angeles uprisings. Set them to music; write rap to them.

Show photographs of the riots, Watts, Los Angeles. Have students read speeches as a student shows the still shots as slides. Students write their own commentaries.

Show photos of children of New Haven from the local newspapers, from national magazines. Have students write poems, or lists of words, or essays about them. Have the students (or you do it first) set the photos to music, dance, mime.

Use a camera to take photographs of the city. Have the students try the same. While doing so have your students get people's permission to videotape them at play and at work so that they can return with a video camera (there are a few at Gateway) and have your students video scenes in the community, buildings, neighbors, people at work.

Show movies about the city. For eighth graders and above, I recommend "Hester Street" (Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side), Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing" (inner city racism), "Boys n the Hood" (growing up in the violence of Los Angeles), "E1 Norte" (a pair of siblings suffer as illegal aliens in California), "City of Joy" (a pocket of hope in Calcutta) and "Cinema Paradiso" (a cinematographer's memory of growing up with films and his adult friend). Discussions about these movies will be heated and lengthy. Of course, be sure you see them first. The first four are highly controversial and different degrees of depressing.

Show tapes of talk shows that deal with issues that interest you and the students such as Oprah Winfrey shows after the Los Angeles uprisings, and other city based shows.

Show slides of reproductions of city art work such as the collages of Romare Bearden and paintings by other Afro-American artists of the city, Jacob Lawrence, William Johnson and Haden Palmer. Two sources for materials on city artists are the Museum of Harlem (1-212-864-4500) and E1 Museo del Barreo (1-212-831-7272). Both will send you collection listings and their museum stores will send book catalogues. Don't forget to show city murals and graffiti in New Haven itself.

City Words That You Assign

Using an assigned list of city-related vocabulary words might be the thing to get students writing. The list can be words taken from a story about the city or the students can provide the vocabulary about their city themselves as a group. The challenge is that everyone must use the same list and use all or nearly all of the words but may use only one of the required words in each sentence. I gave a candy for every required word used in one seventh grade class and the children wrote so much they went through a five pound bag. Most of the children got so involved that they just kept writing even after the words were used up. Some didn't even mind letting their peers know that they liked doing the writing part once they got into the assignment.

This assignment can be used in numerous variations. The list of words can be only nouns one time, only adjectives another. Another time, the words can be taken from a specific story or essay about the city and the challenge can be to write a story that fits well with the mood of the words.

Along these lines, a class can be shown a photograph of a city scene (a building a park, a parade, etc.) and asked to provide words that the picture suggests to them. The formation of a vocabulary list is the valuable transitional tool that enable students to translate the visual to the written. The times that I used a visual stimulus but then forgot to share ideas about it through class discussion and the writing of a group vocabulary list, I found that the students were not able to produce much. The shared vocabulary after the group discussion is essential for children in elementary and middle schools. The list can be divided into different types of words such as factual words versus words that express opinions and reactions.

Descriptive Writing from Group Vocabulary Lists

The method of group discussion to make a vocabulary list for writing can be used in the creation of all kinds of writing assignments as listed and then discussed below:

- description of a small object that the child thinks of as a city thing
 - a hat to a uniform
 - a gun (they all come up with this one)
 - sneakers
 - a bench
 - a Walkman
 - a hooded sweater
- description of a larger object
 - a dump truck
 - a tree on the Green
 - a stop sign
 - a traffic light
- description of a building
 - (one time the interior only, another the exterior only)
 - your school
 - your church

the courthouse
your building or house
-description of a city employee
a policeman
a street person
a businessman
a teacher
-a city event a parade
people hanging on the street
a group of school children people waiting on line
leaving a theater
on a bus
on the Green
joggers

The thing that must be done in all of the above assignments is to make close observations before any form of writing is done, but to constantly refer to the thing described in all stages of the writing. Some students might choose to treat this as a stream of consciousness or freewriting assignment written at the site of the object, person, scene or event. The above list is basically in order of difficulty with the easier thing to observe or experience first. Start small with all students, and through a series of assignments work up to the bigger subjects.

For the first descriptive assignment a single object should be brought in for careful examination. For a group of your students a photograph of the object may be sufficient. The object should be defined with the following characteristics

- size—relative to other things
- shape -overall shape
- shape of its parts relative position of its part
- color(s)
- materials texture(s), temperature—investigated by touch
- identifying marks

Basic vocabulary for these areas must be taught through even eighth grade level. For example, a can of spray paint used to make that mural on a city building:

- size: about the size of a quart of milk
- shape: cylindrical (All the solid geometric shapes should be listed and illustrated) with a small cone on its top and a concave recession on its bottom a tiny cylinder on the top of the cone that has one hole along the side texture: smooth and shiny, painted metal sides, etc.

For a few days I brought in a box of objects in a brown paper bag. One student would take the hidden object outside to examine it and would then return to describe her mystery object to the class while a second student was to draw the object on the board based solely on the first student's description. Again, size and basic shape must come first. The student who did the describing will modify and add details until the "illustrator" can draw the thing. The students (fifth through eighth) found this activity challenging and fun.

This past year I had the students describe a typical city object as a homework assignment. They agreed to only when I agreed to try to guess their mystery object from their descriptions. Because in most of the pieces an essential detail (e.g. It's bigger than a car) was regularly left out, I was guessing for hours. Next time I'll have them switch papers, ask each other for the missing clues and thereby edit each other's works, learn to be more specific (to assume nothing) and to also have some fun playing this guessing game.

Each of the books included in this paper's bibliography has at least one piece that describes a thing, and/or a place and in vivid detail. See the books on writing included in the annotated bibliography below for many brief descriptions of city objects, places and experiences, for example David Dillon's "Writing: Experience and Expression" and Mayfield's book which has a lesson on describing a photograph of a woman sitting and reading in a bookstore—a great example of describing a city thing. Gerald Levin's collection of short essays has the largest number of prose pieces that would work well as models for this assignment. Of course, any book on the city will provide you with many descriptive passages.

Getting Out There For Things to Write About: More Descriptive Writing

Even the most limited class trip can be the source of the next three assignments. Walk outside the school and have the children have pencil and paper in hand so that they can write a description of the school building, its materials, its parts and their relative positions, its details and the effect of the whole. As always they should start with a list of words or phrases and then when inside again, they can organize their notes and structure them for a descriptive essay in the third person.

On a rainy day, the children might describe an interior space of the school such as the boiler room, the kitchen, the auditorium, or specialty classroom .

The next challenge would be to describe a person that is in the school that they do not know so that it remains a physical description. The accompanying homework assignment should be to describe someone who works in the community and helps it function. A discussion about how this person may be typical or atypical of his or her position or occupation would probably lead into numerous other topics that would interest the students .

The most difficult environment to describe is an exterior space such as a park, a street or a another part of the city. To get your students doing this kind of thing, have them read descriptions of cities. Kazin's "A Walker in the City" is largely descriptions of city scenes and experiences. Toni Morrison's books, including one of her latest, "Jazz" has wonderful descriptions of New York, Harlem and some people who live there. Remember to use magazine and newspaper articles for clear and direct descriptions of city places and events.

Describing an Event

For a group of students that has experienced successes with the above types of descriptive essays, the description of a city event which would include the place, time and of course the people involved would be a challenging and exciting topic. In one of my below remedial fifth grade classes, a student described her day at a church fashion show. Another student described her visit to an old age home. Each were superb pictures of the community in which we live. Again, lists of preparatory vocabulary words are essential. Photographs, and reproductions of paintings are great to get the students started talking and writing in class, and samples of other writers' first and third person descriptions will get them thinking and then writing. One piece that I must mention here is a one paragraph description of the tragic and horrifying death of a boy in the South Bronx, by Willie Morris in Jacqueline Berke's "Twenty Questions for the Writer." It is an excellent example of descriptive narrative.

Many of our students have vivid experiences of this city that they might be able to begin to deal with as they read about these things and experience them in other creative forms. Street and gang violence is one of these experiences that our children share with most city writers. You might find it useful to start off with a third person essay on gang violence by Lewis Yablonsky, reprinted in Gerald Levin's "Short Essay: Models for Composition," and then have the students make comparisons with their own knowledge of this problem. The students will be eager to talk about their experiences but you should insist that they then write them and then read them to the class: they'll really write. Have them compare their descriptions with a few from some short stories that you provide them with. At least five such descriptions can be found in "The Ghetto Writer" alone. Compare their works and the published pieces to the gang violence in the movie "Boyz 'n the Hood."

If you have a group of hard to motivate high school students, you could try teaching a couple lessons on the subject of execution. You'll get them reading and sharing reactions at the least. Try these powerful descriptions: 1) "A Hanging," a five page piece by George Orwell available in Leo Rockas' "Style in Writing," 2) the description of the guillotine and Madame LaFarge from Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities," and 3) Norman Mailer's description of the execution of Gary Gilmore in "The Executioner's Song." A blood curdling grouping. It would be worthwhile showing slides of paintings of executions such as Goya's "Execution of May 3rd" and Picasso's "Guernica." Any Renaissance, or later, reproduction of a crucifixion of Christ, (I suggest those of Gerard David, Jan van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden, Rubens) legal execution in Roman times, would provide an interesting historical context for the subject. Issues that you'll be discussing would include the morality of capital punishment, preferable methods of execution, alternatives, lynchings, genocide ("legalized" mass murder) and the moral values of societies that condone capital punishment .

Word Choice in City Voice

Since voice has been the vehicle and city has been the theme of this collection of ideas to get students reading and creating, I'd like to end with a suggestion that city voices, that is the words and rhythms that people use to express themselves, can be themselves the subject of consideration. Two excellent essays for this topic are in the Stubbs-Barnet The Little. Brown Reader: Barbara Lawrence's "Four Letter Words Can Hurt You" and Peter Garb's "Linguistic Chauvinism." A third is "I Recognize You" by Rosario Morale who laments a Puerto Rican immigrant's choice (her own?) to learn "perfect" English and the implications of this choice (in "Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the United States," edited by Faythe Turner). These should get the class discussing and arguing about city language.

By Way of Conclusion . . .

We as inner city English and classroom teachers know how difficult it is to teach language and writing skills because our students think of English as a non-subject, a subject without substance and without a body of information that has to be learned. The use of a theme, such as the city, might make them understand that they are learning concrete material (no pun intended). By pointing out the different voices, you might be able to make students understand the importance of using appropriate vocabulary, writing in the best person and keeping the audience in mind as they write. An understanding of voice should enable the students to know the purpose of reading and of writing. The hope is that they'll do more of both.

Annotated Bibliography: To Help the Teacher Find and Choose Material

Angelou, Maya, "I know why the caged bird sings" (Random House, New York, 1969). In the fictional section of the library, this is a largely autobiographical book about the author's growing up with her grandmother in Banks, Alabama and her experiences with her mother, step father and father in San Francisco. I did a lot of it with my seventh graders at Troup—they loved it. But eighth grade students at Sheridan couldn't handle it. Read it first and you decide. Avoid Angelou's second autobiographical fiction, "Gather Together in My Name"—I found it be shocking and without redeeming value.

Baker, Russell, "Poor Russell's Almanac" (Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1972), pp. 160-162. A fun book on language on the line of William Safire's column in the New York Times. Source of that great piece on voice.

Baldwin, James, "The Harlem Ghetto," pp. 1-11 of "The Price of the Ticket:" James Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket; Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985" (St. Martin's/Marek, New York, 1985). What a collection! I borrowed it from the Woodbridge Town Library and kept renewing it. "Notes of a Native Son," a reflective essay written at the death of his father, pp. 127-145, is worth sharing with your students, sixth grade and up. It deals with racism, self hatred, life in Harlem. . . "Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated," is what Baldwin concluded. Read it and share it.

Baldwin, James, "No Name in the Street" (Dial Press, New York, 1972). The most casual Baldwin that I've read—written in a relaxed first person almost as a stream of conscious collection. A great essay for descriptive experts; difficult reading for students under grade nine.

Berke, Jacqueline, "Twenty Questions for the Writer: A Rhetoric with Readings" (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1976). Useful for ideas for teaching writing skills if you can get past the annoying format and style (e.g., "How should X be interpreted?" and "What are the facts about X?") The writing samples in the section about narration ("How Did X Happen?") are each short and choice including Dick Gregory's "Not Poor, Just Broke," pp. 186-188 a three page piece about Gregory's being shamed by a teacher and therefore dropping out of school and Willie Morris' "The Accident," p. 190 described above on p. 18.

Brown, Claude, "Manchild in the Promised Land" (MacMillan, New York, 1965). Brown's telling of the story of the migration of blacks to New York City during the decade following the Great Depression through his autobiography (mostly first person narrative). It would be valuable to compare parts of this book with the "Laura" or the "Homeboy" chapters of Malcolm X's autobiography. Both tell of the same peoples and city, similar experiences, twenty years time separation, autobiographies, but different voices.

Castro-Klaren, Sara, Sylvia Molloy and Beatrice Sarlo, editors, "Women's Writing in Latin America: An Anthology" (Westview Press, Boulder, 1991). An excellent selection but most for high level middle school and high school students.

Comer, "James, Beyond Black and White" (Quadrangle Books, New York, 1972). An excellent autobiographical, sociological and historic narrative about growing up black in America, land of racism. Every New Haven teacher should read this to begin to become informed about where so many of our students come from. Comer is a professor at Yale's medical school.

De Jesus, Carolina Maria, "Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria De Jesus," translated by David St. Claire (E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., and Souvenir Press, Ltd., 1962). Described above on p. 11.

Dillon, David, "Writing: Experience and Expression" (D. C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1976). In the section entitled "Description" are James Agee's "Run Over" which describes a people on a city street watching a cat struggle to survive, a John Updike description of Central Park, and brief descriptions of a watch, nail clippings and the "Uncommon Cold."

Emanuel, James A. and Theodore L. Gross, "Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America" (The Free Press, New York, 1968). If you own or read only one Afro-American literature anthology, this should be the one.

Fisher, Rudolph, "The Walls Of Jericho," written 1928 (Arno Press, and "The New York Times," New York, 1969), pp. 3-4. Fisher, of the Harlem Renaissance, was himself a brilliant renaissance man—medical doctor, song writer and prolific writer. This book "blends the extremes of Harlem society into a single cohesive story," (p. IV of introduction) that is a bit stilted but definitely worth reading for the teacher and possibly high school students. Easy vocabulary but hard to understand.

Gere, Anne Ruggles, editor, "Boots in the Sawdust: Writing to Learn Across the Disciplines" (NCTE, Urbana, Illinois, 1985). A collection of essays that teach various subjects by having students write about them (and thus teach writing through the subject areas!). A useful book for teacher's in the vein of these Yale curriculum units.

Hughes, Langston, "The Langston Hughes Reader" (George Braziller, Inc., New York, 1958). This book has Hughes' short stories, poems, children's poetry, song lyrics, novels and humor (those priceless "Simple" stories), two of his plays, his autobiography, and speeches and essays. This collection alone could be the source for each part of this curriculum unit.

Jacobs, Jane, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (Random House, New York, 1961). The informal tone of this highly readable book is largely due to its being written in the first person, although it describes cities: their spaces, their uses, our failures to make them better.

Kazin, Alfred, "A Walker in the City" (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, San Diego, 1951). Wonderful source of descriptive essays and how the describing of places and things tells the story of a people and a history.

Lacy, Dan, "The White Use of Blacks in America: 350 Years go Law and Violence. Attitudes and Etiquette. Politics and Change" (Atheneum, New York, 1972), p. 159. This is the book that you read after Comer's. It tells more about how blacks have been systematically and routinely abused in this country. Fascinating, enlightening and infuriating reading. You'll be able to borrow many parts of it for middle and high school students.

Levin, Gerald, "Short Essays: Models For Composition" (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1977). Has Jim Brown's description of his growing up in a broken home, a well written (informative and interesting) essay.

Lewis, David Levering, "When Harlem Was in Vogue" (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1981), p. 103. A well researched book on the Harlem Renaissance. Covered lots of territory.

Lowe, Jeanne, "Cities in a Race with Time" (Random House, New York, 1967). An interesting documentary about the problems faced by New Haven and four other cities. The title itself might be the beginning of a class discussion in which the teacher can learn a lot.

Mayfield, Marlys, "Thinking for Yourself: Developing Critical Thinking Skills Through Writing, second edition," (Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1991). My favorite book for approach to critical thinking and therefore for teaching writing to students of all levels. Mayfield's writing examples are usable for high level seventh graders and up. Tons of city pieces are included.

McCuen, Jo Ray and Anthony C. Winkler, "Readings for Writers. second edition," (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1977). As mentioned, has many short descriptive pieces on city topics.

McKay, Claude, "Harlem Shadows," 1922, Reprinted in "Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America," editors. James A Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (The Free Press, Macmillan Company, New York, 1968), pp. 91-92.

McKay, Claude, "Home to Harlem" (New York, Harper and Rowe, 1928), p.8 as quoted by Kathy J. Ogrenin in the essay "Controversial Sounds: Jazz Performance as Theme and Language in the Harlem Renaissance," pp. 159-184 of Singh's "The Harlem Renaissance: Reevaluation."

McLaren, Joseph, "Early Recognitions: Duke Ellington and Langston Hughes in New York, 1920-30," in "The Harlem Renaissance:

Revaluations," Amritjit Singh, William S Shriver and Stanley Brodwin, editors (Garland Publishing Company, New York, 1989), pp.195-208; p. 198.

Miller, Wayne Charles, editor, "A Gathering of Ghetto Writers: Irish. Italian. Jewish. Black and Puerto Rican" (New York University Press, New York,1972). A great collection of city writers from five important ethnic groups.

Morrison, Toni, "Playing in the Dark" (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992). Morrison's latest book; less mystical and less difficult than her trilogy and "Beloved." Can be read in an afternoon and provide you with all kinds of examples of city writing. Or use her other book of this year, "Jazz."

Naipaul, V. S. "Three Novels: The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira and Miguel Street" (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982). Different countries, different oppressed peoples, same/similar problems. Beautifully written novelettes.

Rockas, Leo, "Style in Writing: A Prose Reader" D. C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1992). Collection of good advice on teaching writing, useful assignments and wonderful literary examples. The Orwell essay on "The Hanging" is pp.45-50.

Scholes, Robert and Nancy R. Comley, "The Practice of Writing second edition" (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1985).

Amritjit Singh, William S Shriver and Stanley Brodwin, editors, "The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations" (Garland Publishing Company, New York, 1989). A wonderful collection of essays about the Harlem Renaissance.

Stubbs, Marcia and Sylvan Barnet, editors, "The Little Brown Reader" (Little, Brown and Company, Boston,1977). An anthology of high quality writing. Those two articles on city language are in this edition.

Turner, Faythe, editor, "Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the U.S.A." (Open Hand Publishing, Inc., Seattle, Washington, 1991), pp. 289-290. Lots of poetry and prose and a photograph of each author. Many city poems—note especially Victor Hernandez Cruz' "The Man Who Came to the Last Floor;" Pedro Pietri's "Intermission from Monday" and "For South Bronx."

Whyte,William H., "City: Rediscovering the Center" (Doubleday, New York, 1988). Good source for city plans and photos.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>