

SECTION 1

Basic Footwork: Learning Technique

When you're practicing deeply, the world's usual rules are suspended. You use time more efficiently. Your small efforts produce big, lasting results. You have positioned yourself at a place of leverage where you can capture failure and turn it into skill. The trick is to choose a goal just beyond your present abilities; to target the struggle.

*From The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born.
It's Grown. Here's How. by Daniel Coyle*

Every year it's the same. During the first week of school, after a honeymoon period of maybe 15 minutes, teachers begin lamenting that students have lost the abilities to write and think.

"What do they teach them in ___ [fill in the blank with the current grade level of the students minus one] grade?"

"I have never had students like these! These kids can't even write a complete sentence."

It's easy to blame shoddy writing on previous teachers, students' intellectual shortcomings, family upbringing, or the weather. However, the fact remains that adolescents are still developing—as writers and as human beings. If students were all masterful auteurs when they walked in the door on the first day of class, they wouldn't need you.

You read *The Talent Code* (Coyle, 2009) and *Talent Is Overrated* (Colvin, 2008), and you understand the importance of practice and modeling in the development of proficiency. Apparently, Mozart's earliest compositions were merely copycat pieces, containing musical patterns borrowed from other composers (Gladwell, 2008). Imitation is not evil, but a logical

starting point. Coldplay learned from The Beatles; The Beatles learned from Elvis; Elvis learned from Hank Snow.

Everyone has to begin somewhere.

You cannot expect students to write well unless you explicitly teach them how. They will not progress as writers if you ask them to fill in blanks or complete multiple-choice exams. Students learn how to write by writing—and writing often.

So, you decide to make like Mozart and encourage your students to learn composing techniques from the masters. Rather than place a literary work on a pedestal, you have your students knock it around the block instead. Eventually, they try out the techniques for themselves. At the least, they will begin to consider technique from the perspective of both reader and writer.

One of the problems with schools today is that everyone—both teachers and students—seems continually frazzled and ultraserious. However, as anyone who has lived through Psych 101 knows, stress obstructs creativity. Fear inhibits learning.

To get students going, you need to loosen them up. So, you assure them that they are in a safe, structured environment, and then you engage them in hours of practice, practice, and more practice. To get students to participate voluntarily, of course, requires that the activity be enjoyable or interesting.

Fortunately, *enjoyable* and *interesting* happen to be your specialties.

RESOURCES

Colvin, G. (2008). *Talent is overrated: What really separates world-class performers from everybody else*. New York: Portfolio.

Coyle, D. (2009). *The talent code: Greatness isn't born. It's grown. Here's how*. New York: Bantam Dell.

Gladwell, M. (2008). *Outliers: The story of success*. New York: Little, Brown.

Performance Art Poetry

Type of Activity

Individual

Approximate Time

One 50-minute class period

Objective

Students will use writing prompts to create a dense, eloquent poem about their hometowns.

Summary

Performance Art Poetry provides some structure for students who otherwise might not participate fully in writing poetry or selecting vibrant, descriptive words.

Materials

Pen and paper, and copies of the Hometown Instructions handout (see p. 20)

If you choose to pursue the Enrichment activity, which is highly recommended, then other supplies, such as a computer, may come into play. However, the exercise may be completed using only pen and paper.

Setup

Begin class by asking students informally about where they grew up. You might want to ask for a show of hands on how many students were born and grew up in the city or town in which they are living now. Allow students to reminisce and tell stories. The idea is to get words flowing. Discuss good aspects and drawbacks about where they are from.

Figure 1. A Student's Performance Art Poetry

Dallas burns
Skyscraper like missile turns
Meat with salsa on the side
Jackhammer overwhelms echoes, "hail the mighty state" inside
Homeless guy holds cardboard sign, pretend cowboy and frantic tycoon
Single mom eight months pregnant lost, stranded 'neath the crazy August moon
Suddenly here now suddenly gone, graceless kiss somehow slithered away too soon
Room without windows, paralyzed face down on the floor
White hair, wrinkled trembling hands, smile behind the door
Never give up, never give up
Sunburn, sweat, and tough
Goes without saying, Dallas plays it rough

Procedure

Tell students that they are going to write a poem about their hometowns. This particular exercise involves you offering a verbal prompt and students responding in writing. Before beginning the activity, however, emphasize that poetry should be expressive, descriptive, and streamlined. Encourage the use of precise, descriptive words and discourage the use of nondescriptive words, such as *big*, *the*, *this*, *it*, *there*.

Then, distribute and go through the Hometown Instructions handout, one line at a time, and allow students sufficient time to think about a response and write.

After students have completed their initial drafts, have them go back over their poems to identify and replace nondescriptive words. During the editing stage, students may also decide to rework their lines so that they rhyme (as in the student sample in Figure 1), but rhyming is not necessary.

Enrichment

To do any enrichment activities, you should wait until *after* the writing has been completed. Once the poem has been written, you may want to have students link the words in the poem with photographs, music, drawings, or other sensory stimuli. Students can compile everything into a slide show (using PowerPoint or the free version available through www.openoffice.com) or film. If a slide show, I suggest a maximum of one line

written out with accompanying image/music per slide. If a film, I suggest having students write out the lines to the poem during the editing process so that the lines of the poem become titles, or having students write out the lines to the poem on an object, then film them. For example, one shot might show a student writing the lines on a blackboard or in a text message.

HOMETOWN INSTRUCTIONS

Write your poem following these guidelines:

Line 1: The place where you grew up and a verb (2 words)

Line 2: The landscape with analogy (4 words)

Line 3: The smell or taste of your hometown (6 words)

Line 4: Music, song, or sounds that remind you of your hometown (8 words)

Line 5: The kind of people who live there (10 words)

Line 6: An important event in your life (12 words)

Line 7: An important event in your life (12 words; You may repeat the above line or write a new one.)

Line 8: A dream or nightmare (10 words)

Line 9: Physical traits of an influential person (8 words)

Line 10: The specific advice or truth someone once gave you (6 words; Perhaps you heard it from the person mentioned above. Try to write out their advice specifically, then delete the quotations marks.)

Line 11: Effects of the weather (4 words)

Line 12: An analogy for your hometown plus a verb and whatever else you feel like throwing in for a last line (2–10 words)

Modeling Prose With Ernie and Jane

Type of Activity

Individual

Approximate Time

One 50-minute class period

Objective

Students will learn how to write in two distinctly different styles: those of authors Ernest Hemingway and Jane Austen. Modeling Prose With Ernie and Jane also shows students how to make their writing more interesting. You may wish to substitute more contemporary writers, such as J.K. Rowling, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, or Zadie Smith.

Summary

Modeling Prose With Ernie and Jane is especially useful for remedial students and students whose primary language is not English, because it provides a ready-made framework for language. That is, students are able to focus on word selection and the meaning of words rather than building a structure to hold the words from scratch. This activity is a great exercise from which to jump to style, tone, or compare-and-contrast essays.

By adapting the writing style of a different author, students learn to appreciate the highly individualistic nature of writing. After participating in Modeling Prose With Ernie and Jane once or twice, aspects of other writers' styles begin to show up in students' writing. This positive development is usually invisible to all but the teacher who assigned this activity.

Materials

You'll need to be able to read aloud from the literature you select and have copies of prose excerpts to hand out to students before beginning the assignment. You'll also need copies of the Distinctive Style handouts (see

pp. 23 and 24), which include excerpts from the works of Hemingway and Austen.

Setup

Tell students that they are going to learn different ways to express themselves using two distinctive styles.

Procedure

Give students a copy of the Distinctive Style: Ernie handout. Have students read the Hemingway excerpt silently, then ask one to read it aloud. Ask students to note sentence length, use of adjectives, frequency of clauses, and repetition.

Ask the class to help write a few sample sentences in Hemingway's style on the board or a transparency. Note the stylistic choices of the sentences and make sure that students truly understand Hemingway's style: minimal use of adjectives, frequent use of repetition, subject-verb sentence structure, relatively short sentence length.

If students get it, then they try writing Hemingway's style on their own. Students read their compositions aloud. Teacher writes the best student sentences on the board or overhead and corrects writing that does not adhere to Hemingway's style. Ask students to note sentence length, use of adjectives, frequency of clauses, dialogue, and repetition in their writing.

Give students a copy of the Distinctive Style: Jane handout. Follow the protocol established with the Hemingway piece.

Enrichment

As readers of the original *Going Bohemian* know, this activity was originally presented using models by John Grisham, Sue Grafton, and Thomas Pynchon. In fact, you should choose models based on specific goals. For instance, if you want students to add more description to their writing, you could use passages from Dickens or Poe; a teacher who wants students to use more precise vocabulary might choose passages from contemporary nonfiction writers Atul Gawande or Steven Pinker.

DISTINCTIVE STYLE: ERNIE

Excerpt from *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway:

Catherine had a good time in the time of pregnancy. It wasn't bad. She was hardly ever sick. She was not awfully uncomfortable until towards the last. So now they got her in the end. You never got away with anything. Get away hell! It would have been the same if we had been married fifty times. And what if she should die. She won't die. People don't die in childbirth nowadays. That was what all husbands thought. Yes, but what if she should die. She won't die. She's just having a bad time.

Excerpted from *A Farewell to Arms*, by E. Hemingway, 1995, New York: Scribner, p. 227.

Assignment:

Rewrite the passage in Hemingway's style, using an incident of your own (real or imagined) involving, for example, life at school, incidents at a party, choosing what to wear, or having dinner.

DISTINCTIVE STYLE: JANE

Excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

Excerpted from *Pride and Prejudice*, by J. Austen, 2006, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–4.

Assignment:

Rewrite the passage, keeping Austen's style. Use dialogue, but make the discussion of possible match-making reflective of contemporary life.

The 128-Word Sentence

Type of Activity

Individual or group

Approximate Time

Half of one 50-minute class period

Objective

Students will use clauses and phrases appropriately to create a legitimate, eloquent, very long sentence.

Summary

The 128-Word Sentence is a great exercise to use when your students' writing seems overly reliant on dull subject-verb-noun structures. The 128-Word Sentence also helps alert students to the possibility of sentence rhythm. For example, in "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner writes several lengthy sentences, but he also writes the following as a single paragraph: "The man himself lay in the bed."

Materials

Pen and paper

Setup

Have samples of very long sentences ready.

Procedure

Read a few long sentences by famous authors. One of my favorites is a 128-word sentence from "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner (1987):

They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her

father musing profoundly above the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men—some in their brushed Confederate uniforms—on the porch and the lawn, talking of Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing that they had danced with her and courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom all the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottle-neck of the most recent decade of years. (p. 258)

Discuss Faulkner’s technique. Have students underline prepositions, such as *beneath*, *with*, *of*, *above*, and draw a circle around words that end in *-ing*, such as *believing*, *confusing*. Discuss how Faulkner uses a variety of phrases within a single sentence.

You may also want to use an example from a more contemporary author, such as Philip Roth (2004), who wrote the following 142-word whopper in *The Plot Against America*:

Elizabeth, New Jersey, when my mother was being raised there in a flat over her father’s grocery store, was an industrial port a quarter the size of Newark, dominated by the Irish working class and their politicians and the tightly knit parish life that revolved around the town’s many churches, and though I never heard her complain of having been pointedly ill-treated in Elizabeth as a girl, it was not until she married and moved to Newark’s new Jewish neighborhood that she discovered the confidence that led her to become first a PTA “grade mother,” then a PTA vice president in charge of establishing a Kindergarten Mothers’ Club, and finally the PTA president, who, after attending a conference in Trenton on infantile paralysis, proposed an annual March of Dimes dance on January 30—President Roosevelt’s birthday—that was accepted by most Newark schools. (pp. 8–9)

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust writes a sentence that lingers for eight pages; Victor Hugo uses a sentence of over 800 words in *Les Misérables* to help give a sense of urgency and momentum to a particular scene.

Try to write a very long sentence as a class. Pick a topic such as, “Let’s write a sentence about trying to cram for a test the night before.” Solicit suggestions from the class and write them on the board or a transparency, so they can see how clauses and phrases can be used to elaborate and extend an idea.

Tell students to write two sentences of at least 128 words. The exercise works best if students write about whatever is on their minds at the

moment: power relationships at school, a secret desire, a sporting event, walking around the mall, or growing up.

After they have written one or two sentences, have students read them aloud. When they are finished, ask them to identify the specific techniques they used to elongate the sentence, including the phrases, gerunds, conjunctions, and other devices.

An eighth-grade student wrote an eloquent sentence of 158 words: “Last year in seventh grade, when we were only babes, new to the school and new to almost everything about life around here, I felt like my friends would stick with me through good and bad, boyfriends and arguments, jealousy and anger, all those stupid, stuck-up Barbie cliques, and weird, embarrassing situations, but now that eighth grade is here, everything seems so different because friends who were my tightest of amigos way back then seem like strangers now as they walk the halls with cold, zombie eyes, looking right past me as if I were some alien creature who is so ugly and perverted that no one in their right mind would want to hang with me and it makes me sad, real sad, to think that just yesterday, there we were, huddled together during lunch, trying to survive, exchanging sandwiches and gossip, with no one to save us and no one to protect us except each other.”

Enrichment

A nice follow-up to The 128-Word Sentence is to have students alter sentence structure again. Have them trade papers and rewrite the 128-word sentences of their peers into at least seven distinct sentences. Both creating the 128-word sentence and transferring lengthy sentences into shorter ones are particularly appropriate for building fluency among students who may be struggling writers or whose primary language is not English.

RESOURCES

Faulkner, W. (1987). “A rose for Emily.” In G.F. Waller, K. McCormick, & L.J. Fowler (Eds.), *The Lexington introduction to literature: Reading and responding to texts* (p. 258). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

Roth, P. (2004). *The plot against America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Symbols to Motifs

Type of Activity

Individual

Approximate Time

Two or three 50-minute class periods

Objective

Students will use symbols to create meaning and theme within a creative story. Students will demonstrate the use of motifs within a creative narrative.

Summary

With my Creative Writing and AP English classes, this is the story that most students will send in for publication. In the last 10 years, I've had over 50 students published professionally, and most have come from stories that seek to create meaning through the use of symbolism.

However, while the motif story works very well with the advanced and more motivated students, it has also worked well for me with kids who are not typically considered to be strong in English. In such a case, it becomes more about the expectations. Obviously, I expect stories that are publishable or near publishable from the advanced students, but it is also surprising how well the typical class of 10th graders will do with such an assignment. It is a great critical thinking activity for them and will help add voice and tone to their writing.

The sample in Figure 2 was written by an 11th grader who selected the violin as her motif. She is a good student and was in my creative writing class when she wrote this. It was by far her best writing of the year. This particular piece of writing is from the second paragraph, where the violin first appears, and a page later where it appears a second time. Throughout the entire eight-page story, the violin appears six times and comes to represent the character's fear of abandonment.

Figure 2. An 11th Grader's Motif Writing

A shiver ran through her system as the guitar strumming melded with a violin solo, and her eyes snapped open. The front paws of the wooden chair hit the ground with a thud and suddenly she wasn't alone, the blinding lights and laughter of a late-night bar overpowering the meandering remains of the soulless tune.... She exhaled a tearful gasp of air and took them carefully and turned to face him, and for a moment their eyes met, his worried and caring, hers lost and frightened, and then she heard the last notes of a violin solo and she was gone again, gasping as the door was unlocked, the key was placed in the ignition, and the car was started. And then she left. She left him there in the parking lot, her headlights flashing across his stone face, her purse still forgotten on the floor, and the fading notes of a violin playing in the background.

Materials

Pen and paper, or computer, and copies of the Symbolism to Motifs handout (see p. 31)

Setup

A good setup for this assignment is the Imaging Metaphors lesson (see p. 63) and The Moody House activity (see p. 140). It is recommended that you review definitions for *symbolism* and *motif*, as it will help the students understand the expectations for this assignment.

Procedure

Instruct students to prepare for an extended writing assignment. Motifs should be discussed, pointing out examples of any you might think of. Give the students the following brief instructions, along with the Symbolism to Motifs handout:

Your task is to create a story that uses one of the following symbols as a motif. The story should be written with a specific tone in mind, and the symbol should recur throughout the story. The idea is for the symbol to become the larger theme of the story. Please do not write a story about your symbol, but instead use the symbol to give depth to your story.

Once you give the handout to the students, offer them the choice of any of the five symbols (or a sixth that you approve) to use in their stories. Ask

them to write a story wherein the symbol they select recurs throughout. As with any motif, it is meant to give meaning to the narrative.

As a starting point, ask the students to brainstorm for a bit and come up with ideas as to what their symbol could mean. Typically, the students will struggle some, but once they grasp the idea, they do well. Help with ideas by suggesting that their symbol could represent something intangible like feelings of loss or memories of youth. The concrete for the students is that their symbol should become a theme. This seems to help many of them with the assignment.

Students should be given one or two class periods to work on their stories. Peer critiques are helpful before final revision. With the completion of the stories, many students will wish to read their stories aloud. If time will not allow all students to read their stories, ask the students to prepare a scene from their stories where they felt they did their best writing and read those aloud. This gives everyone a chance to share a part of their story and generates enough interest that the students will often read stories from their peers on their own.

Enrichment

A good follow-up for this assignment is to create a self-assessment rubric for the students. This will most likely be one of the better pieces of writing the students will have done, so the self-assessment allows them a chance to point out those areas where they might have been attempting something meaningful. As teachers, we do not always get what a student might have been trying to do or say, so the self-assessment allows them that opportunity to tell us.

SYMBOLISM TO MOTIFS

Your task is to create a story that uses one of the following symbols as a motif. The story should be written with a specific tone in mind, and the symbol should recur throughout the story. The idea is for the symbol to become the larger theme of the story. Please do not write a story about your symbol, but instead use the symbol to give depth to your story.

Choice of symbols (motifs) that must recur within your stories (choose one):

1. A strong and constant wind
2. A fallen tree
3. A red kite
4. A fiddle or violin (This can be the sound only.)
5. A light mist, almost foglike
6. Create your own: _____ (must be approved by the teacher)

Guidelines:

1. All stories must use the symbol as a motif—something with a deeper meaning to give the story some depth.
2. All stories should seek to find and create depth within the recurring symbol.
3. All stories must incorporate the use of descriptive tone—create a mood through description that recurs and helps add depth to your symbol.

The Delicate Art of Sarcasm

Type of Activity

Individual

Approximate Time

One or two 50-minute class periods

Objective

Students will learn how to use sarcasm effectively in writing.

Summary

A 16-year-old once wrote in an essay for class, “In high school, sarcasm is God.” Although somewhat overstated (I actually think popularity and desirability are the deified attributes), the point is that sarcasm is a currency with which adolescents are intimately familiar. Students live and breathe sarcasm every day, yet most use it clumsily and ineffectively. They murmur epithets about “your mama” and make attempts at sarcasm that are mean-spirited and bereft of wit, humor, and logic. Sarcasm used ineffectively or with harmful intent inevitably reflects poorly on the speaker/writer, but sarcasm used effectively can cause an immediate sea change in sentiment about an issue.

When considering the power of sarcasm, I think of Ronald Reagan challenging incumbent President Jimmy Carter for the presidency in 1980 by saying, “There you go again,” in response to one of Carter’s sophisticated, complex responses. Reagan’s intelligent use of sarcasm undermined Carter’s legitimacy and helped Reagan win the presidency against a well-liked, incumbent president.

Materials

Print works by writers who write with tasteful, sarcastic wit.

Setup

Have selections from a wide variety of writers who use sarcasm, such as P.J. O’Rourke (almost every piece of writing), Ralph Wiley (most pieces),

Dave Eggers (some pieces), William Buckley (some pieces), literary critic John Simon (some pieces), and film critic Roger Ebert (who indulges in sarcasm infrequently, but is masterly when he does). Comedians such as Chris Rock, Robin Williams, and the late Rodney Dangerfield use sarcasm frequently, although not always in ways that are suitable for classroom use. Choose wisely. Sarcasm can be a devastating rhetorical tool, but you will not be able to teach it if you offend half of your class in the process.

Procedure

Students silently read a selection from P.J. O'Rourke (2007) on growing up in Toledo, Ohio. Then, the selection is read aloud. Ask students to identify where sarcasm is used effectively in the piece and underline the appropriate passages, for example, in the first paragraph:

I grew up in Toledo, if up is the word. Northwest Ohio is flat. There isn't much up. The land is so flat that a child from Toledo is under the impression that the direction hills go is down. Sledding is done from street level into creek beds and road cuts. In Toledo people grow out—out to the suburbs, out to the parts of America where the economy is more vigorous, and, all too often, out to a 48-inch waistband. But no Toledoan would ever say that he or she had “out-grown” Toledo. We are too level-headed for that.

Explain to students that one brand of sarcasm comes from playing with words and twisting them to new meanings, as O'Rourke demonstrates later in the passage with phrases such as “there isn't much up” and “people grow out—out to the suburbs...out to a 48-inch waistband.” Perhaps the most common use of sarcasm is in connection with overgeneralization. O'Rourke overgeneralizes in several places later in this essay—claiming “there is no horizon in Toledo,” that no one ever teased a friend about his German name (“Don Eggenschwiler”), and that everyone in Toledo owns “above-ground pools, riding lawnmowers and golf clubs.” Obviously, none of those statements are true, but O'Rourke writes them to make a point about the “feel” of the city.

Understatement is another instrument in the sarcasm toolkit. In act 3, scene 1 of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio is slain by Tibalt, Mercutio says, “Ay, ay, a scratch, a scratch; marry, 'tis enough,” although he is mortally wounded. As he is dying, Mercutio utters, “No, 'tis

Figure 3. Student Writing About Grand Junction, Colorado

I grew up in Grand Junction, where the desert meets the mountains. Colorado is half mountains; the other half consists of roads leading to mountains. Snow often blankets the peaks surrounding the city, though it rarely snows in town. The land is so arid that most plants stay permanently wilted all year. There is probably some grass in Grand Junction somewhere, though it exists mostly in surreal patches of green on golf courses, which are continually irrigated, and look conspicuously out of place. In Grand Junction, everyone is an athlete—golf, baseball, track, mountain biking, hiking, skiing—though no one makes a big deal out of it. A resident of Grand Junction would never say, “I am an athlete,” though they might enter a marathon on Friday, kayak on Saturday, mountain bike on Sunday, and ski on Monday. It is normal to play around outdoors; it is weird to stay inside.

The scenery of Grand Junction is more beautiful than New Hampshire and more exotic than Hawaii but without the attitude or tourist traps. After years of living in crowded, polluted cities where the rain never stops, newcomers to Grand Junction may think the city has nothing to offer and they are right. Grand Junction has no crowds, no pollution, and few rainy days.

not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.”

The Delicate Art of Sarcasm is most effective when you define the boundaries of the playing field. Fair game are politics, current events, popular culture, local interest, cities, hometowns, and school policies. Off limits are teachers, students, family, neighborhoods, and religions. After some discussion of the key points of effective sarcasm, have students write a sarcastic essay about their hometown using the train of thought provided by O'Rourke. Figure 3 shows a piece written by a student from Grand Junction, Colorado.

Enrichment

Have students take a serious subject—a political speech, an essay, or a dialogue from a book—and improve it using sarcasm and understatement. Instruct them to replace stodgy and ineffective phrasing with sharp-edged and purposeful wording.

RESOURCE

O'Rourke, P.J. (2007, April 13). Why it's good to come from nowhere. *Toledo Free Press*. Retrieved December 1, 2009, from pjourourkeonline.blogspot.com/2007/04/why-its-good-to-come-from-nowhere.html

Secrets

Type of Activity

Individual

Approximate Time

Two 50-minute periods of writing

Objective

Students will indirectly describe a secret (or secrets) between two persons, using subtleties of dialogue, setting, and tone. This exercise is particularly useful in getting students to write with subtlety and wit.

Summary

Although Secrets seems a bit complicated at first, some of the best writing I have ever received from students has been the result of this activity. Furthermore, Secrets seems to help students understand the power of understatement and implication and seems to transfer well to students' nonfiction writing.

Materials

Pen and paper, and copies of the Secrets handout (see p. 37)

Setup

Have students read and discuss O. Henry's (1906) short story "The Gift of the Magi." Emphasize that O. Henry does not simply reveal what happens in the story, but that he allows the actions and dialogue of the characters to illuminate the secrets, the characters' fears, and each character's feelings about the other.

Pick the two most theatrical students in class and ask one to read Character A (female) and the other to read Character B (male). Do not allow the students to see each other's scenario. Ask the two students to

have an impromptu 5- to 10-minute conversation in character in front of the class.

Procedure

Discuss “The Gift of the Magi.”

Tell the class that they are about to witness a scene in which each of the characters has a secret that he or she is hiding from the other. Ask the class to note how the two characters interact—the dialogue, facial reactions, and gestures—as the two students act out their conversation. At the end of the skit, discuss the ways that silence and awkwardness can imply meaning. Have students guess at each character’s secret, then have characters A and B reveal them. Discuss the ways in which the characters implied and the other students inferred their secrets.

Now ask students to write a short dialogue between two persons, in which at least one has a secret. The idea is to make the writer write through implication and indirect description.

Enrichment

Once students have written their stories, ask them to form groups of three or four. Students should read each group member’s story, decide which would make the best short play, and vote on it. Then, two students act out the scenario and the writer directs. If a video camera is available, the fourth student (or the writer) films. If no camera is available, then the fourth student acts as the critic. Eventually the story is turned in and the play is performed for the class (or the film is shown).

RESOURCE

Henry, O. (1906). *The gift of the magi*. Retrieved February 11, 2010, from www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/magi10h.htm

SECRETS: LEARNING TO WRITE WHAT ISN'T THERE

Character A (female):

You have just been nominated for an internship as an artist-in-residence at *Le Louvre* (famous art museum in Paris, France). You are best friends with B, who has on more than one occasion come through for you. Recently, you have found that B has developed some severe problems with gambling. B has told you that some men have been looking for him lately to collect gambling debts he owes. You have repeatedly lectured B on his gambling, but you suspect that he continues to gamble away every cent he earns. You are uncertain what course to take about yourself and your relationship with B. You wonder if you should seize the opportunity to go on the art internship or devote yourself to helping rehabilitate B during this critical time. Of course, B would not want you to forego a career opportunity just to help him. You need to find out if B is still gambling and how B might react to the possibility of you leaving the country.

Character B (male):

You have just won \$4 million in the state lottery. You wonder if you should tell A, who used to be your best friend, because she has been acting very strangely lately, and you do not understand why. A seems to have everything going for her, but A has repeatedly criticized you for gambling too much. True, you spend way too much of your paycheck on silly long shots, but now your gambling has finally paid off. You are not sure if A still wants to be your friend, and you fear that revealing that you have just won \$4 million will perhaps push her into being your friend just because of the money. You want a *real* friendship, not one based on money. A few weeks ago, your family decided to go to Ireland this summer for three weeks. You considered asking A to go with you and your family, but now you think that you would rather not invite A if she is going to act like your guard dog. You would still like to be A's friend, but you need some time to think about being a millionaire, too. In this conversation with A, you want to find out why she has been acting so strangely and if she really likes you for who you are. You have to decide today whether or not you want A to go to Ireland with you and your family. Perhaps it might be best simply not to mention the trip at all.

