Creating a Writers' Workshop in Your Classroom

• Exciting Activities That Build Writing Skills
• Creative Prompts That Engage Kids
• Timesaving Poetry Lessons

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A lesson excerpted from Writing Success Through Poetry by Susan L. Lipson

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The purpose of writing is communication. If you have something to say, make sure you do so in as few words as possible so as not to waste paper. Write what needs expressing; write with a purpose; write to communicate ideas to a reader, not just to yourself; and write because you can add your own thoughts to the greater body of knowledge. Write to say something, not just to fill pages and get a grade.

The comments jotted in margins by a thoughtful teacher have far more bearing on your development as a writer than any grade will ever have. Save every comment-filled work you receive, so that you can refer back to that work later. Even if some comments seem off-base to you, consider that they express the way your words were perceived by your reader—whether or not you intended it to be that way. Consider that a misperception by the reader indicates that you might not have expressed yourself as clearly as you could have; thus, rewritting might be necessary. Now, not all comments from a reader will seem worthy of your consideration for a rewrite, but you will learn to assess their worthiness with time, experience, and confidence in your own standards for your personal best.

If you already have the confidence to know what truly amounts to your best work, then the grade should have little meaning to your development as a writer. I often tell the following story to audiences of students: In high school, I had a teacher who always provided feedback in the margins of my work, and who always gave me A’s on my papers. The one time I threw together a lousy essay (I waited until the morning the paper was due!), I received, nevertheless, an A from the teacher and no written comments. I suspected that he had been as lazy as I had, and that he hadn’t actually read my paper, but had merely assigned an A to it based on past experience with my work. I asked him whether he had read my paper, and he replied, blushing, “I gave you an A, didn’t I?” I said that I couldn’t
imagine why I’d received an A on what was definitely not my usual standard of work. With his graying eyebrows raised, he countered, “Are you actually asking that I lower your grade?” I said that I was asking him to read my paper again and make his own decision, because in my opinion, this A made all my other truly deserved A’s seem less impressive to me. He asked me what grade I’d have given my current essay, and then I was the one to blush; I told him “C.” My teacher ended up giving me a “B-, because you were honest,” and he remarked, “That’s the first time any student has actually complained about getting an A.” You may not believe this, but I did feel better, more justified, with that B-, because I knew that my other A’s now counted. My point, however, is not about grades; it’s about standards, and knowing what really defines your current best. I say current because your best should always be changing as you grow as a writer and improve your techniques. So, best refers to the most accomplished work at that particular time in your life. Always do your best. It’s yours, not someone else’s standard, that counts.

—S. L. Lipson
Writing With D.A.D. and M.O.M.: Student Guide to the Three-Step Writing Process

Step 1: Write the first draft with D.A.D. (for words that show, rather than merely tell). Use each of the following D.A.D. elements, in any order:

D.A.D. = Description, Action, and Dialogue

- **Description**: Colorful adjectives and illustrative phrases, such as similes and metaphors; words that affect two or more of the reader’s five senses.
- **Action**: Vivid verbs that show action, not tell about it; active verbs that bring descriptions to life. (Avoid using passive verbs, such as: am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been, go, goes, went, do, does, did.)
- **Dialogue**: Written conversations between characters, punctuated by quotation marks; words spoken silently by a character to him- or herself, printed in italics or underlined; and quoted words (in non-fiction writing) punctuated by quotation marks and followed with a reference to the printed source of the words).

Step 2: Revise the first draft with M.O.M. Check your first draft for all three D.A.D. elements and revise by adding what you forgot. Now look at your work in terms of the M.O.M. technique.

M.O.M. = Mood, Order, and Matter

- **Mood**: Words that convey an appropriate mood, point-of-view, or tone for the specific subject, theme, and style of the writing; for example, emotion-charged words for a suspenseful story, or formal-sounding words for an academic essay.
- **Order**: Material presented in an order suited to the subject, theme, and style; for example, an essay should present the thesis at the end of the introductory paragraph, and a mystery story might present details out of order to keep readers guessing.
- **Matter**: Every word must have a purpose, and if unnecessary, must be deleted. Words must move a story along, or build an essay’s main argument.

Checking for the elements of D.A.D. and M.O.M. is the same as editing for substance. After your revisions, you will have a second draft, ready for the final stage of the writing process—proofreading for misspellings and errors in punctuation and grammar.
Poetry Prompt 1

Majesty

Towering, twisted, old tree,
The sun casts new life upon
Your dry, gray limbs,
Making them flow,
Like a great, shadowy river,
With meandering tributaries
Across the lush lawn.
Poetry Prompt 1, continued

For Discussion:

1. What, in this poem, possesses the quality of *majesty*?
2. What other title would you give this poem?
3. Identify one simile, two examples of alliteration, and one example of personification.
4. What is the river? (Hint: Look at its adjectives, and know that the river does not refer to part of the tree itself.)
5. Note the adjective *dry*, which describes the tree’s limbs. Why do you think the author purposely chose *dry* instead of another word, like *old*?
6. How might the mood, or tone, of this poem have changed if it had been written with rhyme and a defined rhythm?

Exercise: Using either a freeze frame image from your own mind, or a landscape picture or photograph as a prompt, write your own simile-based poem that depicts something in nature as looking like something else (either in nature, or not). You may use a free-verse style or write a rhyming poem—your choice.

Extension Exercise: Write a prose version (one paragraph will do) that describes the same scene you painted in your poem from the exercise above; aim to stimulate in your readers a multisensory response with vivid imagery. Include a simile or two.

Further Extension A: Take either of the written scenes you have “painted” in the poem or the paragraph, and add or substitute a simile or metaphor that simultaneously reveals something about you, the poem’s narrator, or some other character in the piece. For example, to “Majesty” the author could add: “The sun casts new life upon/ Your dry, gray limbs/ Which creak like my own,/ In the teasing breeze...” The reader thus sees the narrator as old and gray, like the tree. When you make a simile do double duty, you practice the economy of words—packing maximum power into a minimum number of words.

Further Extension B: Write two to three paragraphs, supported by specific examples to answer this question: After writing two versions of the same imagery-packed scene, can you now explain how poetry and prose offer different advantages in conveying “word pictures” to the reader?
Regal Bonfire Dancers

Tall, spindly, wild-haired silhouettes
Of kings, queens, and fans
Bend and sway
Over sand and surf,
Before the horizon’s bonfire,
Moved by both the music of the surf
And the briny, now cool breeze
That feeds the flaming clouds;
They dance in celebration
Of the exquisite struggle
Between Day and Night.

The dancers seem to slow,
As invisible hands
Lower a cool blanket of indigo
Over the fire,
Subduing the embers,
By tucking them into watery darkness,
As the dance scene fades to black.
Poetry Prompt 2, continued

For Discussion:

1. Compare and contrast this poem to “Majesty” (see Poetry Prompt 1), noting how they are similar and how they are different.
2. This freeze frame poem uses **metaphors**. What scene do you “see”?
3. What are the regal bonfire dancers and their fans? Why does this poem describe them as “tall” and “spindly” with “wild hair”? What does the poem mean by “hair”?
4. Explain the use of **personification**.
5. When a scene fades to black in a movie, the sudden darkness marks the end of a dramatic sequence. What makes that line apt for this poem’s ending?

**Exercise:** Write your own beach scene, set in the morning, afternoon, or late at night, to show through carefully chosen details a different view of the beach than this evening sunset view. You may use poetry or prose. Show, don’t tell, how the scene looks, smells, sounds, and/or feels to you as an observer. Keep in mind sounds like crickets (mainly heard at night), sights like long shadows versus short shadows (showing the sun’s position, and thus the time of day), smells like hot dogs cooking on a barbecue, and feelings like hot sand burning the soles of your feet. Your beach may be populated or uninhabited; your shoreline green, sandy, or rocky; your water full of crashing waves or gentle ripples—it’s up to you.

**Extension:** Turn this literal sentence into a multisensory word picture or poem:
The autumn leaves covering the forest floor make me feel, along with the trees, that winter is coming.

**Further Extension A:** Write your own literal scene in one or two sentences, as in the extension exercise above, and have a partner do the same. Trade sentences, and create vivid word pictures for each other.

**Further Extension B:** Draw or paint a picture to illustrate one of your own poetic scenes.
Poetry Prompt 3

Floating Sofa

Like studded, wet leather,
Trimmed in froth,
Glistening in the late summer sunset;
Like a floating sofa rising
above lapping waves,
now black gold.
Rocky studs jut out randomly,
forming ridges for sand crabs
who dare to walk on top of
Mother Earth’s furniture
and get grounded—
SO-O grounded!
Reality splashes upon my feet,
turning the leather to sand
and reminding me that
I ought to get home before dark.
Poetry Prompt 3, continued

For Discussion:

1. Can you see the scene that inspired this metaphorical freeze frame poem? What do you see?
2. How old is the narrator of this poem? How do you know?
3. What do you know about the narrator from the word choices?

Exercise: This poem shows how figurative language (such as metaphors and similes) can do double duty by showing something about the character or narrator who uses them, in addition to showing a scene. Create character-revealing similes for the images listed below. Example: falling leaves—“Leaves sprayed the ground in the whirling breeze, like the confetti we tossed at graduation just 6 short months ago.” Try to write double-duty similes for at least three of these images:

1. a rainstorm,
2. a spot of purple in a field of browning weeds,
3. a car accident,
4. a rap concert,
5. sore feet, and
6. the smell of roses.

Extension: Expand on the last image above—the smell of roses. Write two very different scenes, beginning with “Janine smelled the roses,” to show two very different memories for Janine that have an association with the smell of roses. For instance, perhaps roses remind Janine of her grandmother’s funeral, or of a bouquet she received for some achievement. Make sure to use the D.A.D. (Description, Action, Dialogue) technique for each word picture. Your scene needs no more than two paragraphs.

Further Extension A: How a character reacts to a situation shows as much as the situation itself. Reactions also set the tone of a piece and define its genre. Review Janine’s reactions in your two scenes from the above extension exercise. Label and title each scene according to its genre. Circle the specific words that set and build the tone.

Further Extension B: Adding point of view to any piece of writing adds depth and enables the reader to “know” the characters. Point of view can be added by using a narrator, or by showing characters through their unique perceptions or actual inner thoughts. Experiment with point of view via two different descriptions of a rock concert (remember to let your reader “hear” the music, too): the point of view of an older person and the point of view of a teenager.

Read these descriptions aloud to your class or a partner, and have them guess which description came from which character. Analyze effectiveness of word choices, and replace vague words with vivid ones.