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CREATIVE WRITING – LET’S DO IT

by Ronald L. Cramer

Robert Frost has wisely counseled, “There is no art to writing but having something to say.” Most of us, on the other hand, can recall personal experiences in the composition period when it seemed that “having something to say” was just the problem. Too often the constraints of formal composition so overpowered our imagination that we were unable to write or we produced anemic, lifeless accounts.

Teachers today are committed to the task of helping pupils express themselves in writing with clarity, imagination, effectiveness, liveliness and yet retain the economy that makes for effective writing.

There are many constraints, however, which hinder today’s teacher from engaging students in the creative writing process. The most common of these constraints appears to be the following:

1. Spelling Demands: Facility in spelling demands a complicated set of learned habits built up over a long period of time. Rarely has a student mastered these habits prior to high school. Certainly the beginning first grader has yet to even consider the enormity of the task ahead of him.
2. Punctuation: Most students come to school with well-developed oral language facility. They have oral command of nearly all of the grammatical markers that make speech intelligible. Yet, we as teachers have frequently been unsuccessful in helping the child transfer what he knows

about the spoken word to written expression. Written punctuation has become, for many teachers, a nemesis which prevents them from implementing a successful writing program.

3. Formal Constraints: It is very easy to fall into the trap of demanding that students conform to a restrictive traditional format for their written compositions. Most often this constraint takes the form of requiring a formal title, standard paragraph indentations and other standard format procedures (e.g., name, date, school – all in the right-hand corner).
4. Grading or Marking the Creative Writing: It takes very little to disturb the confidence of some children and shut off the flow of words they can produce. Excessive praise may overwhelm some sensitive students and lead them to worry about equaling their previous output. Far more destructive, however, is the over-anxious and premature marking and red pencilling students’ written creations. This can have a devastating effect upon early writing habits and seldom produces the desired effect of improving the students’ writing skill.

The four things just mentioned represent some of the more common constraints which teachers unnecessarily and unwisely utilize to keep children from producing creative writing. What the successful teacher must

do is to find effective ways and means of encouraging children to engage in creative writing experiences without setting up formidable roadblocks that prevent the student from putting his thoughts on paper. I believe that there are many such ways and means available to the open-minded classroom teacher. What is required, however, before these techniques can be successfully employed is an abandonment of a host of traditional mythology which, in effect, puts the cart before the horse by expecting mechanical sophistication too early and by emphasizing its value out of proportion to its contribution. I am not suggesting that spelling, punctuation, format and marking are unimportant and unnecessary. I am insinuating, however, that they are not primary. They come later and can be easily taught by the introduction of simple but effective editing techniques. Furthermore, we cannot afford to indoctrinate students with the notion that excellent mechanical skills make for excellent writing. I return to the remarks of Robert Frost who emphasized that the "art of writing is having something to say." If Frost is right, and I believe most of us would agree that he is, then we must realize that in the hierarchy of writing skills the development of mechanical abilities must be subordinate to the development of artistic skills — that is the ability to communicate ideas and to communicate them clearly, meaningfully, imaginatively, feelingly.

If a teacher is to implement a creative writing program successfully she must have ideas for getting the writing started. Listed below are some ideas which I have gathered from teachers who used them successfully to make creative writing a significant

part of their language arts program.

1. Use a painting as an inspiration for a short story. Tell a story of person or object portrayed.
2. Use a newspaper account which concerns a large number of people, like Thousands Homeless as Flood Strikes; then pick out one person involved and build story on what happened to him.
3. Rewrite a great plot, like what would have happened if the ship's captain had not shown up at the end of *Lord of the Flies*.
4. Make a magazine out of an individual's work or an anthology of short stories or poetry by the class.
5. Describe a scene before and after a disaster.
6. Work with contrasts.
 - a. Describe the imagined scene upon listening to a record; first after Beethoven's 6th (or anything soft and gentle), and then after some acid rock.
 - b. Describe the scene after seeing a picture (or after seeing the real things) of a river as it runs through a big city and of the same river as it is at its source.
7. Create a character sketch based on the setting the subject character most often inhabits; for example, a certain girl from the appearance of her bedroom.
8. Describe and explain an event from several points of view; for example being hospitalized from an overdose of drugs as viewed by the victim, the doctor, the parents and friends of the victim.
9. Create a poem by employing a synthesis of pictures and words;

the meaning of the poem should be derived from this unit. For example:

	a
c	erc
erc	cabe
cerca	rcance
cancercancercancercanc	
ancecercancercancercanc	
cancercancercancercanc	
ncercancercancercanc	
cercancercancerc	
ercancercanc	
ancerca	

10. Create a poem by combining phrases from various printed sources such as cereal boxes, newspapers, magazines, street signs, bus posters, billboards, TV ads and insurance policies.
11. Create a poem using the alphabet pattern sequences for initial letters of the words that make up the poem.
12. Have two (or more) students help each other write a story. As far as is possible, allow each student to choose his writing partner.
13. Have students write letters to congressman asking for free information or help with a problem. Receiving replies at their home addresses helps keep up student enthusiasm.
14. Have students write a one paragraph or one page description of a classmate. Each student then reads the description in front of the class and the class can guess who has been described.
15. Give the kids a starter line such as, "Boy, did that burn me up!" or "What a mess I made of that!" Let them finish the story as they wish.

16. A variation of number fifteen is to have each student write a starter line on a sheet of paper, fold it up and throw it in a bag. Everyone can draw a starter line and write a story from it. Again, the class can be given a chance to guess who wrote the starter line and/or who wrote the story.

17. Students enjoy writing and producing their own plays.
18. Putting out a newspaper or a book of student stories and poems increases student motivation and enthusiasm as they see their works and names in print.
19. Write a number of stories about different students. They enjoy hearing stories about themselves and their friends.
20. Use the stories in number nineteen as models for the students to write their own stories about each other.
21. Hanky panky is a word game which stimulates creativity in students. The idea of the game is to guess the two rhyming words which remain the same thing as the two words the teacher gives. Example:
teacher — fat husband
answer — chubby hubby

This example is a hanky panky because each of the two rhyming words has two syllables just like hanky panky. There are also hank panks (fat rat) and hankety panketies (sinister minister).

22. Write a story ending after hearing the beginning.
23. Write a story beginning after hearing the ending.
24. Rewrite a story, fable, or poem.

25. Write a title for a story after hearing the story.
26. Read a description, have the children write about what is being described.
27. Write your own words for a cartoon or cartoon series.
28. Write a story about a picture.
"What are the characters thinking?"
"What are the characters saying?"
"What would be a good title for the picture?"
29. Have the children write a description of an object without naming it. Other children read the description and illustrate what they think it is.
30. Write a description of some famous person and have others guess who it is.
31. Give models for poetry, have children write their own.
32. Write a myth (fictional explanation of an otherwise unexplainable event).
33. Write a fable (story told over in many different ways often to teach a lesson.)
34. Write their own story using a given title.
"What are shoes for?"
"Trapped by the storm"
"What was in Jimmy's pocket?"
"Henry the most unusual animal in the zoo"
"The Little Green Wiggly Thing"
"I could not tell"
"What is the color of Love?"
"What is the sound of one hand clapping?"
35. Write three wishes.
36. Write about one of your dreams.
37. Write a tall tale.
38. Have children take the part of a book character and exchange letters with another child about their experiences. Goldilocks tells Red Ridinghood about the three bears.
39. Write a new ending for an old story.
40. Make a diary or log representing the main character in a book.
41. Write literary innovations. Read a story like "Ten Little Caterpillars", innovate on it, change the number and animal, rewrite the story.
Read a poem like "Five Little Jack-O-Lanterns" change it to "Five Little Pirates" and innovate on the content.
42. Write a headline for a book you've read. Have other children guess what book it is.
"Ben Franklin Revealed as a Fraud"
"Dinosaur Missing from Museum"
"Boy Leads Dog Parade"
43. Make a booklet about a favorite author.
44. List all the things you would do if you were going on a trip, giving a party.
45. Write three words on the board, have the children combine them into a sentence.
46. Draw a picture of a person, describe the picture with words. Next, visualize a person and draw him with words.
47. Write how you think a person feels.
George Washington crossing the Delaware.
Lindberg, the day he landed in Paris.
48. Have students produce their own newspaper.
49. Let children write their spontaneous reactions and impres-

- sions when seeing a picture for the first time.
50. Use a blank piece of paper, pretend you're writing on a public wall.
 51. Write a description of an unusually simple object such as a potato chip, parsley, peanuts, or an onion. Compose a story about it using your own descriptive words.
 52. Find an interesting photo from a magazine or newspaper. Have the children write a paragraph explaining the picture.
 53. Sensory exercises are an effective way to get children to write. Blindfold a child, ask him to touch velvet then sandpaper, taste sugar then mustard, smell vinegar then perfume, listen to a jingle of a keychain and then a bell. Take off the blindfold and write about what these things bring to mind.
 54. Listen to music like "The Sorcerer's Apprentice". Lyrics of popular music, blues, rock and roll; have child write his version.
 55. Listen to T.V. ads and have children write their own version.
 56. Write a travel log about a particular place after looking at pictures of that place.
 57. Write a story about objects in a mystery box.
 58. Write a play to use with finger puppets.
 59. Put up several pictures, have the children write about one. The child reads his story and the class decides which picture he has written about.
 60. Write directions for a project that you made by yourself.
 61. Have children complete a doodle as they wish and then write a story about their picture.
 62. Write answers to provocative questions. For example, "What would happen if all the houses in the world were painted purple?"
 63. Read a story, have the children write on a topic related to the story. If it's about a clown, they might write on the question, "Would you like to be a clown?"
 64. Make montages using one word opposites to project an overall meaning: like - death
Use other words to show more meaning.

Life	death
pollution	
kill	carbon dioxide

Cut out magazine letters to make words. Use magazine pictures to illustrate meaning. Use sponge with paint in color to help project meaning and lightly blot areas of color here and there, shellac entire surface.

65. The class is instructed to make up riddles following this form:
I rhyme with hill.
I am found on a fish.
What am I?
66. The students begin by making a list of words which begin with the same sound. Then they are to use as many of the words as possible to create sentences. The model helps the children hear the phonetic sounds.

67. The children are asked to make another list of words, this time using the same ending sound. Endings such as an, at, et, in, on, ot and un are particularly good to use.

68. Start the children with, "Did you ever see . . ." You then ask the children to think of two words which rhyme and can be related in some manner.

(Ronald Cramer is Professor of Education at Oakland University.)

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: VIEWS AND REVIEWS

by Jane M. Bingham

Read any new books lately? Children's books? Here are some of the newer books you might like to share with the pupils you teach. Please remember that grade designations are only an organizational device. Many kindergarteners will be ready for the books recommended for second graders; many third graders will enjoy books designated as fifth grade books. Older children may enjoy books designed for younger children. When selecting a book to read aloud to your particular group keep their unique experiences or lack of them, their interests, and their listening comprehension in mind. Try to choose books that will challenge imaginations, expand vocabularies and concepts, and will probably not be read by the children on their own either because the format of the book is not appealing or because the book is too difficult for the children to read independently. Read books you like, read with skill and enthusiasm, and everyone enjoy, enjoy!

KINDERGARTEN

The Three Billy Goats Gruff retold and illustrated by Paul Galdone. Three

brave goats outsmart an ugly troll. Evil is properly punished.

Milton The Early Riser by Robert Kraus

A panda bear wants to play while other animals, Creeps, Whippersnappers, Nincompoops and others, want to sleep. A humorous, action-packed story.

What's the Matter with Carruthers? A Bedtime Story by James Marshall.

A large irritable bear is humored by his friends in an attempt to soothe his "rumped nerves". Grouchy children in need of a nap would certainly understand Carruther's feelings.

Helen Oxenbury's ABC of Things by Helen Oxenbury.

A refreshingly entertaining and unusual ABC book. The amusing illustrations will give children a lot to talk about.

My Friend Little John and Me by Yutaka Sugita.

A richly colored wordless picture book that shows a boy's activities during a day. Because the activities will probably be familiar to children this book would be a good first wordless picture book.