



“Tell Me a Story”: Moving from Reading to Writing

Focus: Narrative Essay Writing

Overview

This lesson focuses primarily on teaching students to read text not just as readers, but as future writers learning to look “behind the curtain” of an author’s craft, examining the techniques of fiction good authors use to evoke character, communicate theme, and depict action and setting.

Standards

9-10.WS.3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

- a. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.
- b. Use narrative techniques such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.
- c. Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.
- d. Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.
- e. Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

Objectives

- To identify elements of narration including character, setting, theme, dialogue, plot, detail, point of view, audience, and description
- To practice appropriate narrative techniques to illustrate a central point or theme
- To write a cohesive, engaging piece of narration



Materials

- Students should be provided with several different examples of outstanding narrative essays from the [Common Core Appendix B](#) selections for 9-10th grade, pp. 105-110.
- Prior to the lesson, teachers should read aloud several shorter selections in class, commenting or taking note of effective techniques of dialogue, characterization, narration, detail, imagery, and theme.

Activity 1: Story Time!

Purpose

Students -- even at the high school level -- need to be read to aloud by skillful readers. Grasping issues such as tone is difficult for many students, especially struggling readers who can't "hear" tone in a narrator's or character's voice. A skillful text reading can help this issue.

Provide students with copies of the following text samples for grades 9-10 available in [Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards](#), pp. 105-110 and choose approximately three to read aloud. Some excellent choices include the following

- John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* selection, chapter 15, from "The man took off his dark, stained hat..." to "...Mae held the big sticks out."
- Tillie Olsen, "I Stand Here Ironing," from "I stand here ironing..." to the end.
- Marcus Zusak, selection from *The Book Thief*, from "The last time I saw her..." to the end.

As you read, read with expression and intonation, modeling for students how texts should be "heard."

Individual Reflection

Following each reading, ask students to write down answers to the following in a reflective journal or notebook:

- What image or moment "sticks in your head"? Why?



- Were there moments, scenes, or statements that struck you as unexpected?
- What was the strongest and most vivid piece of dialogue in the selection?

Whole-Group Discussion

- Discuss as a whole class what specific elements from each of the three selections were particularly effective or vivid. Ideally, teachers should prepare several “backup questions” to prompt discussion or stimulate further reflection about the authors’ techniques. Some possibilities (There can be others!) are given below:

Steinbeck

- What effect does Steinbeck achieve by putting his characters’ words in dialect, e.g., “san’widge”? What would have been lost if he had written the word as the standard “sandwich”?
- What does the boys’ gesture of sticking their fists into their overalls when they see the candy suggest about their personalities and life experiences?
- Why does the man purchase the candy for the boys?
- What message is Steinbeck communicating about the need for joy even in the midst of hardship?

Olsen

- To whom is the narrator speaking?
- What is the mother’s tone throughout most of this passage?
- Why does the mother include herself in the “non-existent” seeing eyes?

Zusak

- Why does the narrator begin with the statement, “The last time I saw her was red”? What image or idea did this unusual statement suggest to you? Why?
- Why does the author want us to see the ash as beautiful, tempting, like “snowflakes”?
- What point is the author making about the relationship between beauty and horror?

Activity 2

Review

Crucial to the Steinbeck piece was the author’s use of **dialogue** and **dialect** to communicate character. Another feature of Steinbeck’s writing in this passage was objective **description**, where the author does not “come to a conclusion” for us, but rather, allows the reader to make independent inferences, guesses, or evaluations about the characters, the rightness or wrongness of their actions, and the significance of the statements they make without (in essence) telling us what to think.



A signal feature of the Olsen piece was the use of **first person point of view** and **interior monologue** -- the narrator allows her thoughts to range freely from the conversation with her audience about her daughter to memories of her daughter as a baby. From this unstructured and associative narration, we get a personal, intimate sense of this narrator's thoughts and memories.

In the Zusak story, richly vivid and unexpected **imagery** dominated the piece as well as **short, punchy sentences, sparse language, first person point of view, and rhetorical questions.**

Practice

Have students choose one of the three pieces -- the one to which they responded the most strongly. Have the students take particular note of the style, the sentence structure, the use of dialogue, and other features of the text they may notice independently.

Then, have them write a short (one-page) fictional narrative according to the following directions:

Good Writing Begins with Imitation

Directions:

1. After reading the three selections, you will choose the one you liked the best.
2. You will be writing a short story or prose narrative of approximately one page in length.
3. The story can be fictional, true, or "based on a true story."
4. You will write about something that was lost. The word "something" is vague on purpose -- it can be an object, a person, a moment in time, an aspect of your personality, or a conflict. In any case, your narrative must center around that thing which was lost.
5. You will write it as much in the style of your favorite author from the selections we read in class. Take a close look at the techniques s/he used in writing the selection you read.
Deliberately attempt to imitate his or her sentence structure, use of words, point of view, imagery, dialogue, or dialect in telling your story about the thing that was lost.

Note: Students have also responded well to patterning short narratives after other authors as well, including Sandra Cisneros, Edgar Allan Poe, or others with a distinctive "flavor" to their writing.

Conclusion

Students may wish to share their writing through reading it aloud in class. Alternatively, outstanding examples of student writing may be posted (with students' permission, of course) to the Internet for



other students to read, creating a kind of class webpage anthology of fiction. Future students find webpages of previous students' writing immensely helpful, since pieces written by "regular students" (as opposed to professional writers) often present more achievable goals for imitation.

Extension

If your students keep journals, one possible extension exercise could be to take an event they wrote about previously and rewrite it as a fictional narrative -- either in the style of the authors in the Appendix B selection of the Common Core or in other fictional works. Students who are especially adept at this exercise may enjoy telling the narrative in a completely different point of view. For example, if a student wrote about his or her family in a journal entry, she or he could retell an event from the imagined perspective of someone else involved in the event -- a sibling, a parent, a family pet.

Resources

- Sandra Cisneros "Eleven," <http://forevafound.tripod.com/eleven.pdf>
 - "My Name," <http://theliterarylink.com/mangostreet.html>
 - "Four Skinny Trees"
cfbstaff.cfbisd.edu/.../Four%20Skinny%20Trees%20by%20Sandra%20Cisneros.doc
 - E. B. White "Once More to the Lake"
<http://www.moonstar.com/~acpjr/Blackboard/Common/Essays/OnceLake.html>
 - A.A. Milne *The Ugly Duckling* (play)
wingsstewart.blogspot.com/2010/07/ugly-ducking-by-a-milne.html
 - Amy Tan
[Common Core Appendix B, page 108](#)
 - Annie Dillard "The Chase"
www.forsyth.k12.ga.us/.../Dillard%20-%20The%20Chase%20TEXT.doc
 - Larry Woiwode "Ode to an Orange"
 - Gavin Rember "Closing Doors"
 - Langston Hughes "Salvation" (This is a chapter from his autobiography!)
<http://www.spiritwatch.org/firelangsav.htm>
- A good text for writing ideas is *The Compact Reader: Short Essays by Method and Theme* by Jane E. Aaron, published by Bedford/St. Martin's